

The Road to Revolution

C. FELIX AMERASINGHE

ON 27 January 2009, Arunachalam Mahadevabalasingham, who would later appreciate being called Bob, pores over a chess set in his grandparents' shack, which doubles as a coconut stall. Aruna is seven; his brother, Balu, is thirteen. Their childhood home was a concrete four-bedroom in Jaffna town, but that territory is now controlled by the Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lankan Army. The stall is a temporary slot for a family that is being driven from the upper point of Sri Lanka's teardrop form to the eastern coast.

At age five, Aruna had watched his parents shot by balaclava-masked cadres of the Tamil Tigers, their supposed protectors. Slippers still marked by his parents' sweat lay scattered on the street as their bodies were strung from a lamppost, a reminder to other Tamils of the penalty for trying to smuggle boys away from possible child conscription. Aruna's heart had caved watching the town carry on unmoved. Fish mongers called out the daily catch and durian vendors whipped forward on bicycles, indifferent to the shadows under the lamppost. The war was twenty-five years old. The only bodies that mattered were of close friends and family; others were discarded mannequins.

Now Aruna's older brother rubs his hands together in joy as he promises to explain a new chess opening. The Spanish variant of the Four Knights. "You'll love this one." He places the knights in their aggressive postures and asks Aruna to guess what should happen next.

But Aruna's concentration splits as the army checkpoint far up the street explodes. Chess pieces vibrate, roll, and cling together by their magnetic bases. Two Tiger cadres burst in. Their fingers caress the triggers of AK-47s. Balu snaps the miniature chessboard shut, capturing as many pieces as he can, and the brothers grab their prepacked suitcases. The Tigers are on the move again and cloak

themselves with a human shield of Tamils. Balu and Aruna, civilians under Tiger control, advance as pawns.



On 15 March, Balu observes his younger brother. Aruna's hands are blistered, but he can tolerate the pain of gripping his switchblade tight. The boy has a toughness that makes Balu hopeful even while he senses his own end approaches. The Sri Lankan Army has shinier guns and sharper aim these days. Tiger counterattacks falter, and the group searches for fresh meat to toss into the onslaught.



The scrub jungle thickens, and the boys become invisible. They live in squalor and are wrapped in a heat that is as wet as a cloud. Nightly, they play chess with missing pieces replaced by marked stones.

They pick their way between bombed-out shacks and burning water towers. Mankulam, Puliyankulam, and Kilinochchi, wasted by Sri Lankan artillery fire: these are the Tamil majority ghost towns. From puddled elephant tracks, mosquitoes rise carrying dengue. Ranks thin as people die and are buried, Aruna's grandparents among them.



On 15 April, Balu disappears. Every last teenage boy vanishes with him. Aruna braces their chess set tight to his chest as he marches, pulling his bag, receiving help from elderly men when he tires. He recalls his brother's dark hands laying out the pieces. Aruna revisits their games as he walks, listing the coordinates of each move to give himself purpose.



On 8 May the Tamil masses reach a one-mile strip of eastern beach where, during past cease-fires, young couples of all ethnicities once watched the gliding tail fins of blue whales. An army advances

on one side; a frigid ocean promises drowning on the other. And, in the sky, Sri Lankan Air Force bombers outnumber the many clouds. Mortar shells rain down with monsoon intensity.

Under each shell, the ground pops like a pressed blister. Aruna runs, although running is meaningless because there is no safe quarter on the beach. He focuses, in the seconds of calm, on the details around him: the shifting shapes of the sand, the flames that lick the wheel wells of buses, and the twists in eyebrows distorted by fear. These details keep him distracted, keep him alive.

Eleven days it lasts. Before the Tiger brass surrenders and is summarily executed.



Aruna latches on to a Jesuit leading a flock of orphans. Thirty minutes from the devastated beach, they arrive at a clay riverbank. On the slope sit dozens of naked teenage Tamil boys. They protrude like crooked roots from the slopes. Soldiers break bones with rods. The boys whimper but do not squeal. Their bare ribs wither and recede in contrast to the firm uniforms of the Sri Lankan soldiers. Hems of camouflage hug biceps, enlarging the muscles. Big men; disappearing boys.

