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The Sarong-Man in the Old House an Incubus for a Rainy Night

The wetness is really a celebration, when it hadn't rained in so long a time, and the dust outside his house had stopped breathing, stopped moving, with nothing to move against, nothing to stir it into swirls. And the smell, as the water comes hurtling through the sky, he sees it almost in slow-motion, speeding, in a hurry to meet the ground that has been dry for too long. The smell of it has always been homely to him, because he remembers a friend, a girl from his teen years, who always used to ask him, 'Do you like the smell of the rain, Wijey? Do you like the smell of it on the dust?' and he would say 'Yes,' every time, wondering if there was a reason for it. It must have been the change. The instant change in the air they had been breathing – its sudden freshness. It was a funny way to find hope, a groundless reason to suddenly feel better. But that's how it always was.

Wijey remembers being sixteen, how difficult it was. He is now at the very edge of his sixties, sitting on a sloping armchair with armrests that could swivel around to become footrests. And now, so many years after being sixteen, he thinks that the smell had also a note of innocence to it. Not in any way of a symbol, but in way of a memory. And this makes sense, actually. Because it's his own innocence as a boy who found hope in the smell of rain-on-dust that he remembers, that he associates with the smell of rain-on-dust now.

That girl, wherever may she be now?

Wijey brings his trembling, dying fingers to his lips, fiddling absently with the dry flakes of skin there, picking at them. A habit he carried to maturity from immaturity – like an old seller of wares, bringing back home a load he was supposed to trade away for something better.

I say his fingers are dying because he is old. Because he is alone. On that sloping armchair. But more because there is no turning back for him.

It was raining that night, a little more than half a century ago, when he sat in his bedroom, teaching algebra to Krishnan, a newfound friend.

Wijey remembers this now in the darkness of his corridor, with the green paint on the walls. And nothing else, but for the shadows.

The rainy day ghosts.

They were both but boys, and Wijey had no idea of the things he was about to discover beyond that night, but that's not what moves him the most about this memory. There is, in most of us, a stolid self-pity of sorts, when we think of things that broke our hearts when we were just children still. But more, much more, when they break us somewhere else. A place without a name, for now.

And Wijey taught him carefully, what he knew – navigating the various X and Ys, cautious not to overwhelm.

Wijey was a rich little boy, unlike Krishnan. With a lot of books lined against his bedroom wall, the Dickens and the Flemings on two opposite sides. His shiny prefect's badge, although only of the middle-school, sitting primly on the dresser, next to the bottle of Old Spice he never wore because he didn't like the smell. They were all there: little pieces of imported wealth that he had arrayed around himself, in case anyone wanted to know why he was important; I think, because he had no other answer to give of his own.

When the lesson ended, Wijey's mother convinced Krishnan to stay the night, because it was not safe to drive in the storm all the way to Wattala, where he lived. She said it would probably last all night, the storm.

Their dinner was brought up to the bedroom in a large tray. The woman carrying it was quiet and brisk, and Wijey called her by name. While they ate, she laid out Wijey's spare pyjamas for Krishnan,

and fresh towels.

'Do you want more parippu?' Wijey kept asking him, or 'Shall I put some pol sambol?' And they talked about the radio shows and music, and Rukmani Devi, and the Hepburns. Krishnan looked up at the ceiling a lot as he talked, a funny habit he probably outgrew. But the Hepburns, he couldn't stop talking about: those two women, being so different from each other. He kept saying, 'It's Audrey's body, machan ... that shape,' and he would have used a word like *exquisite*, had he had access to it, to describe what he meant.

Wijey didn't like being called machan. And Wijey didn't like talking about the Hepburns. But he didn't say anything. He sensed there was something to it, this dislike of the topic – but only in the way one sees soft tendrils of smoke seeping through a door. It wasn't a fire, an inferno, if he didn't open the door. It was just a stream of smoke, leaking. Harmless. At least for the time being.

They talked into the night, with the rain hammering outside, about things that only barely snagged Wijey's attention. Something else kept him talking, wanting to talk, but all of it was still shut behind the door that screened the streaming smoke.

He kept the windows open, and tiny vapours of rain sprayed into the room with the smell of dissolving dust and, soon, it was time to go to sleep.

Wijey's days stretch and inch into each other now, with hardly any movement in the house of green walls, but for the shadows, starting short in the mornings, and gradually reaching across the floors and furniture, along the route the sun took across the sky. Like a sundial: marking time, and undulating memory.

But everything in the house seems alive, their movements all in an equal speed, an equal rhythm. The furniture, the shadows, the thick dust. The man.

Wijey climbs the stairs forever, a walking stick clutched in his fingers, his sarong held tightly in a clench of cloth around his waist – undone, slipping, unhelpful.

Nobody is here. Nobody has remained. He sways. The stairs, wooden as they are, creak. The walking stick seems to bend. He palms the wall to balance himself.

While he forgets the sarong.

And he is naked, instantly. One hand on the wall, one hand on a bandy stick, in the middle of his stairs.

The sarong, a bangle around his ankles.

Krishnan, Wijey remembered, had rather long hair that night. And, after his bath, before they went to sleep, his hair covered all of his ears, fell lightly on his forehead, curled along the curve of the nape of his neck.

Wijey was moving about, clearing his bed of books and debris, putting the Classics back in the places they were used to, straightening the textbooks edgewise on his desk. But it's the corner of his eye that was most clever, as he sees – almost accidentally but not quite so – Krishnan coming out of the bathroom in the gleaming white towel Prema had given him.

