

Curfews of Thought¹

*...When the unthinkable happens
There is no one left who can tell the story.*

Preamble

Over years of developing a practice around devised theatre, I have come to love the act of faith which requires one to step out of the way and allow for the story which needs to emerge, to emerge.

In this chapter I will examine three plays devised with Sri Lankan casts during the immediate post-war period (2009 – 2019)². Having worked on all these plays, something that struck me was that somehow, in the pursuit of these plays, while the artists thought they were creating one story, another story got told. Sometimes in addition to the story pursued. Sometimes in spite of it.

PLAY I - In Search of Sivaramani

The context, the cast, the story ...

2010 Sri Lanka. One year after the 26-year civil war is militarily won and the separatist LTTE conclusively crushed. Many things are drowned in the rising political euphoria – dissent, memories, evidence, stories, voices, lives. The clean-up and reconstruction of the war zones is as swift as it is brutal. The victorious government is keen to erase. The majority are happy to forget. The erased and the forgotten disappear – sometimes by their own volition, but often, not.

I was a visiting lecturer at the University of Visual and Performing Arts. It was a newly set up university with degrees being developed by a fledgling faculty. Its students were generally those who could not gain access to more established academic disciplines. Still, it offered a foothold into a system of lifelong pensioned support from the State (once acquired, never discarded). Most students had modest ambitions of securing a job at a State school or cultural department. Occasionally one would encounter a student who had the crazy, stubborn dream of becoming an artist.

The fourth-year undergraduate students were working towards their final-year exam production and I was asked to guide them. Within the university this particular batch had a reputation for being conflictual under-performers. In my first meeting

¹ I authored this essay myself, however, the questions raised and worked out came from several conversations with my collaborator David Cotterrell.

² Sri Lanka endured a civil war from 1983 – 2009. From 2009 – 2019 marked the post-war period. In 2019 the Easter Bombings happened, killing over 250 people.

with them I realised there was some truth to this prejudice. The students seemed to lack motivation and self-confidence. They were bitter and resentful that their time at the university had benefitted them so little. As the senior-most batch at the university, labelled as talentless, they had developed feelings of inadequacy. Most of them were just impatient to leave – after clearing the final hurdle of the concluding exam-production.

The canvas for the final year production was entirely up to us. Previous graduating batches had produced ambitious productions such as Greek tragedies. My batch was apprehensive about being measured against these successes. Maybe they should be encouraged to claim a new space for themselves.

“How about you write your own play?”

“But Miss, do you think we *could??*”

Up to this point, no final-year production had attempted an original script. Moreover this batch had no experience in writing at all.

Four students tentatively volunteered as writers. The next step was to find a story. What could this group agree to write about?

They didn't know it, but the devising process had already begun.

Once upon an idea...

I strongly believe there is one story that any group, held together by time and place, is called upon to tell. The story always comes. We just have to be patient and listen for it.

The script conversations started enthusiastically and then quickly deteriorated. As the students struggled to agree on a story, old conflictual habits of the batch re-appeared. The cliché of the team of outcasts working together in pursuit of an impossible dream was short-lived. Alarmed by the possibility of being held ransom to collective failure, the students descended into their comfort zones of fighting and squabbling.

The students were all younger than the almost 30-year ethnic war I had lived through. Ethnographically they were exclusively Sinhala, almost entirely from rural areas of the country - from agricultural, manual-labour or small-enterprise backgrounds. As, essentially, unemployed Sinhala youth, armed only with a vague degree in performing arts, their futures looked bleak. And they were completely caught up in their own immediate futures. I thought the best way to deal with this insularity would be to make them begin to question their own disinterest in anything other than their own lives.

So I told them the story of Sivaramani, the young Tamil girl, born about forty years before them, who had grown up in the war-torn capital of the north of the country – Jaffna. She had become a student activist and poet, had lived in a situation of active warfare and had been politically engaged with the struggles in the North. Through her poetry, Sivaramani questioned the carnage of war and had given voice to the people of Jaffna. Her life came to a dramatic end when, at the same age of the students, she had set fire to her poems and killed herself. Mystery surrounded her untimely and defiant death.

I hoped the story of this Tamil girl, her poetry, her passion, the hardship of war in the North, her symbolic act of defiance, would somehow resonate with this batch of Sinhala students born several decades later, in the same country but of a vastly different world.