A middle-aged Tiger colonel, recognizable from propaganda posters, stands at the edge of the bank. His hunched figure is naked, bound, and bruised. Female army officers brush shoulders with the colonel for photographs. They chatter in Sinhalese, a language incomprehensible to Aruna. He shivers as they pass around cell phones, posing as if with a husband and confirming after that the shot flatters. Aruna has passed many female Sri Lankan soldiers, expecting at least a moment of motherly attention, but none of them offer him a smile or a pat on the head. Invisibility keeps him safe, but their dismissal feels unnatural. Like an insult.

As the priest presses him forward, Aruna notices a boy who must be his brother. The likeness is striking. And the boys' eyes meet. But Balu's gaze is stoic, lost, as if he is in a coma. Aruna feels pressure behind his eyes. He pulls his bag with one hand, clutches the chess set

with the other. Wheels of dust obscure the road ahead. People limp forward: an anonymous crowd. With no partner to teach Aruna, the rattle of the chess pieces connotes a permanent loss.



Balu cannot bring himself to acknowledge Aruna. He imagines himself kneeling to offer a few words of advice: find people to love you, play chess because it is an immortal game, and keep sliding between obstacles. But that conversation must remain a dream. He tries to dilute his gaze and wipe his mind clear of the details that give life texture. Soldiers refill their rounds, metal chambers click, and death is minutes away.



Aruna escapes the island on an overcrowded boat. He cleans toilets in Rameshwaram, South India, and sells sparklers in the south of France; in Spain, he obtains a fake passport and patrons until he lands in Canada with a Sinhalese man, Nishan, who becomes his actual father, according to forged papers. A man betrothed to a Sinhalese grocer in the Chicago suburb of Rogers Park.

Nishan is an accountant from the multiethnic eastern Sri Lankan town of Batticaloa. Neither the Tigers nor the Sri Lankan Army ever hassled him. Although the war had raged on the city outskirts, he had never felt the gaze of a gun or marched through jungle foliage. His fortunes sank from poor calculations. He looks for a new beginning but wears like a soaked sweater the fact of his failure, the shame of not having an excuse.



They land, nest, in a Chicago apartment with incomplete sets of furniture. Symbols of the Sinhalese fill the dusty corners: statues of large-eared Buddhas, packets of jaggery sugar labeled with curvaceous Sinhalese script that Aruna cannot read, and peacock-feather fans. But Nishan's wife, Kamini, is kind. She is building an empire of Sri Lankan grocery stores. The family is rising into the middle class. For the first time in his life, Aruna tastes chocolate.

Kamini chain-smokes in the family room. Ashtrays fill with the remnants of wrapped tobacco. She talks with Nishan about inventory and taking out the trash, scrawls to-do lists on Post-it Notes. But she often describes things she likes as sexy. The building on Devon Street where she wants to buy a three-thousand-square-foot store; the strip lighting that has a blue hue; the wicker lounger: all so sexy. She brings color into the dullness.



Nishan struggles with even simple tasks like submitting advertisements for the local papers. His new wife looms over him, and he obsesses about the size of his penis, which shrinks in response to the stress and seldom rubs against his pants.

Nishan remembers Canada, waiting with Aruna for their new identities to form. He would return from a day of assisting a plumber under the sink and bring a bag of fries to the highway-skirting motel where they stayed. Aruna's smile illuminated the room, and his black fingers glistened with salt. A quiet boy who often seemed folded up into his thoughts. Those were tender moments. The wrappers would uncrumple and crackle inside the Burger King bag, a sign of more food and that things can continue even after they seem finished.



In third grade, 2011, nine-year-old Aruna struggles with formal reading and writing. His parents hire a tutor, a white woman with jet-black hair that smells of mango conditioner. She visits their home and gives Aruna writing exercises. Aruna divides the woman up into segments. The hair belongs to his mother. The cheeks around her smile are his brother's. When the bare flesh of her calves brushes his shins, it reminds him of how he used to nestle in group hugs in shared beds.

And so Aruna loves this tutor, but from a distance. He tells her that English is a sexy activity and she corrects him: young boys should never call anything sexy.