Wijey's forearms turn cold.

He begins to fuss even more with the books that are now geometrical on his desktop. Something had happened. There was the largeness of Krishnan's shoulders, wet, bubbles of bathwater still there. There was the shut bedroom door, and the sudden privacy between the two of them stemming from that fact, which hit Wijey the moment the door shut with a click. There was, maybe, also a nervousness in Wijey. A discomfort. An excitement. Shivers on his fingers that could have been named by any of those things, or all of them.

Krishnan dries his hair with a second towel, roughly, completely unaware that Wijey is suddenly uncomfortable. His shoulders, and the muscles on his arms, work furiously as he rubs his head dry – and Wijey, with his head lowered to his dresser, watches, gulping. One index-finger running absent-ly, up and down, along the edge of his dresser-top.

He says, with some difficulty, 'You – you shouldn't have bathed. It's late. Raining also.'

Krishnan grins, shrugging. 'Yes, but I can't sleep without a bath, machan. Amma says I'll be bald before I am twenty.'

Wijey nods stiffly. And tries to smile.

Krishnan stops wiping himself. He only stands there, with one towel around his waist, another

clutched limply in his hand, and Wijey doesn't know what to do, doesn't know why his breath is rising, and he tries looking everywhere other than at Krishnan.

'Well, let's sleep. I can't wait to sleep. Before the rain stops.' Wijey's speech is discordant, and Krishnan squints at him for a split-second.

Immediately, Wijey regrets his suggestion – because no one sleeps in a towel. And as Krishnan picks up the pyjamas laid out neatly on the bed, Wijey wildly imagines that Krishnan is about to take his towel off in front of him, and panics inside, though only for that second. In the next moment, they both instinctively turn away from each other: one polite, the other private. But while Krishnan turns around to face a wall, Wijey has turned around to find the dresser-mirror right in front of him, and all of this is all wild and spontaneous and happens very fast, much faster to have been in any way premeditated ... but when it happens, when Krishnan inexpertly crouches forward on one leg to pull on his pyjamas and his towel slips – slyly or inadvertently – to reveal him, Wijey doesn't even think of looking away.

He is, admittedly, caught by surprise.

But, for the briefest second, he calms down.

Because in that quickly passing moment of an unknowingly revealed Krishnan, Wijey realises that it was his beauty. This boy in his room with a slipping, white towel was beautiful, and that was the cause for all this panic inside him.

Upstairs, on the top of a long, old, dark-wooded cabinet, are frames of dusty photographs. Dark squares of history that don't receive even the shortest glance from Wijey now, because he no longer remembers them to be there.

But in any house that has been lived in for a long time, there are things that mark, or claim, the entrances and exits of travellers. Bits of history bigger or smaller, but more invisible, than a framed photograph on a cabinet-top. Like the puddle of candle-wax hardened at the top of the staircase, where a twenty-something Wijey had sat entangled with someone he thought he loved, during a long power-cut years and years ago, reading books. He had left with a lot of explanations to Wijey, most of which explained nothing, except the vague possibility that Wijey, despite his wealth, and his fervent way of loving someone, was somehow not *enough*. Then there was the dent on the kitchen wall, a deep gash of wounded plaster, that marked the spot where a dinner plate had crashed, when the young boy who was madly in love with Wijey refused to accept his sheepish explanation of what had happened with the stranger in Pettah. He had gone, too. And there was the sticker of a Mickey Mouse, now grey and slowly disintegrating, stuck to the bookcase in Wijey's small office upstairs: a remnant from a trip abroad, with a friend who was gone now, who had used to call every now and again to make sure Wijey was still there. There were the empty bottles of wine and arrack containing all the conversations that were poured into them as the drinks were poured out. And there was that ashtray someone else had given him for a birthday. The cricket bat another one had forgotten to pack in his haste of walking out, which Wijey, in a histrionic moment of self-consoling, had had mounted on the wall beside the dining table.

Houses are full of these things, little redundant witnesses to truths that need no reminding. The truths of loneliness, and the endlessness of our numbered days.

The rain is now an easy drip out in the garden, keeping time with the tic-tic of the ceiling fan. The lights are out, there is darkness everywhere, and Krishnan is snoring comfortably beside Wijey, his bedsheets tangled somewhere near his knees, a pillow shoved under one arm.

Wijey is wide awake, his wide eyes stunned by the ceiling he couldn't see.

Beside Krishnan, his arms folded across his chest, Wijey was shivering – not for the coldness, but also for the new and frightening weakness of his body, as it yearned, now indubitably, for the touch of the person who was sleeping beside him.

Krishnan stirs, and murmurs something in his sleep.

Wijey, mindlessly, crawls closer to Krishnan. Close enough that, without an inch between them, Krishnan's breath warms the ball of Wijey's shoulder.

And, if he closes his eyes, this minimising-maximising hotness on his shoulder would be the on-ly

thing linking him to the physical world. And the snoring, which was really just a low rumble; and the dripping rainwater outside. If he closes his eyes, he would fall asleep to these things. And, while he slept, there wouldn't be anything to touch the certainty of those few facts.

Even thinking this forms a lump in his throat.

Wijey shifts his body a bit more, carefully, so as not to disturb Krishnan's sleep, and allows his shoulder to touch, quietly press, Krishnan's half-open lips.