The students had been listening keenly. There was a collective breath, a difference in the energy. Everyone could finally agree they had found a story they all wanted to tell.

At least momentarily, a young Tamil poet had unified this group of fragmented Sinhala youth.

Searching for Sivaramani...

Keen to give the students the widest possible exposure into different ways of storytelling, and also in line with the conflicting stories about Sivaramani's life, I gave the four writers the following guidelines. The first writer was to write the story of Sivaramani exclusively through proven research (articles, interviews etc.). The second student was to piece together the story of Sivaramani only through her poetry. The third writer was to create the story of Sivaramani purely through imagination, and the final writer had to keep a diary of the process, a tab on the three writers and on their evolving relationship with the rest of the batch.

The four writers began in earnest, watched and encouraged by their peers (after all, their collective exam marks depended on the strength of this script not-yet-written). Weeks became months, and it became clear that the writers were struggling with this story. It was simply not emerging in any coherent way.

The writer researching Sivaramani was losing himself in romanticising her. He would go missing for days as he travelled around the country in pursuit of anyone who might have known this heroic tragic figure. His batch mates could not relate to his obsession.

The student restricted to the analysis of Sivaramani's poetry soon tied herself up in knots over conflicting translations of the poems. She was getting lost in tedium and frustration. Her batch mates grew impatient with her.

The student tasked with imagining Sivaramani's story was alarmingly removed from reality. The versions of her story that she brought to the group were superficial at best. Her batchmates felt let down by her.

The writer diarising the process had pages and pages of notes on the escalating arguments between the writers and their fellow students, but little else.

The exam dates were now looming and still no script. Soon the students were close to breaking point.

Now I knew that the story of this illusive Tamil poet had really touched the hearts and imaginations of these young people. However, as the pressure built up they were unable to find the generosity or the trust amongst themselves to allow for the story to develop with any truth or confidence. The epic story of Sivaramani was competing for survival with the petty preoccupations and power struggles between this class.

For me, who stood outside the conflict, the path forward was increasingly clear. The play that was asking to be written was a play about the students' *inability* to make a play. They didn't have the knowledge, perspective or space in their heads - or their lives - to really engage collectively with the story of Sivaramani - and this was tragic. And it was this tragedy, manifest in these young Sinhala students, that connected the play most honestly with some of the deepest reasons for the protracted ethnic war between the Sinhala majority and Tamil minority in Sri Lanka.

I put it to them gently. The play could be about the (failing) efforts of a group of Sinhala students, struggling to understand a Tamil political poet of their own age, across time and culture, while fighting their own demons and fears.

The students agreed. A few, I like to believe, understood what we were creating. But most were just relieved to have a story-line.

Sivaramani's legacy...

We performed "*In Search of Sivaramani*" only one day. The audience loved it. The judge board was impressed. The cast got fantastic grades. The batch secured for itself some respect upon its exit from the campus. The students were delighted to publicly own the success of the play. The question remained, however, did they understand or care enough to own the tragedy of the failure of themselves within the process?

The students had created the play they could. But another play had also emerged. And it was in the overlaying of these two plays (the one pursued and the one that was allowed to emerge) that the lens through which the audience saw the play was finally determined. This was not a lens shared by the students. It was my lens. From my privileged place as an outsider - in terms of my age, my background, my distance

from the binding conflicts within the batch – I was able to frame the play with the students in it, in order to share with the audience what I saw.

Ultimately it was only a few students that, even retrospectively, understood the real power of the *Sivaramani* play. And was it important that they understood it? Or was the message all the more powerful in their lack of interest and understanding of it?

PLAY II - Dear Children Sincerely... Sri Lanka in the 80s

The context, the cast and the story...

***2016 Sri Lanka.** One year after an unimaginable victory for democracy. Possibly the most overtly corrupt regime in Sri Lankan political history is defeated and a new President and National Government are instated on promises of rebuilding basic structures of good governance in the country. This is seen as a civic victory as the mechanism was driven by covert citizens' initiatives within a very undemocratic environment. After many years (in the South of the country, at least), emerges the possibility and space for dissent.*

From 2015 onwards my theatre company – *Stages Theatre Group* – immersed itself in an arts research project titled '*Dear Children, Sincerely...*' (DCS), where we interviewed the generation born in the 1930s in order to capture their perspective on how Sri Lanka had developed from Independence (1948) onwards.