He writes about leading a fair-skinned Tamil girl to safety through a downpour of shrapnel. Aruna describes the length of the girl's legs and the roundness of her belly. A thrill zips through him as he writes:

“Her hair curled around her neck like midnight sweeps around the globe.” The tutor underlines the sugariest phrases but explains that women don’t need to be rescued or reduced to body parts. His story would be so much better if the girl fought alongside him. Tossing nunchakus, perhaps, or delivering karate kicks. The tutor flings her arms into a yoga *Y* and, inhaling deeply, declares Aruna brilliant. For that reason he can master these vital principles of storytelling at a young age.

Aruna imagines snapping off the tutor’s coconut-milk-colored nose. War had taught him the value of body parts, the attraction of their health, and he had spent his life waiting to be rescued. How could someone he respects find flaws in these ideas? He yearns to touch his mother’s and his brother’s intact bodies and give them proper hugs before goodbye. Be at peace while others rally around him for once. Aruna polishes his reading and writing twice as fast as he otherwise would have, just to be done with his tutor.



These are things that make Aruna panic: the shriek of airplanes; the shine of guns on television; and the touch of a woman, not only because it reminds him of his mother but also because he remembers the Sinhalese soldiers and their photographs. Sometimes, the sound of Balu’s miniature chess board unlatching makes him go cold because Balu will never sit across from him again.

These are things that comfort Aruna: the creamy scent of cashew curry; a known endpoint to events, which signifies certainty; and Nishan’s hand on his shoulder. Sometimes, the click of that chess set unlatching soothes him because he recalls his brother’s voice offering advice. He remembers his mother and father leaning over to study their games in Jaffna and imagines a sheet of sari or a sleeve rubbing against his neck.



In fourth grade, 2012, ten-year-old Aruna meets Finch Small, whose red hair frames a face that always seems dirty. Finch’s thick

parts—calves, shoulders, and cheeks—are often bruised bluish gray. His father, Finch reports, drinks three tall pints of Guinness, sometimes nursing all three at the same time. The man's day job is watching online poker.

Finch and Aruna play flick 'em marbles at lunch. The game reminds him of how he and Balu used to bounce a tennis ball to each other in slow moments in their grandparents' shack. Small spaces demanded fast reactions.



A teacher jokes that Aruna's name would read easier if he were called Bob. And Aruna adopts the name Bob because Arunachalam Mahadevalasingham, which had remained his first and middle names, are Tamil words. Linguistic identifiers that made him a target during a lifetime of war in Sri Lanka. And Bob now loves neutrality.



The county sends an art therapist to work with Bob. He sketches palmyra trees and sunsets behind the Jaffna lagoon. His memories flood these simple images, but the therapist reacts as if they are empty. She tells him to burrow deeper, so he sketches his brother in the window, his father peeling a banana, and his mother reading *Winnie-the-Pooh* to teach him English.

The art therapist says Bob is holding back. So, he draws three Tamil girls strapped with suicide vests, hurtling toward a fleet of school buses. The caption reads, "hero run blow bus," even though he knows the grammar is incorrect. In fact, he does not associate suicide bombing with heroism at all. It leaves black holes in families: empty chairs at the dinner table and bedrooms filled with toys and journals that sit still, unloved, and then fade away. Satchels and fenders survive bombings when children do not. But Bob gives the therapist what she wants, so "hero run blow bus."

These are the events that unfold after the art therapist approves of Bob's drawing; a psychiatrist replaces the psychologist who has long treated Bob; the guidance counselor explains the warning signs for

future gun-violence perpetrators; Principal Georgia Devlin sends a gift of Ceylon tea; the school security officer, Illford Gip, promotes the Boy Scouts and the therapeutic experience of tying a slipknot; and the sheriff's department searches the family computer, unearthing only Nishan's "wedged-panty" pornography collection, which the officers delete.



Nishan witnesses how the procession of officials isolates the boy, who spends ever more time at the computer. Nishan fantasizes about stomping in his oversized galoshes before kicking them out the door. But he freezes; his incompetence would trip him up. If only his Batticaloa house had been confiscated by the army, his dog shot by the Tigers, or his life threatened by the husband of some gorgeous woman with whom he'd had an affair: any legitimate excuse for fleeing. But that is not how it was. He simply couldn't keep the numbers straight. He feels he lacks the moral right to seize control, so he retreats to his shower to masturbate, to enlarge his two-inch penis to three inches while dreaming that it has a horse's length.