It's the quietest kiss Wijey will ever receive. Or *steal*.

In the darkness, with eyes at the ends of his fingers, Wijey finds Krishnan's hand, lying in the narrow gap between their bodies, palm upward. Slowly, like touching a freshly opened wound, tentatively, Wijey lets his finger touch Krishnan's palm: too gently that Krishnan will not know that his body was being discovered, and (in a rudimentary way) loved. Too gently, also, that Wijey does not feel Krishnan's skin beyond its stillness, its sleepingness. He lets them grow, the ovals of skin that were in contact.

Krishnan doesn't stir.

Succubus, incubus, succubus, incubus.

The words seemed to float towards him from his books, and he, in an unnoticed distraction, wondered which name would more accurately apply to him.

He stays this way for a very long time: his hand in Krishnan's palm, and Krishnan's lips on his shoulder. Both of them breathing, one of them sleeping.

Soon, there will be the birds calling through the coming morning. And with it, a resignation. Failure, salvation.

There he will be, at the end of the race, knowing that this isn't how it is completed, and that this is in fact the way it is interrupted, prevented from being complete.

Krishnan was supposed to wake up, find Wijey there holding his hand, and kiss him, and tell him that this was not the forbidden thing to be wanting, that it was only natural that Wijey found him beautiful, and fascinating in the way that beautiful people are found. They were supposed to come together, and there needn't have been a question of what was to be done between them, what was to be found, what was to be taken home. What was to be remembered.

The biggest regret for Wijey was not that none of this came to pass, but that Krishnan would know nothing of what happened in their room that night. For Krishnan, when he woke up in a few minutes, an hour maybe, Wijey would still be just a friend: wealthy, quiet, good at algebra.

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The journey from a downstairs window to his bedroom is now a long one for Wijey, a trip through memory, through old lives that cannot now be unlived.

Stories that will soon vanish into delirium.

But, for now, Wijey's thoughts are slow, measured, trained. And in a night with a rare down-pour, and dust-smells and old memories, he wonders a lot of things.

His large empty house of green walls could be, right now, filled with grandchildren. A wife. She wouldn't know him to the last detail, but would still love him, and hold his elbow while he clutched the unhelpful sarong ... he may have lied to her from time to time: slipped into the shadows of the night and made love with a boy in a neighbour's unsuspecting garden. But she would still be here.

Because, where, after all, does selflessness end, and selfishness begin? To a man who could have neither this, nor that, what does it all mean? He would have tried his best. Fairness, honour. To be certain and a refuge from her sadness. To be sufficient in every way he could help, and repentant for the ways in which he wasn't.

But here is Krishnan, sleeping, innocently beside him all those years ago. And here is Wijey, denied a newly found desire, and a resolution to find it again elsewhere.

There was no turning back for him.

Santhush

There is, in a moment of memory, silence here. I want the wind to stop playing with me. I want the sea to recede, go back, especially to its noise, and far away. I want to stand here under the moon, listen to the coconut leaves rustling indifferently, and cry. Chunks of male sobs. I can't cry, but. I've moved away from that place when I could. Now, I think, I am a normal person, grown deep enough into all that has happened. But in this moment, this moment of silence with the sea so near me, I want it all to return.

They've built something, a nice block of marble. Something written on it that I can't really see in the dark. Some verse, I guess. Some words someone wrote about his own mother or wife or son that he thought would explain my story, too. It bothers me, so I move away from it. Stand against the line of water, my jeans getting soaked, and look for something to berate. Other than the sea. Other than the railway line with its dark, dead sleepers.

Is he still here?

I look around me, my hands clutching at my thighs through the insides of my jeans' pockets. Is there anything of him, mixed, atomically, with the motes of salt in the wind? The magic of his laughter that had jumped mid-breath into the air when we heard the first shouts coming with the sea wind. Did any of that remain.

The sea is coming.

That's what he heard. In the final moment of his laughter.

It's a strange thing, really. How clear all of it is in my head. But how I have also lived since then – combing my hair, making tea, emailing. You'd think the water would take away those abilities from you. That, on their way back to the sea, the waves would wash you out of your normalcy. That as you stand on a roof, accidentally alive, amidst mud and rubble and scatters of dead bodies shocked into sudden rigor mortis, you would never be able to get on a bus, get angry with someone shouting at you, eat lunch in the sunlight of afternoon.

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I imagine others returning, in the same way I have.

There's someone waiting for me in the hotel. Someone who knew where I was headed to when I slipped out of the room telling him that I'd be back in a bit. This is a good thing. This means I have had at least five minutes of honesty with him about what happened. This means I have been able to *find* someone to be honest with about what happened, even if it was only for five minutes.

And I imagine others returning, – just like me – slipping out of their hotel rooms and regained lives. Sneaking through the dark saltiness of the sea-edge. To stand here, two hundred feet or so away from where the train stood: derailed, confused. To stand with their faces against the sea and dare it to cross its limit again. Like the last time. To search with their toes beneath the sand for the bones, the possibility of those bones, really, of someone they had loved. Interred, as they say. Or swallowed.

We met in our early twenties, which now feels a long time ago, although I only just turned thirty. We were really just children then, all surprised and expert about our particular quaintness. We knew where to hook up, where to find the best guys – the quickest ways of fucking and getting fucked and disappearing into the night, anonymous.

That's how I met him.

