

A House in the Country

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THE NIGHTS HAD always been noisy: frogs, drums, bottles, dogs barking at the moon. Then one evening there was silence. Ray stepped out on to the veranda. There was no wind. He pulled up a cane chair and sat down. The fireflies had disappeared. The trees and bushes in the small garden were still. Only the stars above moved, pulsing in the sky.

These were troubled times in Sri Lanka, people said, but nothing had happened in this neighbourhood. Nothing until this surprising silence. Even that, he thought, may not be new. He was becoming slow at noticing things.

Then a shadow moved. A young man appeared, his white sarong glowing in the moonlight.

He was much younger than Ray. Not as tall, but stronger, smoother skinned. His eyes were bright and hard like marbles. He came and stood by a pillar. A moth flew above him towards a wall light.

'What has happened?' Ray asked, looking around.

Siri scratched his head, gently rocking it. 'Don't know.' 'There's not a sound.' They spoke in slow Sinhala.

Ray liked this extraordinary silence. He liked the way their few words burst out, and then hung in the air before melting. It was the silence of this winter England transplanted. The silence of windows and doors closed against the cold. Lately Colombo had become too noisy. He had never expected such peace would come so close to war.

'The radio?' Ray asked. Siri always had a radio on somewhere in the house droning public service. 'Radio is not on?'

Siri shook his head. 'No batteries.' He bit the edge of this lower lip. 'I forgot to buy new ones. Shall I go now?'

It was late: nearly eleven at night. The little shop at the top of the road would have closed. Ray felt uneasy about Siri going too far. 'No. Go tomorrow. Better than now.'

Siri nodded. 'Too quiet. Maybe another curfew?'

But it was not simply the silence of curfew. There seemed to be no sound at all. In the two years Ray had been back in the country there had been many curfews. They had lost their significance. Only the occasional twenty-four-hour curfew had any impact. Even those rarely inconvenienced him; he was often content to stay in this house.

But in recent months there had been a new wall to build, shutters to fix. Each day had been shattered by hammer blows aimed at protecting this future privacy. Ray had taken to escaping to a bar off Galle Road; it made him more than usually melancholic.

'Didn't you go out at all today?' Ray asked.

'These shutters,' Siri pointed inside. 'I wanted to finish the staining . . .'

'Good. They are very good.' The wood had the perfume of a boudoir.

'I was working on that, the last coat. Finished about seven-thirty. And then, when I was listening after my bath, the radio stopped.' He twisted his fingers to show a

collapse into chaos. 'I didn't go out then because I thought you would be coming home soon.' His face widened in an eager smile.

Ray looked away. His long shadow danced down the steps. A gecko twitched. Ray had come home late.

Siri shifted this weight and moved away from the wall. He sat on the edge of a step. 'What do you think they'll do, Sir?'

'Who?'

'Government.'

Ray leaned back in his chair with both hands clasped behind his head and stared up at the night sky. He saw only a waning red moon. 'I don't know. What do you think?'

Siri rubbed his thighs. He'd heard people say they should hold elections - the government might even win; but people also said that there probably wouldn't be any elections. They'd try another 'military solution' against the JVP - the People's Liberation Front - like against the Tigers, and get stuck with war.

'Trouble is no one knows.' Siri's mouth turned down at both ends, but this was not a face that could show much distress. 'Nobody really cares, do they? Except for themselves.'

Ray put his hands together, matching fingertips, and half nodded. 'Not many people do.'

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Ray had not planned on having any help or company when he first returned to Colombo from England. He'd had a secure job with a building society, a flat in London, a car, and a happy circle of acquaintances. There had also been a woman he'd spend a night or two with from time to time. But they never had much to talk about and quite often he simply thought about going back to Sri Lanka. One summer she went back home to Ulster; she got married.

That year he too decided he would go back home. He resigned from his job, sold his flat and left. The business of moving absorbed his energies, and he had no time to think. He had a house left to him in Colombo and money saved over the years. He hoped he would find out what he wanted once he had freed himself from the constraints of his London life, and once he had retrieved his past.