At recess on 9 May 2012, Bob huddles next to Finch Small as the 777s fly over toward O'Hare International Airport. "My father says that the scientific word for Indian is Sand N***er." Finch crushes a Cheeto loudly between his teeth and smacks his hands together to indicate a friendly provocation.

"You know for sure that that's bullshit."

"Yeah, but I guess I'd love it if you'd just kill the asshole. You must have killed people during the war." Finch's wry smile emphasizes the darkness in him. That darkness had accompanied Bob in the watery jungle heat, whispered sweet nothings to him when he felt hopeless on that beach in the final days of the war, and promised to clear the brush so that he could find eternity. But Bob had turned death away: a firm breakup. And now, even as he dreams of slitting

Finch's father's throat with the switchblade the army had confiscated, he tells Finch it wouldn't be worth the art therapists that both of them would have to deal with afterward, never mind the jail time.



On 20 September 2013, Kamini washes plates that Nishan forgot to clean. She thinks of the suicide-bomber drawing and the white noise of the heating unit becomes the hum she'd heard in the aftermath of bombings. In the capital city of Colombo, her hometown, Tiger bombers had left the city moth-eaten with loss. Every block became defined by places where lives had been destroyed: the Central Bank, the Office of Taxation, the Borella Buddhist Temple. And the fissures spread to the Otters Club, where her favorite cousin would no longer order Sinha beer at the bar; to her deceased aunt's house, where no surviving family member knew the hiding place for the ancestral wedding sari; to the Sinhala Union pool, where the water would never again split with quite the force of her friend Paul Delivera's cannon-ball dive. She'd left Sri Lanka in part to escape those widening gaps.

But Kamini realizes that Bob has lived through an all-encompassing kind of loss. And she wants to tell Bob that Sri Lankans on every side were so cornered that their only choices dripped with evil. But he should not talk to all these hippies. They will never understand. What's more, one of them might ferret around and realize that a Sinhalese boy should not be so familiar with suicide bombers or speak Tamil. Art and writing are exposure. His false identity is a thin wrapping, one that relies on how ignorant Americans are of the war.

She approaches Bob, who sits at the computer. Electronic chess pieces drift across the screen, chirping as they land. Blue light fills his focused eyes. He moves the pieces of his miniature chess set, including the marked stones, in sync with the screen. Practicing the matches of the masters.

"Bob." Kamini wipes a tear from the edge of her eyelid and discards her planned line of conversation. "If you could have anything you want, what would it be?"

He remains fixated on the screen but mumbles, "That they write 'Bob' on my gravestone."

Kamini winces: How can she respond to that? The next day she buys Bob a large chess set, one whose pieces are heavy enough to withstand the hustle-bustle of classroom activity. This gift accompanies a Star Wars lunch box. Children should be children, she thinks, especially the ones who have moth-holed childhoods.



At lunch the next day, Bob and Finch play chess. Bob teaches his friend the Spanish Knights opening, but it is too advanced. He has first to instruct how to advance a pawn and make the knight leap. Bob struggles to explain, and he wishes he had Balu's easy way of teaching. For the first time, he talks to Finch about Balu.

"Before the war got really crazy, my brother, Balu, had a side job fixing motorcycles, adjusting them to take kerosene when gasoline was banned. He was good with his hands." Bob is surprised at the clarity of his own English. The words wing out from him. "In fact, it's ridiculous how much still happened while the war was hot."

"Like what?" Finch leans in so that his nose is almost against Bob's cheek. Goose bumps ripple along Finch's neck.

"Well." Bob smiles at his recollection of Jaffna resisting, persisting, through its routine. "I mean, kids attended school. They took exams. All while you could be kidnapped and sent to the front line by Tiger guerrillas."

"You had gorillas in Sri Lanka?" Finch squints, itches his armpits, grunts, and spins in a circle.

"Um. No. Guerrilla as in terrorist. The kind that put a bullet in your head if you talk back. There's nothing funny about this."

"Sorry." Finch squirms in discomfort. "How did your brother die?"