This night when we sneaked into this crevice between two houses, at two in the morning. I was horny out of my mind. I remember slipping my hand, without interlude, without introduction, or request for permission, through the waistband of his pants – and he wiggled his eyebrows and laughed with his eyes, and I think that that was when it all started. There was all of Colombo around us,

there was the millennium just unfolding, 2004 waiting in the three-year distant future. And I, not knowing any of it, fall in love with this man for the way he laughs at me without the use of his lips, as my hand snakes through his underwear.

There were two feet between the two houses, and here we were, against each other's bodies, unable to move, jammed. We kissed. Roughly, hungrily. At-two-in-the-morningly.

But, as usual, there wasn't much that could happen there, in the spacelessness of a stolen gap. And there was nowhere else to go, nowhere with an unquestioning, unjudging bed, and so we made a compromise – with the quick invention of a fake name, something simple and unassuming, like *Isuru* for me, and *Yohan* for him. The whispered saving of phone numbers, and promises, sheepish- but-earnest, to meet at some other convenience. The quick cupping of his butt, by me, and the swift brushing with forefinger of my bulge, by him. This soundless, hot wistfulness—

And then the night, and him shuffling away, hands in pockets, shoulders hunched under his disappointment.

These details, lurid or sordid as they may be, are important. Because they built everything that happened next, all the way to Boxing Day, the muddy-salty-deathly water and the shock of it all disappearing away, artlessly.

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There is very little preaching to be done here. There is little morality to be spread out into the night. In a moment of hyperness (the way I tried to joke about it, a lot later), the ocean took him away. It broke my heart.

He was a crazy sort of person, with laughter caught in the odd corners of his eyebrows and eyes. He joked about everything. He would, sometimes, look me in the eye, laugh at something I had been saying, and say, "No one else would get a ball about you." I found myself believing him, to my surprise.

Until he started saying it, nothing about myself felt a mystery to me. Nothing about myself felt difficult to understand.

I remember how, one day – and this is the most important thing I will remember about us – he stopped the car, in the middle of the road, one greasy, sweaty afternoon, and told me, sternly, while 138s and random school vans screamed their horns at us, "Isuru, there's nothing in this world. There's nothing in this world that can stop you from loving who you want to love. Nothing at all. Fuck everything."

And he squeezed my shoulder, and restarted the car.

The point I am trying to make, the point I am looking for to be made, while I stand here, alone— I don't know.

If I say it here, if I make up a thought in this cleanish way of making sentences that I have got used to, I am afraid no one would understand.

I fought a lot after it all happened. In a way, I still do. Though, now, it's with enemies that are more ordinary – as in, the expected kinds. But, during those first months, I fought with everybody. My family. My friends. These were the people who, in almost every sense of the word, *rescued* me. And I fought them, months into 2005. I didn't use words, or fists. Of course. I used, instead, an angry, enraged silence. The averted chin. The refusal to eat. Hidden, stiffened arms while they talked to me concernedly. It was not exactly their sympathy, their kindness, that had me at it so much. Or the fact that they had refused to rest until they all held me and ascertained my aliveness for themselves. The way they brought me home.

Though all that was anger-worthy, too.

I thought, initially, that I was angry for being rescued. That I was angry for not being allowed to die. But I knew, quickly enough, that that wasn't right: they didn't rescue me from the waves. Or death. It wasn't them who pushed me out of the train, or onto the rooftop that I found myself on. All that had happened on their own, many hours before they finally found me in Galle.

It was slow work, the way I reasoned out the details like this, but, by the time the mud had dried, it was important for me that I did. I needed to know where all the anger came from. I needed to sit down and pick at it, with a little, sharp toothpick. Until it all came undone.

I remember watching the woman on the TV. And sometimes the man. All in suits, in news anchor clothes, doing what TV people do. Telling stories, invoking charity, calling for help. The endless queue of parents of lost-gone-dead children. The wives or husbands of dead husbands or wives.

I was, in my anger, cruel. I resented all these victims their grief. I resented how everybody reached for their faces or heads when they heard these people's stories. Their televised tears. How public they were allowed to be.

public

I thought, when I bumped into that word, I might be getting nearer the truth.

My brother would keep switching on the TV, and I always sensed my mother trying to pass him a significant look over my shoulder.

I ignored them all.

After about two weeks, I went to meet his parents.

I wanted to wait longer, but I knew if I had, I'd still be waiting these many years later. So I went to see them, and when I walked into their house, the first thing I saw was my Yohan: his grin – how did I put it again? – *yes*, caught in the odd corners of his eyebrows, and framed, larger than life (such a stupid way to explain a size), in the middle of their living room. And I *think* I knew it at that moment, too – why I was so angry.

His parents were surprised to see me.

His mother had used to cook me food, her son's "best friend", the one that had come out of nowhere: we didn't work together, we didn't study together, we hadn't schooled together. Though this confused her, she – almost resignedly – stopped pressing those questions, eventually accepting our closeness as something safe, advantageous. Even, by some of the things she accidentally let slip, beautiful.

There are the funny, happy memories I have of her.

Once, she sneaked me out into the kitchen, while Yohan was having his dinner, and said to me, 'If Loku won't, at least you can tell me, putha. Isn't there anyone he is interested in? If there is, you can just tell us. We'll ask around and if she's a nice girl, we'll arrange something.' I

remember nearly choking on my mug of tea.

But we laughed about it later, and, somewhere secret, I was flattered at the inadvertent meaning of her gesture. Her seemingly unthinking, carefully calculated motion of faith.