From the material of these interviews we produced a show in 2016 that chartered the tumultuous political journey through seven decades of Sri Lankan history (1948 – 2009), from Independence, through two youth insurrections, to the end of a civil war. The play comprised 7 scenes, each scene depicting a decade, and each decade containing a singular pivotal moment that changed the course of the country irrevocably. The play connected the dots between these seven crucial historical landmarks, in order to create an arch of modern Sri Lankan history as remembered by the generation that had lived through it all.

To undertake a play that attempted to track the post-independence journey of the country in seven scenes was a rather ambitious project. But it was a response to the changing environment in post-war Sri Lanka – a place that was finally beginning to open itself up to a culture of self-criticism.

I was working with my regular ensemble of actors. We had managed to create the acts for all the seven decades – save one. We were having trouble creating the decade of the 80s. What the scene had to be about was never in doubt. The 1980s contained arguably the most devastating turning point in Sri Lankan history - the five-day pogrom against the Tamil people in July 1983 – which marked the start of a three decade civil war.

Unlike the undergraduate Sivaramani cast, the DCS cast comprised capable and seasoned actors. I knew them well. They were a receptive ensemble, both trusting and generous in their sharing. However, most of them were born after 1983, and so had no living memory of the riots. Also all of them were Sinhala, so they did not even have an inherited memory of the horror and tragedy of this period.

Once again, we had to look for the story we wanted to create, while allowing for another story to emerge from within the reality, potential and limitations of the artists creating it.

Sri Lanka in the 80s... the scene....

The event that sparked the 1983 riots in Sri Lanka was the killing of 13 Sinhala soldiers by Tamil militants in the north of the country³.

This attack had shaken the Sinhala majority community. Within a history of simmering ethnic tensions, this was the first time the Tamil community had initiated such a daring attack against the Sinhalese. The killing of 13 young soldiers would have been chilling in its symbolism and audaciousness.

As a cast of almost exclusively Sinhala artists, we were struggling to understand how to truthfully portray this turning point of the 1983 pogrom against the Tamil people. We knew that Sri Lanka before the riots and Sri Lanka after the riots were two different countries. We had inherited the country after the riots. How were we to connect with the one before?

We entered through the door closest to us. Being a Sinhalese cast ourselves, we worked on the responses of the Sinhala population to the news of the attack. We did several exercises to enter into their headspace. The lines were fine, the blocking was good, the energy was focussed ... but something was missing.

We tried another door. We focussed on the tragedy of the Tamil people. We researched articles and photos and spoke to people about what they experienced and saw. But something was still missing. The scene remained flat, unconvincing.

The actors could not understand what they were doing wrong. I was trying not to panic. As a Sinhala director of this hugely ambitious play, it was vitally important for me to be able to capture this scene with some level of maturity and sensitivity. Yet, however hard I pushed the actors to put themselves in that headspace of the horror of that moment – the Sinhala population at that time, on the verge of a civil war between the Sinhala and Tamil people, I knew we were far off the mark.

Of course, what was not working was that the cast was genuinely *not horrified* about the idea of a civil war between the Sinhalese and Tamils. That moment of terror, of

³ 1983 is considered the start of the civil war

the incomprehensible, unthinkable threat, had passed through the country decades earlier. It had taken with it, an innocence we would never again be defined by.

I knew we had to find something that created real fear in the hearts of these young Sinhala actors before me. A fear mad enough to drive them to unthinkable violence.

On a whim I asked the cast to lie down and close their eyes. I then told them a fictionalised story based on the Boko Haram kidnapping of the Nigerian school-girls⁴. However, I localised the incident. In my story, a group of young Muslim men broke into a girls' school in a remote Sinhala village and took away 20 Sinhalese children. We didn't know what had happened to the girls, where they were, what would happen next...⁵ I asked the cast to connect with the emotions this situation created within them.

We then ran the scene again. The cast was drawing from the fear and rage they felt at the imagined situation of having to face a national crisis engineered by a group of Sri Lankan Muslims.

When the exercise ended, several of the actors sat down on the floor. Two of them were in tears. One left the rehearsal room.

The silence that followed allowed us all to individually process what had just happened. The actors had finally connected with the anger and racism that was needed to make the scene in 1983 truthful. But something very painful had been revealed in the process – something about our real fears, our deep unspoken prejudice.

