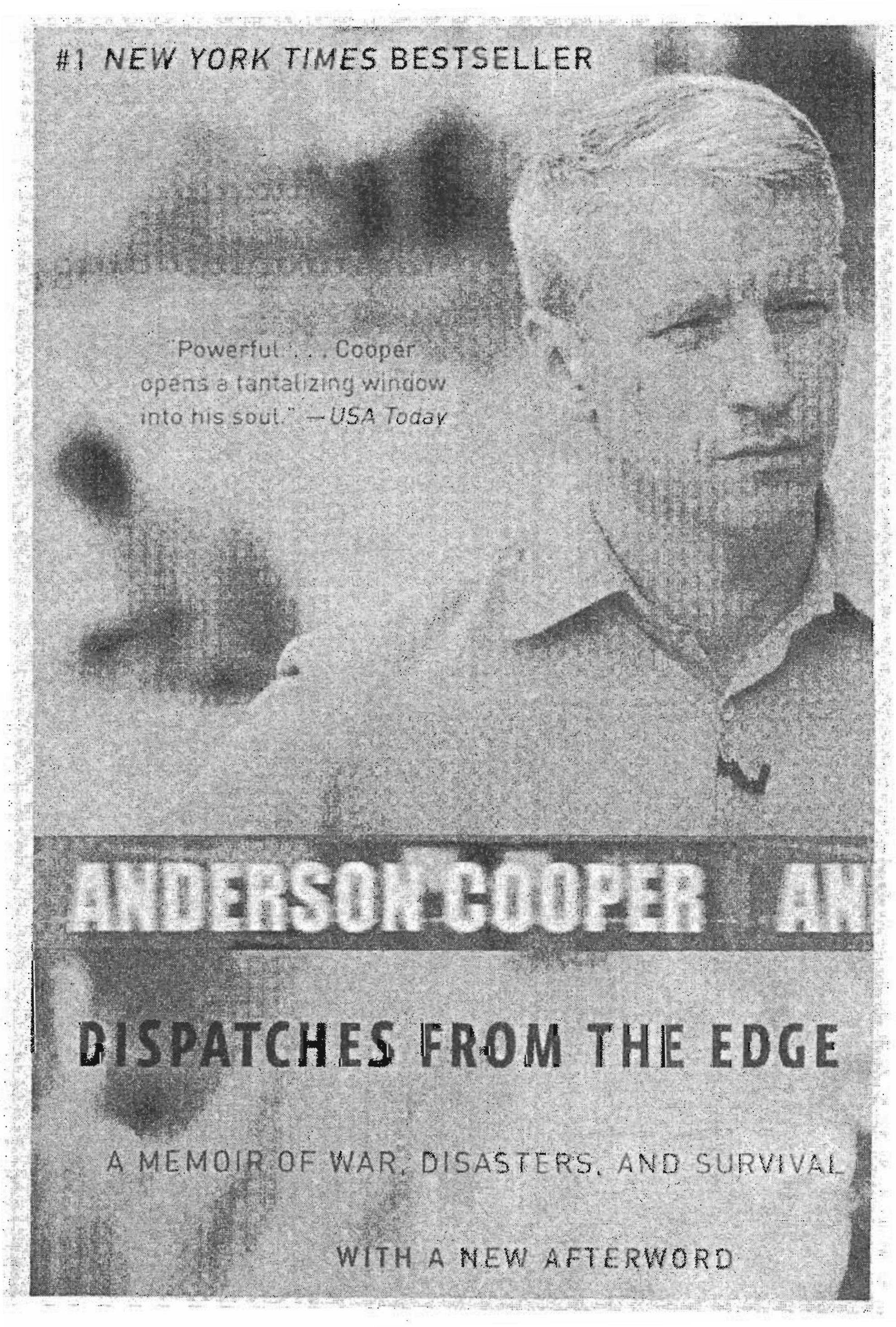

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

"Powerful . . . Cooper opens a tantalizing window into his soul." —*USA Today*

ANDERSON COOPER

DISPATCHES FROM THE EDGE

A MEMOIR OF WAR, DISASTERS, AND SURVIVAL

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD

I'M UNABLE TO sleep on the flight to Sri Lanka. It's nearly a week since the tsunami struck and already I fear I've missed the story—the bodies and the burials, the emotion of the moment. Like a raw recruit who thinks the war will end before he sees action, I wanted to go the minute this happened. It's the way it always is: find the worst-off place and plunge in head first. It sounds strange, ghoulish, perhaps, but it's the truth. I want to be there, want to see it. Once I am there, however, I've quickly seen enough.

On the plane the flight attendant asks a Sri Lankan passenger if she's comfortable.

"I just lost three people in my family," the passenger says.

"Oh, that's terrible," the flight attendant says, pausing for a moment. "No duty-free then?"

I expect the Colombo airport to be buzzing with activity. A massive recovery effort is supposedly under way. At Sri Lanka's main airport, however, there is little sign of it. No C-130s off-loading pallets of water and medicine, no line of trucks picking up supplies. A few Red Cross personnel wait for their colleagues to arrive, but there's no indication that a catastrophe has just occurred.