And here she is. Her son taken. No remains to crumble over, aggrieved. No funeral to be had. No public reason to get into her finest white, and cry, hanky in hand; wail, like mothers are meant to.

'Aunty—'

Her hand flashed through the whole room, and the blur of Yohan's eyebrow-grin hanging in the unfocussed background, when it slapped me across my face.

And here was anger.

Face contorted in rage. A how-dare-you written in the folds of her cheeks, and the looseness of her oiled, greyed hair.

Here was anger.

No one in my family knew the whole story of that day.

They knew I was in the train that made the headlines, the train they kept panning up to on the TV. Its twistedness was, for the news-tellers, the sum of the tragedy. An easy excuse to not describe it all: the helix of the railway tracks and the toppled passenger carts did it much better in just a ten-second clip, and they knew this. But my family didn't know that I was not alone in the train.

I had lied, like I always had.

I had told them I was headed to join my friends holidaying in Unawatuna after celebrating Christmas at home with them. They didn't know I was with Yohan. Mostly because they never knew Yohan existed in the first place.

So they only had to be relieved when they found me, waiting for them in a hospital in Galle. And, in that, they were puzzled that I wasn't. My father, touching my head, wanted to ask me, *What's wrong?* But he didn't. Just touched my hair instead, caught my curls in his fingers. They all

stood around me. Father, mother. Elder sister, younger brother. 'Yamu,' I said. And that was all.

They didn't know that when the first shout came, Yohan laughed. A ha-ha, someone's-crazy-again laugh. Always the one to take things lightly. We were sitting side-by-side, waiting for the train to move. We looked out of our windows and the sea was nowhere to be seen, the usually blue beach at that moment a strip of desert.

I know they say there were two waves. And this is what makes me sometimes wonder if all of this really happened: if I was really there, if I really sat next to Santhush, who I preferred to call Yohan, waiting to run around in the Galle Fort, taking pictures and telling ourselves things. It could all have been a dream, because I don't have all the details right, the way I should.

But the image I remember, I remember completely. The loudest rumble I'll ever hear: a moving, rolling rumble, moving towards us; us, seeing the water, in a moment of slow-motion speed, and then looking at each other, unsure.

I don't know if he saw his whole life flit across his eyes, because his eyes didn't betray a thing. Looking at the water rearing up on its hind legs, all he did was swiftly take my hand in his. And I know he said he loved me. In a quick set of three Sinhala words.

And then the water hit the train. And I remember, clearly, his fingers slipping away; not thrashing against the flush; not trying to grab him again. I think I remember him going under. I am not sure. I think I remember I saw his eyes widened, I am not sure. The water was not swimming-pool clear, so I couldn't have. But I think I saw something there, in that second of separation, the longest look of longing in the shortest span of time, which, when I try to describe it, sounds imagined. Constructed. But it was there, take-my-word-for-it. It was there.

And this is me, months later. At home, in the half-dark of my bedroom, with TV dialogue spilling in from outside; I am standing over my desk, taking off my work clothes. Suddenly, without any warning, my body breaks, and I can't stand anymore, and I grab the side of my table, falling down to my haunches, and without knowing it was coming, I am sobbing into my hands.

Here's akki. And ammi, behind her.

Here they are, surprised, and kneeling beside me, and by now I know I am crying because I miss him, because he's gone, and I didn't try hard enough to grab him – I didn't wander around looking for him, and maybe he's still somewhere out there, though I know this is not true, and I can't live by myself anymore, because I let so much of myself be defined by what he said he knew of me...

And I want to lash out against my sister and my mother.

I want to tell them they know nothing about me, and so their concern means nothing. I want to tell them that the strongest touch-memory I have is of his wet fingers fumbling to hold on to mine.

I don't.

I just take in a deep breath and stand up and calm myself, and say, 'I am sorry. I am sorry. I am okay. Please let me be,' and close the door behind them.

I have someone waiting for me in the hotel. Someone who deserves more than what I am doing to him right now.

I must go back, as cold and quiet and calling as this night is.

Just five more minutes of my toes deeper into the sand. Just five more minutes of the possibility of you being here, Yohan. And then I return.

(an excerpt, novel; a work-in-progress)

Close your eyes.

Picture a city that lives by the sea, its port in the bag under the city's sleepy eye. Give it sleek towers and flowered trees in some places, then rows of wooden houses coloured in as many colours in others. Give it a million people, their shoulders bustling against each other on a weekday evening, as the buses come out to take them home.

Give it the men of ailing dreams, the cardboard clothes of their most innocent schemes. Give it youth, and imagine their insouciance, as they chase its streets in slippers, their streetlight orange skin. And imagine the elders, their intransigence, dismissing the newness of everything, its colonising claim on memory: see them drive past their children's streets, eyelashes striping aversion across their knees.

Imagine the woman who stops in the evening, her skirts flashing in the wind, the moments whipping by before escape becomes a dream. Name the parts, mark out the anatomy of what makes a city a city, its roads and avenues, the places where coins may fall to the waiting tin and places where tins are as empty as a scream. Bathe in the sunlight that waits for something to happen. Don't make poetry, watch it, because it catches you unawares, from the backs of three-wheelers, and trucks transporting riverbeds. Learn the prosody of its peoples' names, inflecting memories, and stories of their earliest ways.