Of course, the audience never knew. I remember sitting in the darkened theatre hall, watching this scene being performed. I wondered if it mattered that the fear, pain and anger on the faces of the young actors on stage – depicting the Sinhalese's fear of the Tamil people in 1983, had actually been accessed through the fears of the Sinhala people of the Muslims in 2016.

I also remember contemplating the tragedy that Sinhala youth could not be driven to despair over the threat of a war between the Tamils and Sinhalese anymore.

Here, unlike in the Sivaramani play, the double lens created by the truth that emerged from the story that was pursued was not made visible to the audience. It was understood and experienced, nonetheless, by the cast – and it provided that edge of truth to performance.

⁴ 276 female students were kidnapped by Boko Haram in Nigeria in 2014. I still remember the global shock at this incident.

⁵The civil war between the Sinhalese and Tamils ended in 2009. But shortly after this, conflicts started emerging between Sinhalese and Muslims – the country's second largest minority. The growing local tension around this issue was fuelled by the wider global 'Muslim issue'.

PLAY III - Thought Curfew

The context, the cast and the story...

2018 Sri Lanka. *Sri Lanka has become a deeply empty place to inhabit. The structures of democracy, fair play and good governance we fought to set in place in 2015 are collapsing before our eyes. The lack of political will to honour them is now clear. Of course, there is a felt difference between being subject to State hypocrisy, greed and corruption, and being subject to State terror, abductions and silencing. People are thankful we seem to have moved from the latter to the former. But without real breakthroughs in justice, integrity, accountability or political vision, our achievements ring hollow and people, fragmented.*

Following 2015, my practice began to diversify. After 17 years of focusing my artwork almost exclusively on issues connected directly to Sri Lanka, I was now expanding my practice and my commentary to a global platform along with my new collaborator, British visual artist David Cotterrell⁶. The situation in Sri Lanka – which was moving away from the critically urgent to the paralyzingly disappointing – released me, somewhat, for this undertaking.

Through my association with David I was learning to claim what artists of the Global North claim so easily – the right to a canvas beyond one's own country and immediate concerns⁷. No longer defined by an urgent national crisis, I was able to lift my eyes a bit, to widen the lens and to look at matters which lay elsewhere in the world.

We began working on a play called 'Thought Curfew' billed for performance at the 2018 Rwandan Ubumuntu Festival of Humanity. 'Thought Curfew' set out to explore the manner in which entire communities of people could be rendered 'unthinking' in an instant.

In our early concept notes we wrote...

How does unthinking violence suddenly unleash itself on people who shared life together? And how does unthinking violence disappear again into normalcy?

A child's journey...

In the play a little child flees a Thought Curfew that is fast-spreading across the world, rendering people instantly unthinking as it engulfs them. As the girl escapes from the sudden and terrifying strangeness that emerges first within her own family, she

⁶ David@Cotterrell.com

⁷ With regards to David's work, what struck me most was how he was able to leverage these international platforms to reflect critically back on his own local context. However, for me, it was a new experience to even permit myself to begin engaging at a global level.

encounters, beyond the edges of her world, different manifestations of the Thought Curfew within parallel worlds she previously knew nothing of.

She enters the worlds of Refugee Camps, the Military, Development Aid and Religion – all now subject to the expanding ‘Thought Curfew’. The child is struck by the strange behaviour, limited language and defining beliefs of these exclusive communities that seem to share a common wider context but little else. The child is pursued from each of these rigid thought camps, or sites of ‘unthinkingness’ until she is the only ‘thinking’ person left in the world.

Performed in Kigali, this play obviously resonated with the experience of the Rwandan Genocide⁸ – a tragic world example of mass-scale unthinking, unthinkable violence. But in David’s and my minds, the play was more than that. It was a commentary on a growing global phenomenon – where language, agendas, money, media, power, faith, lifestyle, careers – all contribute to create fortresses of restricted thinking, patterns of curfewed thought, structured to protect those who belong to a particular defined world and negate those who don’t.

The unthinkable option, in this context, would be to be a thinking person.

In the case of the play, it was a child, who knew little of the complex global crises, but still retained the freedom to think and respond freely.

