

The Sri Lankan Masseur and Others

by Praveena Shivram

JESUS LIVED IN THE PALMS of her hands. She knew this. He was right at the centre. His warmth spreading through the lines and calluses in her palms, as she pressed into the oil and moved Him across skin. Skin of all colours—white, brown, black, yellow—it did not matter. Jesus was a just God. He did not differentiate between colours.

Lakhmaali usually closed her eyes, allowing the Lord to guide her hands, but today she had her eyes open. She was looking out onto the ocean from the fourth-floor spa that she worked at on Mirissa beach, watching the waves roll in and out, the sea's high tide restlessness mirroring her own.

"Ow, that hurt."

The white female skin had spoken and Lakhmaali apologised, in her broken English, her tongue itching to switch to Sinhalese so she could explain why she was distracted, so she could explain to this stranger in her country why she felt like a stranger in her own home, and surely she would understand? She knows the ways of the Lord.

She shook her head and closed her eyes, centering her energy onto the palms of her hands, feeling the nail of fate press into her, and flowing back into her work with the warmth of blood.

Chamine was riding the bus to Galle from Matara, where

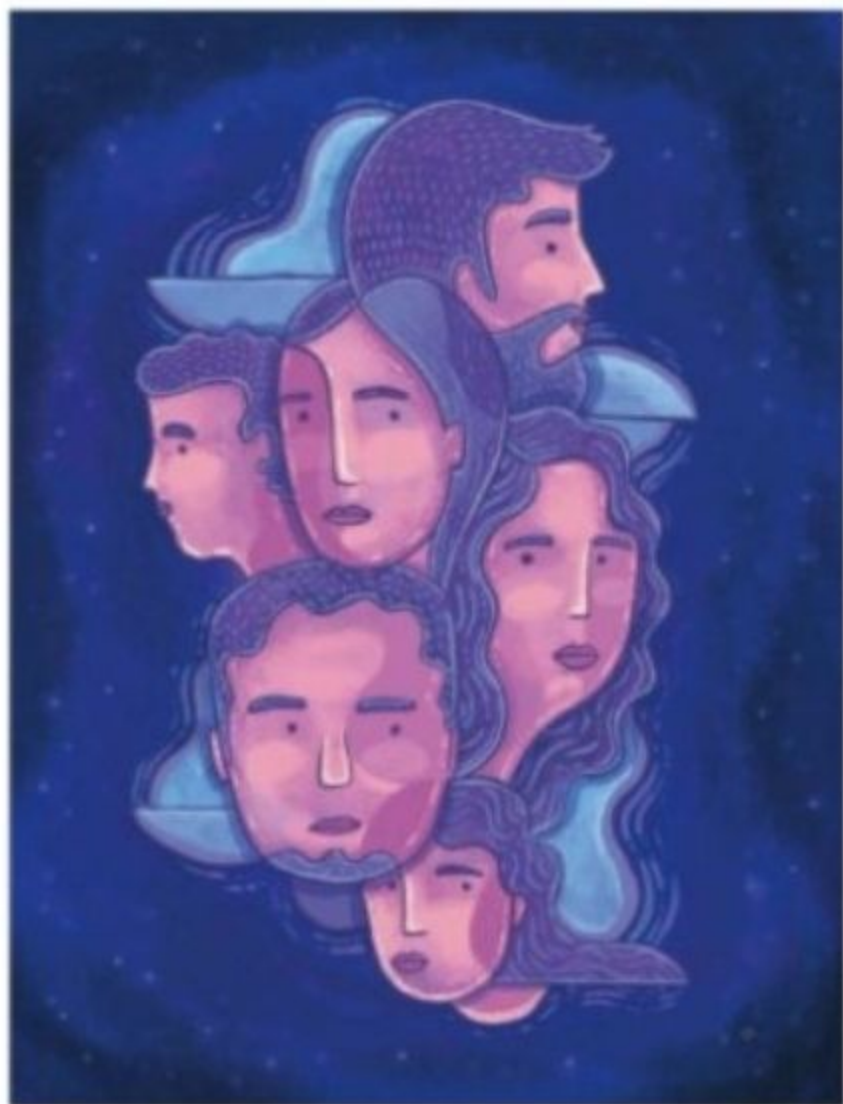


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she lived with her brother, listlessly listening to the travelling salesman selling math textbooks. She was sitting next to tourists on the bus, their eyes glued to their screens, instead of looking out at her country's beautiful coastline. They were Indian, she knew, because she recognised the twists and turns of Tamil that they were speaking. Ramees had tried to teach her a few words, but that was a long time ago. Chamine now occupied a different space and time, one that was purely Sinhalese in texture. There was no room for someone so fickle, someone carrying impossible dreams of identity. Did he not see that identity was created, not inherited?