Picture time trot. Picture the day flip through noon to sundown. In this city, nothing happens fast, though everyone's always running, not looking up, rapid skies changing behind phone calls that never end. Picture them hurtling into the night, their beds waiting, them even more. Picture shooting through the darkness to repeat it all over again. Picture time never stop.

Picture history, oozing like thick smoke from the marble white walls; rising like heat through the red, new pavements. Picture a city racing through its events, too fast for the lessons to stick, to disperse smoke and memory caught in the crevices of its buildings. Picture poverty, but picture it congealing in the wealthiest places. Picture glory, picture losing it, picture wanting it again.

Picture nothing happening there in the middle of everything else. Picture me.

Picture men in their dark tan dusty shoes. It's the evening, so the lunches packed in their plastic shopping bags are empty, and they're striding through bus horns and lottery shouts, headed in different directions, collisions avoided like ants crossing paths down the same trail.

Picture me here.

You know where we are now.

Let's keep watching the men, because we like them. They're streaming past the kadala carts, the ones with the chequered windows of metal grille. They're the black flash across the white screens of mobile phone shops fluorescent against their silhouette.

Here's Harin, earphoned, his pants slushing against each other as he walks with the crowd, a laptop bag slung over one shoulder, one hand clutching its strap, the other skipping a song on his phone. Let's walk with him.

You do not see, at first sight, that Harin is not alone. It's hard to say if he walks determinedly or completely at ease, but he navigates every bend in his path with seeming precision. Both his phone and hand have returned to his pocket, so his office pants stretch back around his body. The song could, at a guess, be Sinhala rap music or 80s' pop ballad. His hair is unfazed, his face impassive. It's hard to see that Harin is not alone.

Rukshan keeps up in his own pace, not necessarily behind, not necessarily following. Rukshan also carries a bag, full of books and papers, having just finished his lectures, and having had Harin find him afterwards, so they could take the bus home together.

There's a common rhythm to how they walk: the tenuous connection between two men who could have been strangers. It's evident against the scattered rhythms of everyone else, and when you pick it up, it's all you see: a chameleonic dance in the midst of a crowd.

They get into a bus – in a sudden, spontaneous swerve out of the pedestrian stream. They didn't make eye contact, nothing to hint this transition in their course, but it happens, and it happens seam-

lessly. In the bus, they stand side by side, and between them they decide who will pay for both of them – but, again, there are no words.

Harin goes back to his music, and Rukshan watches the street flip by, flash by flash.

There's a moment, when the bus brakes and Harin swings, where Rukshan swiftly catches him by his shoulder, anchoring him. But the bus regains its balance, and they both go back to their quietude.

It's hard to guess what Harin is thinking. It's almost as if his mind is completely blank, that all he thinks are the names of the things his eyes see. It's harder still with Rukshan, although all you see in his eyes is the swirl of the million-myriad thoughts roiling behind them.

We could ask ourselves who are these two people? Where do they come from, these two men just in the brink of anonymity, navigating our city of innocent deceit like they've lived here all their lives.

But here's Dumila, sitting across the aisle from where they stand, asking a much simpler question – even if, in his world, it is the most frequent.

All he has eyes for is the earphoned one, who we know to be Harin, and the beautiful inward curve of his back. His eyes linger on the hollowness there at its centre, tucked-in shirt loose, ready to spill out. Dumila hadn't missed how he was caught by his quiet friend when the bus braked, or the rhythm they share even in relative stillness, but this information isn't enough to answer the question he wants an answer for: their mutual wordlessness, the comfort of their perfect silence, makes it too ambiguous – and maybe there right there was the answer he was looking for, but you can never know for sure.

There is, of course, the familiar gathering of blood in his lap, the usual embarrassment summoned so easily. He blames it on the long day, the eight hours of different people shouting at him as they passed him in the corridor, or as he passed them sitting in their cubicles, this one asking him to get their lunch, fish-not-chicken-please-don't-forget-again, then that one asking him if the photocopies are ready, all twenty sets of them, and on and on and on. There was Suraj sir, always coming in in the mornings with his pre-knotted tie swinging from his elbow, his management diary and car keys and two sandwiched plates wrapped in serviette keeping his lunch together, all piled one on top of the other on the same hand where the tie swung, the other navigating the doors. Dumila swoops into his cubicle, like a fool, just for a whiff of his perfume, that distinct odour that had been over time to trigger a hotness at the base of his spine every time he inhaled it.

“Good morning, sir,” he would say, with no idea of how sheepish his smile was, and, “I'm going to get breakfast, sir, is there anything you want?”

And, of course, right on cue, Suraj sir would boom his reply, “I say, what's this sir-sir business, Dumiya. Haven't I told you I'll have none of it, we're practically the same age!”, to which Dumila would blush in answer, and say Sorry sir Sorry sir, “I keep forgetting.”

Ha, ha, ha, Suraj goes, and his teeth look landscaped, white and fence-like and even, and Dumila barely understands his meaning when he says, “There you go again, sonna.”

He never got the answer to the question he asked, but he knows his allotted two minutes are over, so he slides sideways out Suraj's cubicle door, and out to get the breakfasts of people whose smells he didn't care for.

In Nugegoda, under the useless flyover, the bus comes to a halt, and waits there for more people to clamber on. The clots of people at the doors climb up in semi-panic, their eyes out for a seat that somebody else might take. They push the standers further inside the bus, and Dumila watches the earphoned guy being separated from his friend by a mother and daughter who come and lodge themselves between them. Dumila doesn't know his name is Harin, or that his friend is called Rukshan, but when he realises Harin is being forced down the aisle towards where he is sitting, Dumila can't believe his luck.