A play about the unthinkable. A play about instantly unthinking people. It was a compelling challenge. We researched and explored the application of this extreme framework to the four worlds we had identified⁹. How did these worlds respond to human crises? How did individual humans function within these collectives? We studied the language and behaviour patterns of the communities, the physical structures of their worlds, the laws that defined them and the rules that bound them.

Ideally, this play would be devised and performed by an international cast – in order for it to reflect the global subcultures we were critiquing. However, challenges of budget and time limited us to a Sri Lankan cast, who, like me, were unused to devising a play not directly linked to a Sri Lankan crisis. However, I had now developed a stubborn (maybe even arrogant) belief in the dynamic between the story pursued and the story that I knew would emerge. I felt that within the devising process, a story didn’t have to have direct resonance with a cast for it to work. What we needed, instead, was genuine engagement and generosity of input and the confidence to then step aside and let the play that needed to be made, to emerge from within us.

Thought Curfew got made. It was performed in Rwanda as the closing show of the festival. The play was well received and powerful in some aspects and clever and poignant in others, but in spite of all that went right and everything that surpassed our expectations, I came out of the process feeling that something had not quite

⁸ In 100 days in 1994 an estimated 1 million people were killed

⁹ The worlds of the Family, Refugees, Development Sector, Military and Religion.

fallen into place. We had gone in with a conviction, we had come out with a sense of achievement, a sense of relief, even a sense of breakthrough. There was actually no reason for me to feel anything but satisfied. However, something in the process, which had been, albeit, rigorous and expanding; something had not occurred.

No matter. I wrapped up the production in my mind and prepared to move on.

However the lessons of the unthinkable play were yet to reach us and yet to teach us what we could not possibly anticipate.

Nine months after we performed Thought Curfew in Rwanda, the unthinkable descended suddenly on Sri Lanka. Within a day the country was blindsided by a catastrophe that stunned the world and threw us back forty years onto the brink of another pogrom, another civil war¹⁰.

Almost instantly, we were in sickeningly familiar but also terrifying unfamiliar surroundings. The hysteria and paranoia were immediate and paralysing. People withdrew into their communities, further into their families, further into their houses - into the smallest confines that defined them. Racism, suddenly validated, grew quickly to being flaunted and celebrated. The entire country was spinning.

In the disorientating weeks after the bombings, I picked up the text of Thought Curfew... the opening lines read...

When the unthinkable happens
No one is left who can tell the story
...
Here is how it happened
Here is how the unthinkable came into our lives
...
The unthinkable began not so long ago
The unthinkable began not so far away
The unthinkable, as no one here will remember,
First went unnoticed.
It first began in our Family...

And so, a story had emerged after all. And it was not the story we were pursuing. Or was it? Because we were pursuing an unthinkable story and now an unthinkable one had emerged. And of course, it emerged in a manner that we could never have thought of.

But here it was, at our doorstep. The unthinkable.

¹⁰ On April 21st - Easter Sunday – a series of suicide bombings exploded in churches and hotels in Sri Lanka killing over 250 people from 15 countries. Investigations found that senior government officials had prior information of the attacks, but failed to prevent them.

Here it was in the racism that exploded from within our own families and closest circles, from persons we thought we had shared a lifetime of values with¹¹.

Here it was in our language, instantly reduced to recycled clichés of hate and violence, attempting to counter what we could not even comprehend¹².

Here it was in the vulnerability of refugees from other countries who were being turned on and hounded out by us – a people reputed worldwide for our hospitality to visitors¹³.

Here it was in the military that was looking and (purposely?) still is looking in the wrong direction for the wrong threat¹⁴.

Here it was in the scramble to recalibrate aid budgets around a country now classed, once again, as ‘high conflict’¹⁵.

Here it was in the self-righteousness of our own religions that trampled other beliefs to win the race for salvation¹⁶.

Here it was in the paranoid security, the collective memory loss of the horrors of a three-decade long war, the call for a return to a previous political regime of ‘strongmen’ and ‘kings’ who promise to destroy enemies and dissent¹⁷.

All manifestations of the unthinkable were, indeed, upon us.

At this point I realised that what I had been missing in Thought Curfew was the crisis created by a truth that emerged from within the artwork, which pushed us to contend with ourselves in a manner that we had not anticipated.

