

Sri Lanka

by Pradeep Jeganathan

When he turned to the quiet sound of her voice, he knew he'd heard her before, that she had already called out several times, and that she'd reached him somewhere in a recess of his unquiet mind. She was smiling now as he turned, repeating with a tiny hesitant upward inflection — a half question: “Krishna?”

He had just walked into the student center library, the bad cafeteria dinner still sitting heavy in him, looking for the *Island-International*, the newspaper from home that you could check out at the library desk. It wasn't a library newspaper; they didn't get newspapers from home at the library. Someone else, Ravi, a senior he didn't quite know, got it and was kind enough to leave it at the desk for every one else. Today it hadn't been there; it had been checked out. Upset, he hadn't even looked up as he turned to go to the carrels until Ashley's voice had reached him.

“Oh hi!” He said, and then as the realization that she had been saying his name for a while sank in, smiled shyly. “Sorry, I was thinking of something else.”

He knew her name; she'd introduced herself the other day after the big panel discussion on Sri Lanka the South-Asia graduate student group had organized. But he stood there, tongue stuck in his mouth, mind emptying out, turning blurred and desolate as the snow covered pavement outside, gazing at Ashley as if she was but a vision from another world. Today she was in a blue sweater, which was thick and soft around her slim form, snuggling her neck in its folds, pressing gently on the lines of her jaw, with sleeves so long that her small hands were almost covered by them, only tiny pink tips peeking out, moving on the edge of the wool.

“Hi,” he said again, a familiar feeling of stupidity overcoming him.

She was smiling gently; as if she sensed how he felt. “How are you doing?”

He usually hated that question, it had been his pet peeve all of freshman year —the ‘how are you doing?’ that didn't mean anything, that everyone here just threw around. But she asked it differently, making him want to answer.

“I'm... I'm fine, and you?”

“I'm great.”

He sat down on the long sofa in the lobby of the library, half turned towards her. The *Island—International* was in her lap, a little crumpled, one corner under her denim encased right thigh.

“I wanted to ask you...” she stopped, and nibbled on her lower lip, wetting it with her tongue, diffident. “I'm trying to write this paper, on Sri Lanka, and I am so confused. I was wondering, could I talk to you about it?”

Krishna glanced up at her face, thinking he shouldn't stare, but not taking his eyes off the smooth, glowing, slightly flushed planes of her cheeks. He met her eyes for an instant, blue gray under darkened lashes.

“Yes, of course. I mean... sure, but I don't think I know enough to help with a paper.” He paused and shrugged very slowly.

She laughed softly, almost teasingly. “Aww... I heard you ask that question at the talk; didn't Professor Fulton say it was the best question of the day?”

He flushed dark at that, lowering his eyes. “No, no...” he shook his head. “He was just being encouraging.” He remembered the open sea of faces turned back as he had got up to ask the question, expectant, watching, making his heart pound as he spoke. He remembered her face, turned back, framed by her unruly hair, watching him as his words tumbled out, quickly but then smoothly.

Unconsciously, he touched his own lower lip to his teeth.

“Come on, it was a great question. And any way you are from there, right? I mean you know so much more than me.”

“Ok.” He said, feeling both warm and empty inside himself. “What is your paper about?”

They talked for an hour or so about Ashley's paper. It wasn't all that clear to him, at first, what it was about; but he got the

general drift of her interests. The class was on political conflict, and Sri Lanka and Nicaragua were cases they had done. But he was absorbed, and after a few exchanges, he was surprised at how much he did know. He thought all he really knew were differential equations, and Maxwell's laws, so usually he never even dared discuss liberal arts or social science stuff with some one who was actually majoring in it.

"Wow," Ashley said after while. "You've read so much. Are you in Polisci?"

He chuckled at that. "No, I'm 8 & 6-1."

"Six? Oh no... the MIT numbers thing. That is so crazy you know?"

"I know. Sorry, but every thing has a number here. It is crazy. Even more so if it is double major. 8 is physics. 6-1 is electrical engineering."

"Electrical? Isn't that the hardest one? I mean there is that big class right, in programming? I heard that is a terror?" Ashley went to Wellesley, so MIT for her was a foreign country she was still getting to know.