We drive south from Colombo, and the farther we go, the worse the scenes of destruction. There are few bulldozers, no heavy earth-moving equipment. In every seaside town we drive through, villagers dig through rubble with their hands, or use crude tools to repair fishing boats splintered by the waves.

Thirty-five thousand people are dead in Sri Lanka. Their bodies have already been found. Another five thousand people have simply vanished.

CNN engineers have set up a satellite dish on the grounds of a destroyed beachfront hotel. Christmas decorations still hang from the lobby ceiling: SEASONS GREETINGS! HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Every morning near dawn for the next two weeks, we broadcast live from amid the hotel's rubble. Then Charlie Moore, my producer, and Phil Littleton, my cameraman, and I pile into a van and drive off, searching along the coast for stories. We end up working around the clock: shooting all day, writing and editing most of the night. Every report is the same: incalculable loss, unspeakable pain.

THE SINGLE WORST scene of carnage in Sri Lanka is just off the main road to Galle. When the tsunami hit, an old train packed with more than a thousand people was knocked off its tracks. At least nine hundred passengers died. For days they were unable to move the railcars and couldn't get to the bodies trapped in the smashed steel. When we arrive, however, most of the dead have finally been recovered. A few are still pinned underneath the train cars, submerged in ponds of seawater that have turned the ground to mud.

Two dogs brought in by Dutch volunteers search the wreckage. They are cadaver dogs and are specially trained to find dead bodies. The dogs are confused, however, there are so many scents; it's hard for them to stay focused.

"Everywhere we are searching, we find always bodies," one of the dog handlers tells me.

One of the demolished railcars came within a few feet of Dhanapala Kalupahana's house. He and his wife, Ariyawathie, are trying to clean up inside, but there is little they can do. Their roof has collapsed. It wasn't hit by the train; it fell under the weight of passengers who jumped onto it, trying to escape from the railcar. Several survived, but at least four people fell through the roof and died in Ariyawathie's living room, right in front of her eyes. She is barely able to speak. Her mother and son were also killed by the wave.

"Mother, no body. Son, no body" is all she can say.

Outside their home the jungle has become a gnarled mass of steel and mud, splintered trees, rotting flesh, and broken bones. I climb into a train car that was knocked off the tracks. Passengers' possessions are strewn about—a plate of food, a little girl's purse. Handprints smear the walls, a mixture of mud and blood. Everyone aboard drowned. Later I learn that the name of the train was Samudra Devi, the Goddess of the Sea.

* * *

AT TIMES, WORKING in news is like playing a giant game of telephone. Someone reports something, and everyone else follows suit. The truth gets lost along the way.

"What about the kidnapped children?" a producer in New York asks.

"What kidnapped children?" I say.

"They claim lots of storm orphans are being kidnapped and sold into sexual slavery."

"Who's 'they'?" I ask.

"Everyone," the producer responds. "It's being reported all over the place."

"We'll look into it," I respond, which is usually the only way to end such a conversation.

Child trafficking is a major problem, especially in Southeast Asia, but when we start checking the kidnapping story being reported on other networks and papers, it seems slim on facts. It's mostly just aid workers worrying that children separated from their parents by the disaster may get kidnapped. Part of the aid workers' job is to get relief, and one way for them to do that is to raise red flags, warn of impending problems. Warnings, however, aren't facts.

We've hired a Sri Lankan newspaper reporter named Chris to help us get around, and when I ask him about kidnappings, his eyes light up. "Oh, yes, it appears a very big problem," he says, his British-accented English accompanied always with a peculiarly Sri Lankan shake of the head.

Chris shows us a headline on the front page of one of Sri Lanka's daily papers: TWO KIDS, RESCUED FROM WAVES, KIDNAPPED BY MAN ON MOTORCYCLE.

"There have been a lot of stories like that," he says. "It's all very dramatic stuff."

"Is it true?" I ask.

"I have no idea," he says, "but it makes for a great headline."

When we check with police, it turns out there have only been two complaints of child abductions filed with authorities, and neither of those cases has been confirmed. We decide to track down the story about the two kids kidnapped by the man on the motorcycle.

Sunera is seven, his sister Jinandari is five. They haven't been seen in nearly two weeks.

"I believe that they're alive," their aunt tells us when we track her down in Colombo. She speaks in a whisper and clutches a photograph of Jinandari dressed as a ballerina.

Sunera and Jinandari were in a car with their parents when the tsunami hit. The wave swept them off the road, carrying their car like a piece of driftwood some three hundred yards into a water-filled ditch. It ended up submerged upside down underwater, not far from the Lighthouse Hotel and Spa, a strikingly modern waterfront hotel near Galle.

When we arrive, the place is packed. It somehow survived the storm, and is now filled with reporters. They've converted the parking lot into a satellite-feed point. When we finally locate the manager, Ananda de Silva, he tells me, quite confidently, that the children are dead.

"From our staff, three people came and tried to turn the car," he tells me, pointing to the now dried-out ditch. "We couldn't do it, but after about thirty minutes, we were able to get the girl and boy out." The parents were dead, de Silva says, stuck in the car underwater. When they got Sunera out he was dead as well. Jinandari was unconscious.