There are three rows of standers in the bus. Two are lined against the seats on either side, and a third stands between them. There isn't an inch of space between two people, so you have to squeeze your way to the front when it is time to get off, pushing the standers against the shoulders of the people seated beside them. Dumila loves this forced intimacy, the hot sharedness of breathing everyone else's exhalations. The physics of how complete strangers borrow space from each other with their bodies.

Harin was now standing immediately next to Dumila – his left thigh warm through his pants against Dumila’s own right shoulder. He is trying to sit still. Trying to look out the window, be interested with the pedestrians focussed on going home. This part is an old game. One that Dumila promises himself out of playing every time he wants to be the better man. He doesn’t remember when it started, or if someone else had started it for him. But he wants to keep the promise he made to himself. So he refuses to move, he refuses to calculate, and – now that Harin is standing right next to him – Dumila refuses even to look.

When his stop comes, Dumila will not take his exit gladly. He will yearn, by then, to touch Harin. Ask him to follow him off the bus. But everybody in the bus know they are strangers: there will be no reason for them to talk to each other. So, as he pushes himself out off the footboard, Dumila will be heavy with the old knowledge of never again seeing this man who caused his blood to swirl. But there will also be the knowledge that all of this will happen again tomorrow. A different person, but the same outcome.

Harin is barely aware of the shoulder frozen against his leg. He keeps an eye out for Rukshan, stuck between a woman and her teenaged daughter, separated from Harin by the push of the throng.

When his phone starts to ring, Harin has to struggle to pull it out of his pocket, and fumbles with the earphone-jack, before swiping the screen to answer the call.

“Hello?”

It’s his mother, calling to check if he had eaten. “Not yet, amma,” he says, “still in the bus with Rukshan aiya – we’ll get something at the top of the lane.” And, on cue, she launches into admonishments: why won’t you cook something at home, why are you still out so late, why do you two always eat from shops, couldn’t you have at least bought something in the city itself? Harin doesn’t try to explain himself; he simply says, “Don’t worry, don’t worry. It’s just for today.” When she asks to speak to Rukshan, Harin tells her he’s at the opposite end of the bus and, promptly, she hangs up.

Over the din of the engine, and the conductor’s loud, cracked voice, Harin hears the tone of Rukshan’s phone ringing. Had he the imagination for it, Harin would wonder at this, how they are all triangulated, hunted down to corners: his mother in Kandy, and him, and Rukshan – all of them connected and then disconnected, on loop, like a clock. Instead, he’s merely annoyed. The crawl of the traffic, the sweltering crowd, the mother who missed taking care of him, poor Rukshan throwing up defences. The bus is dawdling at a halt again, the driver revving the engine as if he was itching to be off, but still waiting to fill up the bus with even more people.

Harin glances down, and finds the man seated before him watching Rukshan intently. There’s something of a grin across his face.

*

The policeman ambles up authoritatively to the side of the bus, and hits the driver’s door with the butt of his palm. “Hmmm, hmmm. Get going now,” he says. And, the bus, throwing the towel in, lets out a final heave, and rolls away.

It’s five thirty in the evening, and he is at one of the busiest junctions of the city. The Catholic shrine and the Salvation Army are facing each other off. He imagines he’s caught in the glare of their stare-down.

Traffic has a lifespan. It’s true if a policeman ever tells you this. All you think of are streets clogged with cars and people. But there are nuances to this. Ten in the morning, it’s as if the city is heaving a sigh of relief after a very tiring run. Twelve, and things pick up a rhythm of business-as-usual. Four, the sun’s on one side of the roads, and you can almost feel the city bracing itself. Can you picture the cars, arriving one after the other to rush hour, like it was some hyped-up party everybody already wanted to leave? Six thirty, and, all of a sudden, it’s war. Nothing like the violence of being stationary when all you want is to move. Tired, hot. Abused by shrieking horns. Three-wheelers as annoying as gnats: poking, buzzing, trying to squeeze their way up your nose. None of this is anything new. It’s conventional wisdom: school traffic at one-thirty, office traffic from around five in the evening. But have you ever seen it grow? Grow, and then dissipate? It’s like the rain, except it happens every week day. You don’t find any poetry written about the traffic. But can you think of anything more appropriate to describe the cycle of life?

You'd think, all those hours standing there in the middle of uniflow's upstream would give you a sense of how the traffic thickens or thins. In a way, you do. There are measures in whistle blasts and tired-handedness. These can tell you something of the volume. But if you ever tried to catch the thinning as it happens, you'd be wasting your time. One moment, they're all trying to kill each other, uppity polite drivers and the raucous rude ones, both in their own ways trying to own the road without just going home. The next moment, it's time for you to go home yourself. You have no idea how this happened. Traffic doesn't leave like a departing wave. A tsunami. But the drivers come to a seeming truce, there's enough space now on the roads to agree to disagree, and this marks, apparently, the end of your shift.

You can't wait to join the stream of people on the pavements. There are some tired days when you feel like you could follow them all the way to wherever they disappear to. Then you realise they don't disappear to a place, but to a time. For now, though, they pull you into their shoal-of-fishness, not everyone heading the same way, but still sharing the same shimmer rhythm. You know you can cut your way through this crowd. You don't need their shoal, you're a shark. But you put your hands in your pockets, and breathe in, and tighten your core. You fall to the speed of those around you. Because there's peace in blending in. It feels appropriately off-duty. And you feel you have the right to be just on your way home.