"Yes, 6001. I'm in that now."

"I bet you are acing it."

He felt his cheeks warm. "I'm... I don't know. I think if you do the problem sets, you are ok." He knew he had to get to work on the next one, which was sitting in his back pack. It had looked long when he had glanced at it before dinner. "Looks like you've got a lot of notes there, Ashley." Her yellow pad was filled with scribbles, points he had made, references he had cited, and then there were special areas on the sheet she'd circled, which contained what she called her "aha points."

"Yep. Lots. Got to get to the computer center. I thought I'd use the one here since the one at Wellesley is so useless."

"Oh here? The student center one? Isn't it rather crowded?"

She sighed, and shrugged, long curls of light hair caressing her right cheek and ear, as she buried herself deeper in the sofa. "Got to wait; it is such a drag."

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It was the next day that he saw her, waiting in the student center computer room, sitting at a table, books spread in front of her, scribbling on her pad. He'd walked into collect a printout he had sent from the cluster where he worked, since the printer there was down.

He stopped by her. "Been waiting long?"

She looked up, almost translucent white teeth showing through her parted lips, as she smiled brightly at him. "Yes, and there is no end in sight. These guys are playing computer games on the terminals." She hissed.

He nodded. "They tend to do that. But, you know what?"

"What?" She grinned, tilting her head up, hands going to her thick, soft hair, pulling it back off her face with a smooth motion.

"You could just use a terminal in the Athena cluster in building 11."

"Eleven?" Ashley went, but she wasn't kidding now. "The one right off the infinity corridor, right?"

"Infinite." He smiled. "Yes, that one."

"Don't you need a key or some thing to get in?"

"A password. I work there. Come with me, I'll show you."

They stopped at the traffic lights waiting for them to change before they crossed. He glanced up across the road, as he always did, at the cube in the corner that said 77 Massachusetts Avenue, and the huge roman looking columns that dominated the entrance. Krishna had been 14 when he had told himself he would go to MIT, when deep in Resnick and Halliday, he had understood Maxwell's laws. They were the most beautiful thing he'd ever known, so wonderful in their elegance that he felt, when he thought of them, he could hold the universe in his hands.

When the light turned amber, he turned to her, seeing the soft flakes of snow, descending, bright in the darkening sky, falling onto her hair, settling in the tendrils and wisps.

"Here." He handed her his scarf.

She looked at it. "What?"

"To cover your hair."

"To cover my hair?" She looked quizzically at him.

"Yes, Oh I mean... from the snow." He looked up, unsure how to be clear. "You need a hat may be?"

"Oh. No, I am always macho about winter." Then she looked at him, head slanted to one side. "That was weird for a moment. I thought you were saying like I need to cover my hair." She laughed knowingly, as she had found him out. "Is that a custom in Sri Lanka?"

"No of course not." He stepped away, sideways, balling the scarf in his hand, walking quickly across the road, as the light changed. He never knew what to say to something like that. You could always say yes or no, but qualifications were needed if you were going to be honest, and qualification were hard. But he knew he'd started reading books on Sri Lanka, because he needed to explain things, to himself and others — because if that world, his world over there had ever made sense, it seemed far more confused when questioned from outside.

He ran up the steps, as he always did, draping the scarf back on his neck, stopping only at the door realizing he'd left Ashley behind. He stopped, and waited for her, stepping aside so that she could walk through the famous old automatic door into the lobby of the Institute. She went through but stopped, not going on. He pointed forward. "This way," he said, thinking she was confused about where they were going.

She didn't move, but looked up at him, hugging her books to her chest, saying again, "Krishna?" so softly, it was a whisper. He saw the look on her face and he stopped short, moving closer.

"Krishna, I'm sorry. I upset you. I didn't mean to."

He felt his back relax and his face smoothen its tightness. "No it is fine. But thank you for saying that. I... some times. I don't know how to explain every thing, ok?"

She leant forward and put her hand on his arm. "I'm just a totally ignorant WASP girl. You've got to remember that." She moved closer, standing inches from him, face lifted, eyes large and open. "You've been so nice to explain things to me. I really appreciate it. Don't be mad okay?" Her fingers moved gently on his arm, and the scent of her hair enveloped him. Suddenly he wanted to kiss her.