The first time he saw the house this uncle had left him, this blood turned to sand. It looked like a concrete box shoved into a hole. Nothing of the elegance of his converted London flat, nor the sensuality of the open tropical houses of his Sri Lankan childhood. But then he found Siri.

It was the luck of a moment. Ray was with a friend at a bar. They were drinking beer. His friend asked about the house, and Ray said he had too much to do. He needed builders, renovators. His friend mentioned Sirisena, Siri, who had done their house.

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A few days later Siri turned up. Ray liked this quiet competence; the strange innocence in his eyes. He didn't quite know how to develop their working relationship. To him it should have been simply a relationship of employment. The old conventions of Colombo serfdom died years ago, but Siri kept saying 'Sir' and circumscribing their roles. He developed his job from artisan, to supervisor, to cook, night-watchman and, in effect, the servant. Ray felt things had to change incrementally: he acquiesced and played the roles Siri expected. Siri himself was too deep in this world of manners to

feel the pull of revolution being preached across the country.

Siri did the carpentry, found the plumbers, the electricians. He moved in and slowly rebuilt the old house around Ray. Walls were replastered, doors rehung, floors tiled. And he kept the house in order.

Although in England Ray had done many of these things himself, here he found he needed Siri. Much of the renovation was straightforward, but from time to time he would see the need for change. He would talk it over with Siri, his fingers designing in the air. The next day Siri would start on the work.

In this way a new veranda was created; rooms divided. The curfews allowed him to examine progress. They provided the snapshots when activity was suspended. The workmen didn't come; it was only Ray and Siri.

100 It was the first time since childhood that Ray had had a constant companion. He encouraged Siri to talk and wished, in a way, that Siri could turn into this confidant. He wanted to ask, 'Why do you treat me like a . . .' but could never bring himself even to suggest he saw himself as a master. Siri simply showed respect in his antiquated fashion.

Ray's only response was to care. He didn't know how to respect in turn, but he felt a need to protect in a way he had never felt before. He tried to be generous with the pay and reasonable in his demands, but Siri seemed to want to do everything that needed doing and to spend all his time in the house. He hardly ever went back home to his village.

When Ray bought furniture for Siri's room, Siri looked dismayed.

'What's wrong?'

'I don't need all this.' Siri pointed at the cupboard and the new bed, the new pillow and mats.

'Some comfort won't harm.'

'I have nothing to put in the cupboard. The old bed was fine, just as it was.'

Ray said now that Siri had a steady job he might accumulate some possessions.

'What for? My family need things, my mother, my brother. I only need something to do. Some place . . . Sir, this house I am making for you. It will be beautiful. To me that is enough.'

120 Ray didn't know what to do. He was embarrassed and puzzled. He pulled down his chin and snorted, like a bull backing out of a shed. The early days were confusing. Siri seemed exhilarated by the freedom he had to use any material he desired to turn ideas into reality, even his own ideas. He had never been given such complete responsibility before. Ray didn't understand this. It took time for him to see Siri as himself.

That night, that silent night, back in his room Ray kept thinking about Siri. He felt uncomfortable. He would have liked to have talked some more. To have said something to Siri that would have helped them both understand what was happening. Instead they had sat there swallowing silence.

The next morning Ray woke to the scream of parrots circling the mango tree in the garden. He dressed quietly and stepped into the soft rubber of his shoes. In fifteen minutes he was out of the house.

The road was deserted. He walked to the end and crossed over into the park. He had

a route he could follow with his eyes closed, carefully planned and timed to avoid other people.

He liked walking alone, in control of the sound around him: the thud of his feet, the blood in his ears.

The sky that morning was grey. Large, heavy clouds rippled overhead. Crows crowded the flame tree by the main road. Bats hung on the telephone lines.

140 Usually Ray walked for about twenty minutes. On his way back he would collect a newspaper from the small general store near the temple. Then at home he would savour a pot of tea and read the news. This morning he was looking forward to returning to an almost completed veranda.