"Tiger killed him first," says Bob, "and then the Sri Lankan Army killed him."

"He died twice? I just shat my pants," said Finch, smiling, as if numb to the whole concept of losing someone. As if unable to grasp it.

“Gross.” Bob punches his friend midshoulder. But they are chuckling. Outside, a boy trips and then leaps around like a kangaroo under fire, clutching his leg. Falling had never before been funny to Bob. It warranted concern. Now he sees the humor in the clumsiness and foolishness of it. Bob’s shoulders relax, and the world seems a little lighter, a little crazier.



Principal Georgia Devlin, who had seen Martin Luther King speak at the Mall in Washington, plans fifth-grade graduation. Bob in particular deserves recognition, so she insists that, in the program, two asterisks appear next to the names of students who received at least three A+s. Bob’s name alone will enjoy those marks of fame.

Principal Devlin decrees that children will not receive graduation certificates. Instead, they will walk up in descending order of height, pause for five seconds on stage, and then file onto the risers. Tallest children stand at the top; smallest at the bottom. Applause must wait for the end. Absolute silence until then. To preserve decorum.



The back of the line is packed with Asians whom they call late bloomers but who may never blossom past five foot three. Treh Than holds down the rear behind Ming Lee, Ping Su, and Bob, who is therefore fourth from the end. Brian Cassoway leads the way. At five foot ten, wearing a suit and a square-tipped tie that rises into an hour-glass knot, he towers over the school. He is not an enrolled student, but his twin sister, Nubie Cassoway, is. Immediately to Brian’s right are two girls who seem to have vaulted over puberty and landed ripe for a spread in *Seventeen* magazine. Behind them, zit-faced preteens arrive on stage and hold their five-second smiles in morbid silence. Only the echo of rustling programs is audible; the parents respect the ban on applause.



When Bob reaches the spotlight, he crosses his hands like a choir boy. In one fist, he clutches a rook and bishop from Balu's chess set. Nishan watches the boy's composure in amazement. He wants to clap until his hands wear each other down to the bones. But his days in Batticoloa sap at his will. He remains glued to his chair. Nishan senses his penis vanishing, the foreskin flapping around a void. It is a minor success for him just to raise his hand to rub his temple.



Kamini fumes that Bob is so far back in the line. The boy has spent his life wandering in long lines. Now he has finally reached somewhere good, an endpoint, and they shove him to the back. Outrageous. Kamini has spent thirty minutes without smoking a cigarette and has to chew a toothpick to calm her nerves. She generally abides by rules, but now she claps her hands together and beats her right foot in a loud rhythm.



Nishan, inspired into a sudden confidence, smacks his hands together in an off-rhythm flash. Wanting to outdo his wife, he stands on his chair and hoots until the chair snaps and he falls. He jumps on the next chair and continues with his hooting and one-legged leaping until that chair too fails. He loops along the empty back row, breaking chair after chair, and flutters sideways like a one-man domino exhibit.



Bob remains still, exceeding his five seconds. Parents mumble that they too would have liked to applaud their babies, and it's a disgrace that, just because Bob is smaller and smarter and darker than the other children, his parents are allowed to cause all this commotion. It is not fair to Than and Su, who cannot enjoy their five seconds of silence. These parents, who rarely care about anyone other than their own children, become vocal advocates for the Asians in the back.

Principal Devlin's simple words crackle through the microphone: "Now, Bob, it is time to move along. Let's let young Jing take your spot." And no one but Ping notices the error in his name. Ping

removes his right shoe and hurls it into the shadows of the theater wings. The laughter from the short boys around him is contagious. So he chucks his left shoe into the crowd.

The teachers, who encircle the podium in card chairs, call out in unison for everyone to talk in their indoor voice.



Nubie Cassoway stands two rows lower than her twin merely because she is nine inches shorter than him. That twist of fate is not her fault, no result of her agency, but a reality. She tears off her scrunchie, shakes out her hair, and lifts up the lower hem of her gown so that she can leap onto the riser and yell out, “Fuck you all, my brother doesn’t even go to this school. And who gives a damn about this fifth-grade graduation anyway? Who put the tall kids up top?”