"No, no, I'm not mad," he said, shaking his head, and trying to smile. He could feel every male eye that went past flickering on them, on Ashley, she standing so close to him, one glance following the other, drawn it seemed to the glow of her face, and radiance of her hair. He took her hand gently, "come, please."

They stopped at the glass door to the Athena cluster, and he pressed the keys of the electronic combination lock, making it flash, she beside him and quiet.

"It is a bit Sci-Fi like here. But hey... It is MIT, right?"

She laughed softly, eyes meeting his.

He settled her down in front of the large new VX120 workstations; the whole row was vacant, colored patterns spinning idly on the dark curved screens.

"So... But will someone ask me for ID or some thing?"

The room was empty, except for two guys who were at the far end, hacking away. "Oh no. That is the beauty of this place; no one talks to any one else. No one checks any thing. And especially every one in Athena is 6-3 and way into d&d; you know the kind who wears those light brown glasses indoors?" He grinned. "They are scared of nearly every thing; no way they will even look at you — you'll terrify them."

She laughed at that quietly, but hard. "You are funny." She said. "Thanks so much for this."

He smiled happily, standing up to leave. "Oh it is not a big thing. Now at least you can work in peace."

But it turned out that she didn't know Emacs, the text processor she needed to know to use the Vax, so he had to walk her through the basics, the control xs and control cs.

“Krishna?”

There was a upward slant again, that he was beginning to recognize. He had been checking something out on the system waiting for Ashley to make sure she had mastered the basics of the text processor. He swiveled the dark blue chair to turn to her, loving its contoured comfort, listening.

“You know I understand more of the history of Sri Lanka now, and how the Sinhala Tamil thing developed. But I still don't get the 1983 riots? How come that happened?” She touched her lower lip to her teeth, as if she may have said the wrong thing again, and her face tensed. “I mean I don't know enough, I guess?”

He listened, still, hearing her words. His fingers moved on the cushioned arm rests, nails scraping the cloth. Behind her, the white wall of the room dazzled him, and the row of embedded lights in the ceiling flickered with fierce power.

He forced himself to take his eyes off the wall. “There is this paper I read,” He offered, trying to remember and then make sensible what he did. “It had an unusual argument. It isn't the relative deprivation of the lower classes theory that Tambiah offers. I mean I think that is kind of true. But this paper argues that different sections of the capitalist classes benefited differentially from the structural economic reforms the IMF wanted.”

Ashley was scribbling in her pad; Krishna didn't really see her fingers move, but he saw the shapes emerge on the yellow sheet.

“Different sections? So how does that become Sinhala vs. Tamil?”

“Some Tamil sections benefited more from the import trade he says. And they then out did their Sinhala competitors. There is more to it, but that is the gist of it. He is a Marxist anthropologist in Sri Lanka, Gunesinghe. You must read his stuff.”

"You are such a gold mine. Thanks again." Ashley wrote down the reference that he gave her. "And how on earth do you remember even the publisher? I swear you are a computer!"

He laughed at that, and said nothing for a moment, just basking in the warmth of her praise, "No of course not. I forget loads."

"Lot less than me, I'm sure."

"Well you've got a lots of stuff to remember." He smiled at her teasingly. "Password for the room, for my account, and all the Emacs stuff. You got it all?"

She nodded hand moving on the writing pad.

"Okay, I'll see you around then. Oh and..." He bent and wrote his dorm phone number on the edge of her pad. "You can call from the extension here." He pointed. "Dial 5 and the number. Just in case something goes wrong?" He sensed the unfamiliar upward inflection creep into his voice.

"Thanks so much."

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"Krishna?"

It was a week later that she called; the paper was done and she wanted to thank him. He pressed the phone close to his ear, to make her voice louder, for the line was always bad, but more to feel her closer. His ear traced each little inflection, every tiny pause, and each tinkling laugh almost before he heard them.

He stopped his racing mind, stilling it, speaking in another voice. "Ashley?"

She said "Ye...es?" back as if to tease his serious tone.

"I'd like to ask you to come over for dinner sometime, please?"

