Fiction allows coincidence to flourish, but in real life coincidence can give rise to questions that get revisited over and over, with the conditional perfect as its unassailable syntactic expression. Our ‘What ifs …?’ acquire their most touching dimension in personal accounts, but asked within fiction such hypothetical questions feel rather pointless. For instance, no one will ever ask themselves what if the protagonists of Michelle de Kretser’s brilliant winner of the 2012 Miles Franklin, Questions of Travel, had never met?

In contrast, memoirs and factual accounts of personal experiences allow readers to engage with texts in ways fiction cannot afford us. There is a certain rawness to autobiographical texts, a blunt assertion of terse, unmediated feelings which is not masked behind words. It is this powerful statement that gives them a value that no work of fiction can approach. Their poignancy and truthfulness can be well beyond the literary and touch a different kind of nerve in us.

You will no doubt remember the images of the tsunami that affected Eastern Japan in 2011. You will also remember that black tongue of water rushing inland, devouring and destroying everything in its path. It is not too difficult to make a connection between such images and the many terrible stories of personal grief and despair such a catastrophe caused. In my case, having suddenly seen that dark tongue surge between my feet as I tried to flee from it in Samoa, on 29 September 2009, the March 2011 Japanese images were a most unwelcome reminder of the event that took my daughter Clea’s life. As in Sonali Deraniyagala’s case, despite their horror (‘As much as they horrify me, I want to see the meanness of that black water as it crumples whole cities in its path. So this is what got us, I thought’ [202]), the TV images transfixed me.

Sonali lost her husband Steve, her two sons Vikram and Malli, and her parents on the morning of 26 December 2004. Born and raised in Sri Lanka, Sonali studied economics at Cambridge and Oxford, married a highly educated, open-minded East Ender and gave birth to two handsome boys. They had always agreed that Sri Lanka should be a second home for their family, so whenever they had a chance they would travel and spend time in Colombo or, preferably, in the Yala National Park. They were due to check out of their hotel a few hours later, but the Indian Ocean trapped them, like so many others, on that woeful day.

Wave tells her story, or rather two stories so powerfully interconnected that they cannot be dissociated. After the tsunami struck and upended the jeep they were attempting to escape on, Sonali somehow was able to grab a tree branch in the muddy debris-infested mess the lagoon near the beach became. She was rescued and driven to a hospital. All her family had perished, as well as her friend Orlantha, who had been staying at the same hotel. As the days went by, whatever little hope there was of finding family members among injured and displaced survivors vanished.

There is no sentimentality in her restrained account of the hours after the catastrophe and the days that followed. The shock, the terror, the immense void the tsunami had struck in her life are all brought to us in simple, outstanding yet awful frankness: ‘Was it real, what just happened, that water? My crumpled mind couldn’t tell. And I wanted to stay in the unreal, in the not knowing’ (16).

There is no self-pity either throughout the pages that tell of the months and years afterwards. Of how the bodies of her parents, her two boys and Steve were finally found: ‘Steve and Malli were identified four months after the wave’ (47). Or of how she retreated

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**Book reviews:** Wave by Sonali Deraniyagala. Jorge Salavert.
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from the world and was watched over constantly by relatives and friends: ‘Sometimes I would drag myself into the kitchen – maybe I can slit my wrists – but someone would steal up behind me. Besides, they had hidden all the knives’ (43-4). Of how she finally gave in to alcohol (and pills) after initially refusing it:

I feared it would blur the truth of what had happened. I had to be vigilant. … Then suddenly every evening I was drunk. Half a bottle of vodka down by six p.m., never mind that my stomach burned. Then wine, whiskey, whatever I could stumble around the house and seize. I’d swig from bottles, no time to get a glass. (53)

When Sonali was finally able to leave her relatives’ house in Colombo, she went back to her parents’ house, the now empty home away from home where her boys had spent many happy times. Emptiness is all around her, and also inside her, so she searches for her family there, trying to make sense of herself: ‘in this stillness, sterile with the odor of varnish and paint, I hunted traces of us’ (66). When her brother decides to rent it out, she began to hassle the Dutch family that had moved in. Grief, of course, had taken hold of her desperate mind: ‘the house, it anchors me to my children. It tells me they were real. I need to curl up inside it, now and again. But my brother could not comprehend any of this’ (77).

She went back to the beach in Yala, to the remains of the hotel, obsessively searching for something she knew deep inside she was never going to find, yet she felt drawn to it. ‘Dust, rubble, shards of glass. This was the hotel. It had been flattened. There were no walls standing, it was as though they’d been sliced off the floors’ (70).

Sonali returned to London in 2006. She had been away for nearly two years. But it took her almost two years more to walk back into their home, to walk back into her previous life, the one that was meaningful. There she sees the piece of pyrite Vikram had bought at the Science Museum the weekend before they left for Sri Lanka:

My eyes cannot focus on any one thing in this playroom, but the Fool’s Gold, this I can see. And the two red schoolbags, hanging on the door handle as always. I pick up the rock and press it tight into my palm. But I can’t touch those schoolbags, each one now a scalpel. (95)

The life that once was hers in that home, the life that used to hold her self together, is gone. Yet the past is still there:

When I lie in our bed the power of their absence assails me. The sheets have not been changed since Steve and I last slept on them. I haven’t been able to bring myself to wash them, and so I sneeze all night. […] On Steve’s pillow, the one his head hasn’t touched in nearly four years, there is an eyelash. (105)

It is good and reassuring to know that friends rallied around her and were unconditionally supportive. From conversations I have had with parents whose children have predeceased them, it seems that it is not unusual for grieving parents to find themselves surrounded by a wall of silence. Raw pain can feel way too much to handle.

It would be unfair to Sonali to think of this astonishingly sincere and blunt account as something with which she sets out to make the reader feel uncomfortable. Sonali does not seek to unsettle, because no one could be more unsettled than herself. It takes a brave person

to write what she has written and in the direct way she tells it. But let us not forget that it takes a brave reader, too. *Wave* is a reminder of the personal horrors behind mass tragedies, but it should be remembered as a courageous tribute to her husband Steve and her two boys, Vik and Malli.

As her reader, I am grateful for the way Sonali brings their boys and husband back to life within her pages. Despite her inescapable grief and desperation, *Wave* charts her incredibly painful journey from a state of near-craziness to some sort of normalcy, a journey many grieving parents will no doubt relate to.

As a society, we should be able to come to terms with the grieving. Perpetuating the misconception (perhaps the myth?) that ‘Grief is a frightening condition, and at its extreme is like the sun: impossible to look at directly’, as Teju Cole does in his review of *Wave*, ¹ does very little to support the grieving. The image Cole employs may sound apt, perhaps even beautiful, but grief is a human feeling, and as such it is natural. Why should it frighten you?

**Jorge Salavert**

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<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2013/03/sonali-deraniyagala-wave-review-teju-cole.html>, accessed 10 August 2013>