*

When he enters his annexe, Rajeev finds his wife sitting at their table, drinking tea, and reading a novel. "Why didn't you wait for me?" he asks. She says, "I got off early – took a tuk home. Didn't you get my message?"

He nods to say he did, and goes inside.

Outside are the citric colours of a setting sun. The city looks like it's waiting for the night to come. These are the moments she's afraid of, when she feels the need to make a witness of this thing that was happening, even if it's just one of the two of them. It could be her pulling these curtains apart, or – if he had the attention for it – her slamming the fridge shut, or crumbling at the foot of their door with a mug in her hand to show him just how dissolved she was inside. This need is what she has always fought down; it's the same one she carried around since before she walked into this house with Rajeev. So all she has is her blank face. The cleanness of her movements, and the fluid elbows of not having dangerous inside. She drinks her tea, and reads the same line in *The Cat's Table*, over and over.

He stands in the doorway. "Shall I call up something for dinner?"

He doesn't seem sure, but, despite all her suppressing, he knows there's enough going on to feel nervous about. She looks at him, blinking. "Sure," she manages to say. "Sure. Thank you. I think I'll go for a walk." And almost runs out the front door.

City dust sparkling is the biggest deception. This was it. Trees green on either side of the road, and between them the swirl of dirt, like something special, shining. She is trying out metaphors in her head, she wants to laugh at herself theatrically. Collect all this self-loathing into a puff out of her chest. There must be a way to experience all of this, all at once: the vehicles that match their speed with their screaming horns, the rivulets of people marching in opposite directions, all of them carrying their own worlds around the city, looking for home. She sometimes wonders if it's this way she thinks that causes all her suffering. Maybe if she could turn thought into a pocket of silence, traffic would become just traffic.

And this constant self-judgment makes her doubt the size of her tragedy. *This can't be a big deal*. At the same time, she wants to kick something, stub her toe painfully, and scream at someone: *I love him for godsakes!*

Someone stuck a park bench on the pavement in Slave Island junction, where people circumvent it without the slightest second glance. This is the last place a person would think of sitting down, so she settles in, one stolid leg over the other, to ponder the sunset.

There must have been things that happened to me as a child that's made me this way. Maybe I should blame my parents. Think back to the days when my father looked over the top of his news-

paper at me, and wonder if there's some rejection there. Some disappointment, or some insidious desire. But he was a quiet man, and he loved us all from his quiet way, as if it was a place: a balcony on the house opposite ours, with him clutching the railing that kept him from being a noisy lover. He made us eat our meals fast, and pray the rosary sitting on the floor, next to the furniture we used for everything else. Maybe that was it. The clean allocation of things to places of "proper". Because now I seem to want proper love, proper family, proper man.

A part of me wants to know that it must be tearing him up inside, this failure of his against properness. He's the man that insists the kitchen curtain be closed, that aligns the footwear near the doorstep. He's the one with the gold watch. The cute-boy, family-man grin. I insist on recalling the concave of my body as he wraps himself around me in the night. He needs me. I watch him, riding through the morning, joking his way through coffee and the morning shit, his shoulders so decidedly at ease that I am sure he has no idea how transparent he is.

Sometimes I feel like throwing a plate on the floor just to see if his façade would falter at the crash of porcelain. I look for his eyes, when we are making love, and there's enough of the street-light spilling in to make his eyelashes shine: there isn't a flicker in his consistency. He is all there, both rough palms flat around my waist. And I think of balconies again, my poor father. What else should I expect?

I look up; it's time to go home. This junction gets flooded on a weekday evening. So many bus routes crossing each other like a citywide spider. I like to blur them out, the pedestrians, turn them into flashes of shadow across the shop lights. The air smells like dirt and diesel here, but it's a headful of a smell. An anchor if ever you needed one. A home.

*

He wraps himself tighter around his core. Past midnight, the streets are flooded in tungsten light. The lampposts stand with their heads slumped, side by side, all the way from Mutwal to Moratuwa. Every thing is still, anything that moves is an intruder, and will disappear back to the city's nighttime camouflage.

He could, as he walked, fold into the orange of the streets, become invisible. His speed is equal to the general stillness of the hour, the level at which tree leaves are heard shuffling overhead, and roaches scuttling across culverts. The grain in the cement shoot up his bare feet.

If he breathes in, he should breathe in the whole city. All the skyscrapers scattered across his line of sight like an army of minions. All the trees reaching over the roads beneath them like polite ghosts, arboreal fingers interlocked, asleep. All the millions of lives, being lived, at that very moment, in the shadows, and in the shadows behind closed doors. When he breathes out, he should feel the whole of himself leave him, twisting ribbons of identity streaming out to the Colombo night like cigarette smoke. He thinks of salt, and of himself. He thinks of the city.

There is the occasional motorist, the two guards dozing in their cage a mile away, the red mongrel taking a late-night stroll down the island in the middle. But, in all reality, no one is here. Only him.

He walks through the city, wrapped in his stubborn sense of self. Struggling, but failing as he tries, to swirl out into the city, and become a mystery bigger than himself. To become diluted, because he craved occupying a place he could finally understand.

He wants to disappear. But he's only invisible.