He felt calm as he had when he first began to row, when he knew he was one with the oars, and the motion of the boat. He felt his thumb, tight, almost numb on the hand set.

"Sure! Oh I would love that."

"I'll cook?"

"Oh Sri Lankan food? Will you? That would be awesome."

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He started early on Friday, smashing the cloves of garlic with the side of his cleaver, pushing off the thin brittle skin with his thumb, collecting a pile before dicing. It was going to be chicken curry, lentils and rice since Ashley was so excited about Sri Lankan food. He didn't really know how to do it like it was done at home, since he'd never really cooked at home. He'd learnt to cook at MIT, because there were kitchens in the dorm and cafeteria food was so bad; he was working hard on stews since they kept well, and stir fries since they were so quick. But he had kind of got coq au vin right a couple times, and some times tried to go a little further. But today he was using his father's recipe, written in neat hand, mailed to him in the kind of notebook you used in school back home; Appa had retired, and was now learning how to cook.

He was peeling ginger when Julie walked in, humming, ever present Walkman wrapped around her ears, shrouded in an enormous hooded red sweat shirt, that said 'MIT' in big white letters on it.

She stopped by him, and watched.

"Ohh... you are cooking? Looks fancy." She poked at the garlic, taking off her headphone.

He stopped and grinned at Julie. "Nah it is not fancy. Just kind of basic."

Julie was nice, and unfailingly kind; she was a senior, but she had time for every one, always listening and encouraging. She didn't care much for guys as such; she spent a lot of time with all the other female soft ball players. But from time to time she'd check in on Krishna, saying "You thinking of home again?" with unerring accuracy.

She glanced at the place settings on the plain white table in the big common room the kitchen opened into.

“Oh. Company?”

Krishna turned to her, a piece of peeled ginger in the palm of his hand, nude and oblong. “Just a friend.” There was something in his voice, and Julie caught it.

“A date? That is way cool.” Julie patted his shoulder. “Do I know her?”

“She is at Wellesley. Ashley, she is in Polisci there.”

“Not the blonde?”

Krishna nodded.

“Woo hoo!”

“What? Oh shh.”

“She is beautiful. Whoa.”

Krishna started laughing. “I think you need to ask her out Julie, by the looks of it. How do you know her?”

“I met her at a ZBT party. She was with Ravi.” Julie nodded, remembering.

Ravi was course 2 like Julie and they'd done a project together the year before. And since he was Sri Lankan it had been a vague but helpful initial point of reference for the two of them, when Krishna had been a freshman.

“Oh. Ravi?”

“Have fun!” said Julie, already heading out.

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“That was so nice. You are such a good cook!” Ashley was sitting on the bean bag in his room, finishing the red wine they had started with the food. She was wearing a shortish skirt that stayed close to her thighs, which were smooth in light tights.

“Not too hot? I was worried about that...” He asked.

“Hot? As in hot spicy? No, it was just right. Wow. So this is like home cooked Sri Lankan food?”

“What? As opposed to take out? I suppose it is by definition; since I cooked it.”

"No, silly boy. I mean is this what you have at home, for dinner?" The chicken curry had faded her bright red lip-gloss, but he could still see the hint of blush high on her cheek bones.

"Oh, well yes, sort of. But we have more stuff. More dishes." He didn't even start to explain that this would be lunch, not dinner, at home.

"Sounds fabulous. You know what? I'm trying to decide if I should do my junior year abroad in Sri Lanka."

"Oh does Wellesley have a program?"

"No, it is through another college; but you can get a year's worth of credits for it. I'd learn a lot, and I know I'd just love the food."

He leant back, propped up on his pillows, glancing at the window pane for a moment. It was a little warmer today; there was a light drizzle instead of snow. Drops of water were falling, slowly, deliberately, it seemed, off the edge of the quarter open pane, onto the sill.

"And that is a good reason?" He sipped his wine, turning back to her.

"Well, I am interested in Sri Lanka. You know that." She sounded defensive. Reaching for her bag, she took out her lip stick, and re—did her lips with practiced ease, slowly pouting.

He nodded quickly. "Yes, of course."

"Krishna?"

He smiled almost unthinkingly.

"I was wondering... You are a sophomore right?"

He nodded again.