Chamine went to the local monastery every week, she chanted every evening with her brother and she tried to follow the Buddha's Eightfold Path. She tried, but she failed every day. It was impossible to live with the woman who called herself their mother.

"Are you going to Galle?" The tourist pronounced it as 'gaa-lé' instead of 'gaul' and that put her off. Chamine nodded and turned to face the window on her side. But two minutes later—because this wasn't the person Chamine wanted to be—she turned to the tourist, smiled and asked her another obvious question, "Are you here on vacation?"



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Sanath crushed the butt of the cigarette under his feet and began to run towards the bus full of tourists that was pulling into the Matara bus station. He knew, with his fluent English, he would be able to convince one of them to hire his taxi service. He had to make this work—he had sold his auto a month ago and convinced his sister to invest in a car. He knew it would work. Sri Lanka had opened its doors again. Even Uber was in the city. He had already applied and was waiting for his confirmation to come through. Till then, he had to use his charm.

He had mastered this over time. There would always be a group that looked lost despite Google Maps on their devices and Lonely Planet guides in their hands, arguing about things they knew nothing about. They didn't even know how to pronounce the names. He had read those guides and often laughed at the places that were featured. Places he would never go to for a holiday. The latest was Mirissa's Secret Beach. His friend, who managed the hotel, gave Sanath a commission for every tourist he brought in. Sanath couldn't understand what the tourists saw in the place—the waves were constantly broken by rocks, the sand was dotted with sharp bits of broken shells and corals, and the sea was always too rough.

Give me the mountains, thought Sanath, and instantly felt the cool air of Ella, his favourite hill station, fill his being. He hated the fact that they had to move to Matara from Colombo, thanks to his mother, as if they didn't have enough problems already.

He zeroed in on a group of young girls and boys, five in total, their rucksacks towering over their heads, their skin already speckled red from the heat, crowding around a Lonely Planet guide and discussing something in what he thought was French, but could have well been Italian or German. They all sounded the same to Sanath, with no distinguishing markers in tone or lilt or pauses, unlike Sinhalese and Tamil. He could speak both fluently, but he was careful where he shared that fact. He walked up to them, a smile on his face—not too wide, in case it came across as creepy, but not too faint either, in case it was completely missed—and said, “Hi, I am Sanath. I drive a cab and have lived in Sri Lanka all my life. Maybe I can help? Only if you want, I don't want to impose.” Such a blessing it was since Netflix came into his life and he learnt the complicated art of foreign politeness.

Ramees was watching a TikTok video on his phone, when the microphone failed and he sat up, his attention once again on the meeting. More of a gathering, he thought. Ever since the war ended and the thalaivar died, the Tamils' last vestige of hope for some kind of permanence within the border of Sri Lankan identity had begun to fade, even for those like his father, who particularly didn't support the vision for Tamil Eelam, but was swept up by the rhetoric nonetheless. His father was sitting next to him, body slightly slumped on the white plastic chairs, his head resting on his hands, his eyes looking straight ahead. Ramees wondered if he had fallen asleep. He had seen a WhatsApp video of someone falling asleep with their eyes open. There was a brief huddling next to the mic and it came on again and the speech continued. It was the same old refrain: Tamils need jobs, Tamils need respect, Tamils need dignity, Tamils need to not live like refugees even outside refugee camps. Ramees went back to his TikTok. For Ramees, born into the war and growing up with its chains around his body, it was the predictable that threw him off guard.

His phone pinged. WhatsApp message. From Charmine.

“Meet me at the Fort in Galle at six.”

This woke up Ramees. Here was something unpredictable. It tasted delicious.

Nisha sat in the Ayurvedic massage office, deciding on the massage she wanted. The lady in front of her was explaining each of them, but Nisha already knew she wanted the longest massage they had to offer, the full body one for 60 minutes. She wished there was a longer option, but this would have to do for now. The many bottles of oil lined up on the shelves in the room looked promising enough, the smell of Ayurveda mixing with the smell of the ocean—it seemed exotic, much like this Sri Lankan holiday she was having with her new husband. But she didn't want to think about that, or him.