And, of course, this crisis does not always come, and it should never be forced. But this experience made me realise that when we venture out as artists to address

¹¹ After Easter 2019 many people I know fell out with their families and friends over issues of religion, racism and nationalism.

¹² Some of the most vitriolic public spaces were the virtual ones – where hate speech, threats, virtual violence and misinformation hit unprecedented levels, resulting in the government temporarily shutting down social media.

¹³ A lesser known consequence of the Easter Bombings was the expulsion of over 1500 refugees from Sri Lankan homes, most of whom were Ahmadi Muslims from Pakistan.

¹⁴ There are many theories about a more sinister national or international involvement in the harboring of extremism in the country which could have had a direct impact on the Easter Bombings.

¹⁵ In the ten years of no open conflict and with various development projects being implemented, Sri Lanka was advancing towards upper middle income status and away from the ODA donor list.

¹⁶ The Easter Bombings created a new animosity between the two monotheistic religious minorities in the country – the Muslims and the Christians.

¹⁷ The Easter Bombings brought more support for the former regime which was seen as corrupt and racist but efficient.

some aspect of a human crisis or tragedy, we should always consider, honestly, our own capacity to deal with what would happen to us if our art work, should, in fact, turn its lens on us.

EPILOGUE

I started this essay trying to understand, through my own practice within devised theatre, the dynamic between the story pursued and the one that emerges. My work and experience has convinced me that it is through the overlay of this double lens that we arrive at, not just *a* truth, (for *a* truth is fairly easy to achieve through any art work) but at *the truth* that we are compelled to share. Working out what we are *compelled* to create is crucial to the integrity of devising because the process is so inherently open, so inherently collective. Within this, who are the players? Who draws the playing field? And how do we know we have arrived?

I believe its all through a complex act of watching.

But who watches who?

Ideally within a devised process, we are all, at the same time, the watchers and the watched. Us looking at each other, us looking out at the world, us looking back at ourselves. Placement. Perspective. Swap. Placement. Perspective. And again. Until we can see and be both the wood and the trees.

The play 'Sivaramani' was so intensely and so directly about the cast that they could not wrench themselves out of the process to see themselves in it. This literally meant they could not see the play. Ironically (and quite uniquely) though, through their *inability* to recognise themselves, and their indifference to this tragedy, they actually owned the play in a more truthful manner than they could have ever contrived. This experience was quite an exceptional one. Not something that can be replicated. It was definitely what that play was compelled to say.

The DCS artists knew they were implicated within the story they were pursuing but it was an association across the distance of time. As members of a paranoid majority they had inherited an inbuilt racism they thought they had neutralised. However, in order to really see and *own* their placement within the *tragedy* of this reality, which was more than the tragedy of inheritance but rather the tragedy of potential fresh violence; they had to exit the space they occupied, and re-enter from a place closer to an uncomfortable truth. It was only when this happened, when we artists saw ourselves within the racist structures that we publicly rejected; when we had no option but to understand and accept our place within the problem we were trying to depict, it was only then that we could access the truthfulness of the artwork; to see clearly the play and ourselves within it. It was a reality we were compelled to address in order to access the truth we were compelled to perform.

In *Thought Curfew* we didn't feel implicated; not directly anyway. It was a play about world issues. It was a play that spoke more directly to the people of another country than to us. We were holding up the frame; pointing the lens. But then, unexpectedly, the play we had made for others boomeranged back on us. And this taught me another lesson.

The act of devising does not end with the striking of the set or the fall of the curtain. Discovering what we are compelled to say is not defined by funding cycles, budgets or performance deadlines. Truth comes to us in spiralling cycles, strengthened by our own ability to return to a familiar place with a new understanding that might even destabilise us.

Within this pattern, the challenge of the artist is not to create *some truth* and move on to the next project; but every so often, maybe stay with an artwork, maybe return. A play we made for others could be more about ourselves than we are willing to admit. An artwork about ourselves, maybe, rings hollow because it is so completely, only about ourselves. We should never be so arrogant as to create a lens we are not prepared to subject ourselves to, or a frame we are not willing to step out of.

There is no formula. There is only intention, integrity and the commitment to the pursuit - to not let go of an artwork until it has achieved what it is compelled to say. For it is only when we discover this that we are compelled to say, that we can stop devising.

And this requires courage. Because then, even when the unthinkable happens, and even if it happens to us, there will be someone left who can tell the story.