Bob stands still. He maintains his smile, thinking of how good it feels when his parents stand and fall and cheer him in the auditorium.



Brian Cassoway never wanted to attend the graduation. His mother had argued to the school board that Brian is at a disadvantage: his all-boys private school, Pooky Prep, runs straight through to twelfth grade and does not hold a fifth-grade graduation. Wouldn’t it be nice for Brian to boast his striking Pooky suit while celebrating with the other children? The Cassoways sent potted floral arrangements to the board members, everything in *de minimis* quantities, just below the floor for bribery established by Illinois law.

Now Brian Cassoway, seeing how Bob’s parents stand out despite their short stature, wants to be a leader too. Outdo the rest. So he removes his tie and rips open his shirt. The buttons pop off and spray into the lower rows. He grinds the festive air. The two girls beside him begin a vigorous rendition of the floss, swinging their arms so that they become vibrating maypoles caught in fast forward and reverse. A soft hand grazes Brian’s thigh, and he longs to attend public school.



Now comes Illford Gip, the retired police officer and one-time Army reservist who almost served in the first Iraq war. The school security guard. A skilled marksman, he spends hours dreaming of confronting a would-be mass shooter in a shopping mall. He would sneak in through a vent while wearing a black body stocking, and he would fire two shots, one to the head and one to the heart, killing the crazed shooter instantly. All the women in JCPenney—who resemble soft-lit supermodels—would strip off their clothes and absorb him into a massive orgy of gratitude.

Illford Gip, despite his dreams, when confronted with a real school shooter at a nearby middle school, will one day run in the opposite direction and, from the safety of a nearby portable potty, call in backup from the police station.

Illford Gip now charges Bob to force him onto the risers. But a sudden tremor runs through him. Bob does not flinch or glance at Illford Gip. The boy has a sturdiness and permanence, like those stone horsemen at roundabouts who reduce snowstorms to frosted icing while people cower in their homes. He changes course, preferring to chase other children into the stage wings. There, a boy pushes out the handle of a mop. Illford Gip trips, and as he falls toward his concussion, he ponders: Would I have been better served if I rapped into the auditorium on a cable instead of charging the stage?



Now sits Gilly Sandrison, who believes that graduations are feel-good nonsense. She wanted to take her precocious daughter to Mozambique to build houses for the poor instead, but the tickets were too expensive. So she knits a thick sweater and tastes her bitterness while her daughter frolics in the stage wings. It is unfair that people assume she opposes the flu vaccine just because she wears white foundation and sings *You are my sunshine* while walking through the school. She gets her daughter vaccinated every year. She hears the din and observes the little brown boy. There might be something worth protesting here, even if she doesn't quite know what it is.

Gilly Sandrison stands, and her knitting needles prick her as they tumble down. She wants to be recognized as an experienced protester in her own right. But her knee-length hair catches in the joint of the chair and her neck takes a vicious whiplashing.



As children clear the risers and scatter through the audience, Bob waits for that familiar traumatic flinch from all the noise. But his nerves remain chilled. The scene has a lightness to it, like a torrent of children falling and getting up and jumping on one leg.

Although mass shootings will occur at several neighboring middle schools, none will occur at his. The two likeliest shooters, scarred by violent childhoods, had opted for a different opening move the first time Bob showed Finch how to advance a pawn. And with each passing lunch period, the steady march of fifth grade, the boys corrected their tilt toward violence.

Bob surveys his surroundings. Farther down his riser, Finch shields his eyes from the lights and smiles like someone who has just tasted melted caramel for the first time. His parents are absent from graduation, but the rising pulp of his cheeks indicates that it does not bother him anymore. Illford Gip remains flat on the ground, and several children play hopscotch over his thick figure. Gilly Sandrison is catching up, one hair at a time. Brian Cassoway gyrates while Nubie Cassoway punches the air. Kamini and Nishan chant, "We stand with Bob," and the auditorium thunders like a shifting elephant herd.

Bob hears the rhythm, the calmness, of his own breath. He imagines Balu standing across from him. "Very good," his brother says, waving a frail hand above a field of chess pieces. "Now draw in your last remaining castle, position your bishops, and attack with all the pawns that you've made into queens. Involve every piece. Finish this game. Then let's start another one."