She followed the lady into one of the massage rooms. It was plain, unfussy with a long bed in the centre, a square hole in the wall overlooking the sea, and a small basin in one corner. In the other corner sat a short, squat masseuse, holding a rosary in her hand. The two women spoke in Sinhalese for two minutes and then the first one left. The masseuse smiled at Nisha, asking her to strip in broken English. Nisha, self-conscious at first, stripped and lay face down on the bed. She felt the masseuse cover her hips and legs with a cloth and the trickle of oil on her back. She imagined the scent of jasmine or sandalwood would assail her, but instead it was plain old groundnut oil, the scent of her mother's kitchen. She smiled, closed her eyes, the silence in the room filled by the sound of waves outside, and she thought of her cab driver from the day before—the one with thick, black hair, messy and rebelling against any kind of centre or side parting, his easy smile as he spoke in fluent English, pointing out the sights outside to her and her husband, the way he caught her eyes in the rear view mirror when he made a joke, the light scar on his dark-skinned neck, the part of his body she could watch unhindered, and she imagined his hands all over her body, letting a soft moan slip out before she could catch it.

Embarrassed, her eyes flew open, but the masseuse was behind her, the rhythm of her movements uninterrupted, and Nisha remembered instead the warm waters of the rock pool at Secret Beach, where the cab driver had dropped them last, and where she tossed his name around in her head like an excited ocean playing with a shell.

At the Dutch Fort in Galle, Krishnaraj put down his heavy bag of math textbooks, took out a grey handkerchief from his pocket, wiped the sweat off his forehead and neck, and looked out into the horizon. Another week had gone by with barely any sale and he had tried all avenues—buses, street corners, outside monasteries, even at some beaches. Sometimes tourists bought a copy as an experience they could sell later, a memory that could become part of a conversation later, some even took a picture with him. Krishnaraj didn't mind. He had to sell ten books a week to pay his rent and buy some meals. If he was lucky, he sold five. This week he had sold one. It meant no dinner tonight. Tea would have to do. And rent, he had time.

He looked around him—at families taking pictures, groups of youngsters sitting on the wall facing the beach, their legs dangling, the spray of the water as it hit the rocks catching them by surprise, a group of older men drinking tea, and tourists taking multiple pictures of the sky that was changing colour from a pallid pink to a hungry orange, yearning to devour the sun.

A girl came and sat a few feet from Krishnaraj. She was wearing a blue dress, a formal dress. She must be on her way back from work, thought Krishnaraj. She kept looking at her phone, worry lines spreading across her forehead like rivulets on desert sand. I hope it is not a lover's tiff, thought Krishnaraj, I simply couldn't bear it. Not today. She looked vaguely familiar, but Krishnaraj met so many people in a day that he barely saw them. It was too risky a prospect to wake up a mind numb with loneliness to the side-effects of company.

A man arrived and sat next to her. No one smiled, and Krishnaraj turned away. It was impolite to stare, he knew that, but in five minutes, most people were staring at them, as their voices rose in anger. They were speaking Sinhalese.

"You think I am doing you a favour?" The girl sounded like someone he could imagine in a quiet house, like someone who would disappear into the blue walls of a house, a wall-hanging to centre the aesthetics of a room and then forgotten.

"No, but the problem is you think you can bend me to your will. You and your brother both." He was interesting, because he reminded Krishnaraj of his younger brother, lost to the war many years ago, sounding indignant at being taken for granted and yet feeling special for being noticed at all.

"Because that is all you are worth, and what you deserve for destroying everything."

"What did I destroy? Your sense of false pride? Oh, you think you are so important. It makes me laugh."

"Then laugh. Go on, laugh. Right now."

"I wish, but in front of people like you laughter is nothing but snuffed out embers of light. Ask your mother, she will tell you."

The girl started to cry, and the man tried to hug her. Krishnaraj sighed, picked up his bag and made his way down to the road. He thought he could still hear them as he walked away, but he had tuned out. Life felt too heavy for him to bear, and he already had a bag of books to carry.

The stars in the sky were exceptionally bright that night. Maybe it was a night when the earth turned differently, or the sky woke up to the right side of the moon. Or maybe, for the purposes of this story, on this day and moment, it is required. Whatever the reason, when Sanath sipped his beer with his friend at the Secret Beach at the end of a long day and looked up at the sky, when Nisha, listening to her husband shower, looked out the balcony of their room and into the sky, her skin still smelling of groundnut oil and dreams of a cab driver, when Charmine, her eyes fresh with tears and heart empty of words, looked out at the sky from the bus, when Ramees saw an old man asking for a ride and stopped the tuk-tuk he was in to let him in and briefly looked up at the sky, when Krishnaraj, listening to his growling stomach, lay down on a mat on the terrace of a house, a space he called his own, and looked up at the sky, and when Lakhmaali sat in an empty house with a hand full of Jesus and looked out the window at the sky, the stars seemed to claim the night in a blaze of light, and then disappeared in an unassailable blink of the eye.

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