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The Combination

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Abstract

When I first saw Druna, at a sad little makeshift refugee camp north of Mankerny on Sri Lanka's East Coast, she was sitting in a square of hard red dirt, surrounded by a tangle of tent poles and metal stakes...

Cover Page Footnote

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The Combination

Fiction by Dave Rothbart

When I first saw Druna, at a sad little makeshift refugee camp north of Mankerny on Sri Lanka's East Coast, she was sitting in a square of hard red dirt, surrounded by a tangle of tent poles and metal stakes. I'm a reporter—I got her story: Her husband, two children, and father had been washed away by the tsunami. That was five weeks before. Now she was out of tears. She said she was ready to die. She asked me, Would I help her? I said I would help her pitch her tent.

It was an ugly, American thing to do, to fall in love with her. But I did. We spent the next week together, every day, putting up tents, talking to people, visiting the neighboring camps. At night I rode a motorcycle back to my hotel in Batticaloa. Druna laughed sometimes—the sound was breathtaking. She was beautiful, but her beauty wasn't what squeezed my heart, it was her laughter.

Late one afternoon we found ourselves in the ruins of Mankerny's lone bank. The water had blasted through the front wall and killed all five people who worked there, including the bank manager and the owner of the bank. In the middle of the back room, a refrigerator-sized safe had been knocked from its moorings and laid sideways on the floor. No one who knew the combination was still alive. All month, kids had been tinkering in vain. That night, when Druna and I wandered in, there were three young boys straddling the safe, like they were riding a triceratops, while a fourth boy, older than the others, crouched below and spun the dial.

“Go home,” Druna shouted at them. But of course they had no homes, and she wasn’t really angry with them.

“There’s a hundred million rupees inside!” one of the boys cried.

Druna led me through to a tiny room off to the side. The calendar on the wall was stuck on December. We stood facing each other and holding hands for a long time. Darkness edged in and my thoughts bashed at me. Why was I doing what I was doing? I couldn’t figure out exactly how despicable this was. All I wanted was to bring comfort to Druna, and to be comforted by her. We began to kiss. I loved her so fiercely I thought my heart would crack open. I also knew I’d be leaving in a couple of days and that in a week I’d be back in Detroit. In the other room, the little kids crowed and sang and banged sticks against the safe.

“Is this okay?” I asked Druna.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, which seemed both a no and a yes. We kissed some more.

Then there was a different sound from the big room, a metal sound, a bottle being uncorked. The kids screamed for us. Druna and I rushed in.

The safe was wide open; the kids had somehow unlocked it. Bundles of rubber-banded orange and green and purple money spilled out across the floor. Everyone was very quiet, and the kids stared wide-eyed and fearful at the loot, as though it might be protected by ghosts. At last, the oldest boy ventured forward and slowly bent down and lifted a stack of bills. He peered back at us, his eyes somber, and said, in the tiniest voice, “We’re all so rich.”

Davy Rothbart is the creator of *Found Magazine*, a frequent contributor to public radio’s *This American Life*, and author of a collection of essays, *My Heart is an Idiot*, and a collection of stories, *The Lone Surfer of Montana, Kansas*. He writes regularly for *GQ*, and his work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Grantland*, and *The Believer*. He’s the founder of Washington II Washington, an annual hiking trip for inner-city kids, and is also the co-director of the documentary film *Medora* (2013). He splits his time between Los Angeles, California, and his hometown of Ann Arbor, Michigan.