"Her eyes were shut, her head like this," de Silva says, flopping his head forward.

"The paper says the children were kidnapped by a man on a motorcycle," I say, showing him the headline.

He waves his hand at the front page. "That is just rumor," de Silva says, insisting that he saw Sunera's body handed over to Sri Lankan soldiers passing by in a truck. As for Jinandari, he says a man named Lal Hamasiri took her to the hospital on a motorbike.

Lal Hamasiri lives a short distance from the hotel. When we arrive, he is at first unwilling to speak, furious that local papers have made him out to be a kidnapper.

"I saw the child lying on the ground," he finally tells us, beckoning us into his home, away from the prying eyes of suspicious neighbors. "I immediately picked her up and gave her mouth to mouth. She had some white foam on her lips."

At the urging of the crowd, he flagged down a passing motorcycle and took the girl to a nearby hospital. "The body was a little warm, and I believe she had a slight pulse," he says, but by the time they got to the emergency room, he was sure she was dead.

"I went up with the good intention of saving someone's life but in return I got a very bad name, and everyone looks at me like I'm a criminal, like I'm a kidnapper."

At the hospital, it quickly becomes obvious how a little girl can go missing. The emergency ward is washed away. Hospital beds sit abandoned in the courtyard, waterlogged papers and medical records litter the ground.

A short, squat man in a sparkling white suit waddles out of the main door, trailed by a fast-moving entourage; UN relief workers, Sri Lankan underlings, a few local news crews try to keep up with him.

"That's the fucking minister," our guide, Chris, tells me, pausing to watch the political parade pass by. According to him, this particular government minister was caught by his wife screwing another woman in his office. His wife created such a scene that the police were called, and the local tabloids had a feast.

"Oh, we went to town on that one," Chris says, his eyes wistful at the memory of it all. "Photos, eyewitness accounts, the whole nine yards."

When we finally track down the hospital administrator, she confirms that Jinandari was dead when she arrived. Because the morgue here had been demolished by the tsunami, they transferred her to another hospital. Even if she had been alive when she was pulled out of the water, the travel time alone to and from the hospitals would have killed her.

We decide that the least we can do is try to find Jinandari's body. Since we've come this far, it only seems right to see it through. When we reach the second hospital, we're directed down a long corridor and into a large, sun-filled room. It's the temporary morgue.

From outside, the room looks like an art gallery in New York's East Village. Hundreds of small photos line the walls. At first it's hard to tell what the photos show. You have to go up close, and even then it takes a moment for the images to snap into focus. They are pictures of the dead. More than a thousand of them. Every body that was stored here, every corpse, had its photograph taken, in the hopes that someone might be able to identify it.

No one ever talks about what the water can do. It's all here, however, color captured on film: the submersion, the struggle, the exhaustion, the fear. Water flooding into lungs, babies coughing and vomiting, hearts stopping, bodies convulsing, heads snapping back, startlingly white eyes popping from mud-smothered faces, tongues swelling into blackened balloons, necks bloating like those of giant toads, bones breaking, skulls crushing, teeth being ripped from heads, children from their mothers' arms.

In movies, people drown peacefully, giving in to the pull of the water, taken by the tug of the tide. These pictures tell a different story. There is no dignity in drowning, no silent succumbing to the water's ebb and flow. It's violent, and painful, a shock to the heart. Everyone drowns alone. Even in death, their corpses scream.

Nurses with face masks scrub the mottled floor with stiff brushes and brooms. Until a few days ago, the room was filled with bodies lying side by side on the floor. They've now been buried in a mass grave on the outskirts of town. It's the third time nurses are trying to disinfect the floor, but the rot and puss have seeped into the cement. There are flies everywhere. Phil puts his camera down for a moment to change batteries. "Don't put that on the floor," the head nurse warns him, worried it might pick up bacteria. Hard as they've tried, they can't get the smell out. The stench of bodies is still there, buried under layers of bleach.

I've brought with me photos of Sunera and Jinandari—school portraits, the kind for which kids have to dress up, comb their hair, sit still. Each child smiles straight into the camera lens. I know Jinandari is somewhere on this wall of the dead, but staring at the pictures of the corpses, I know I'll never find her. The bodies are too decomposed.

"We should go," Charlie says, and I know he's right, but I keep forcing myself to look at the photos, stare at each face. I figure it's the least I can do.

Finally, we head out to find the mass grave, and reach it just as the sun is starting to set. There are no signs, just a swath of red clay stretching for hundreds of yards in a clearing in the woods. A bloodred slash in a forest of green, upturned earth as far as the eye can see.

Two women stand at the grave's edge. They live just behind it, in a small clearing.

"Why did they have to dig the graves here?" one of the women asks. "Now the ghosts of the dead will haunt us at night."

There are no headstones, no markers. The bodies are carried in by bulldozers and dumped into pits. New graves continue to be dug. No one knows for whom. The dead have no names. As we leave the burial ground and head back to the hotel, I check my watch. I notice the date. It's January 5, the day my father died.