"So..." She stopped, small fingers pressed to bean bag. "You were there during these riots? I mean you were in Sri Lanka in 1983, right?"

"Yes I left right after the riots, at the end of August, to come here."

"You are... Tamil right?"

He seemed to stiffen. "How do you figure?"

She bit her lip. "I'm sorry, if it that is rude to say. I'm sorry. I just figured from the question you asked at the talk. I mean I thought you implied it."

He nodded and smiled slightly, not wanting her to be sorry, not wanting to be tense. "Yes, I'm Tamil."

"The riots... must have been hard for you? Was everything okay with your family?" She got off the bean bag and sat by the edge of the bed, by his hip, her thighs pressed together, body half turned to him, watching his face.

The water was pooling on the sill now; tiny drops gathering, islands on the grimy white surface. Slowly he took his eyes off the little puddles, hardly realizing Ashley was sitting so close, wisps of her scented hair brushing his hip. His mind calmed as he ran his eye on the edge of her ear, and the cutting ache in the back of his head lessened.

"Yes, they were fine." He looked out of the window again, feeling his cheek vibrate, unable to stop the tiny persistent motion. Most people here who asked about '83 stopped there, and he was used to that. Usually the subject changed to some thing more pleasant, after a quick "Oh that's good!"

But she said nothing, listening, her body turning further, one knee on the bed now, bent, tiny slipper kicked off.

He turned to her again, trying to smile, hoping to compose his face.

"You were in Colum... bo?"

"Yes, I was at home. My father was away visiting a friend in another town. It was just my mother and sister at home, so we figured they should hide — and they did, in another house."

Ashley was leaning forward, her fingers on his upper arm.

"Every thing was fine, until there was that crazy frenzy on Friday."

She nodded. "Black Friday, right? When the Sinhala people in Colombo thought they'd been attacked by the Tamil Tigers, and attacked back?" She spoke softly.

Krishna could see five little puddles on the sill, swollen, bulging out, the surface tension of their outsides holding them in. Krishna tried to focus his mind on the equations that governed that tiny, odd force of nature, going through the derivation in his head. He knew his lips were trembling.

“There were these five guys, Ashley, they were being chased by this huge crowd, and right at our wall, they were cornered.”

“Oh my God.”

“They bashed their heads on our wall, and then smashed their skulls with blocks of concrete from the pavement — the sidewalk — right by our house, right there, just broke their skulls in.”

He kept the cold red wine on the sill, and tried to cover his eyes and cover his face with the back of his hand.

She kissed him as he cried, first his cheeks and cheek bones, her hair on his face, warming and enveloping him, and then on his lips licking and nibbling, whispering softly, “oh you poor baby... poor baby.”

They must have lain there for a long time, and drifted off to sleep; when he half woke up, it was nearly 3:00 am and Ashley was in sweet slumber, her head resting on his chest, breasts pressing softly on his ribs. Krishna covered her in his comforter, and sat by the window until dawn, thinking of the red patches on the pink walls of his parent's house, the patterns of water on the sill, and changing colors of the winter's sky.

It was much later in the morning, the tray of coffee, eggs and toast he'd brought her, balancing on her knees, that she asked, “Krishna? So is it safe now in Sri Lanka?”

“I don't know.” He shook his head. “Every thing's fine in the south, I think. I go crazy trying to get news some times. There isn't much in the Globe or the New York Times. So I just pounce on the Island when it comes.” He grinned.

“So I could go there? It would be safe?”

“Oh sure.” He said. “I worry about my parents, but you'd be fine. And, actually, I was thinking of taking my junior year off and going home.”

“Oh that'll be nice!” Ashley smiled brightly.

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When he saw her again it was more than a month later. She hadn't called, and he didn't really have her number. But that day their eyes met suddenly in the middle of the infinite corridor, and she went, “Krishna!”

He stopped, and she hugged him gently and kissed him on both cheeks. “How nice to see you!”

“Manuel?” she said softly, diffidently almost, tugging on the sleeve of the bearded guy, in army surplus fatigues she was with, making him turn towards Krishna. “This is Krishna, Manuel. He is from Sri Lanka.”

While they shook hands, she said, “Manuel's from Nicaragua.”