Siri would have prepared the tea and disappeared: a tray with a white cloth, a small blue Chinese tea pot filled to the brim and protected by a embroidered tea-cosy, one plain white cup and saucer, a silver jug of boiled milk. A silver spoon. Ray would normally find the tray on a glass table. He had learned to accept this service as a part of life. He no longer resisted it and he never did the same for Siri. He never went that far.

But some times, in the evening, he'd offer Siri a drink. He would find Siri sitting on the steps or strolling about the garden.

'Have a beer?' he'd say.

Siri would nod hesitantly and approach Ray smoothing his sarong. He would take the glass and sip slowly. He never sat down when he had a beer. He would stand while Ray sat. Whether they shared a beer or not, Siri was usually quite happy to talk. He'd tell Ray about life in the village: river bathing, family feuds, someone running amok. In the middle of such a story, Siri would sometimes stop and peer at Ray. 'Why do you look so sad?' he'd ask, and surprise Ray with this directness.

One evening Ray asked, 'Have you built your own house?'

160 Siri's mouth wrinkled; he slowly shook his head. 'No. Not my own. I have no land.'

'What about the family farm?'

'It's very small. We have one field.'

His father had tried milch cows, but couldn't compete with the local MP's people. They had commanded everything until the JVP moved in. By then the cows had dried up and Siri's father died. His brother stayed to work the one field, but Siri left.

'Could you ever go back to live in the country again? Now, after a city life. After what you've learned.' Ray wanted to know how genuine this own feeling of returning to roots was. He knew it was never possible to go back to exactly the same things, but at the same time he felt the old world never quite passes away. Suddenly the frame shifts and you find yourself back where you started.

'Go back to the country? Village life?' Siri smiled like a little boy thinking about the ripeness of mangoes. 'Yes. Yes, I could go back to a life in the country. Like my brother's. If there was a house like this in the country.'

'Maybe you should start saving some money?'

Siri found this suggestion amusing. 'There's never been the chance.' He clicked his tongue and added, 'Until now.'

The next day Ray went with Siri to the National Savings Bank and got him a savings book. He arranged for a part of Siri's salary to go straight into savings. But even after that Ray felt Siri was still not thinking far enough ahead. He was going to lose out. It

troubled him at the time, although this own concern about Siri puzzled him more.

Months later Ray heard that some private land was being sold close to Siri's village. He asked him about it.

'No, Sir, I didn't know.'

Ray took a piece of paper from this pocket and unfolded it. 'Look, this is what it says.' He described the position of the land. It was near the coast.

'Yes,' Siri nodded. He knew the area.

'That land is a good price, I'm told.'

'I don't know, Sir. But there's not much growing there.' He delicately licked this thumb and forefinger, 'You can taste the salt in the air there.'

'No, it is good land. You can grow cinnamon or cardamom. Something like that. I know Mr Wijesena has some land there.'

Siri nodded. 'He has grown some cloves I think. Are you thinking of buying some land also?'

Ray was standing by the door. He took a deep breath. Suddenly he realised he was nervous. Sweat ran down his back. Things were not very clear in his head. He had started talking about the land with the simple intention of planting a seed in Siri's mind: land was sometimes available. He had probably hoped, he now thought as he stood there, that Siri would connect the idea of this savings with the possibility of a piece of land out in the country. But as they talked he realised that it would take Siri years to get a living out of such land. That Siri's life would be, at best, only a life of subsistence. He would sink into the earth, unless something radical could be done.

'I was thinking about a piece of land,' he said, looking down, away from Siri. 'I was thinking about you.'

'Me?'

'Maybe you should take some land.'

'Impossible, Sir. Even with the savings you arranged. Good land in our area is expensive.'

'I know. But if you could, would you like some land? Is it what you want?'

'You know me, Sir. I like to build. I like to grow. With some land there I can do both. And I can do as I please.'

'But when?'

'When my luck comes. When the gods take pity.'

'I can lend you the money,' Ray said quietly. It was not exactly what he wanted to say. The words slipped out like moonlight when the clouds move.

'But then I will be a debtor. I could never pay it back.'

Ray could see that. It could be the rut in the ground one never got out of. But he had a plan working itself out as he spoke.

'I'll buy the land. I'll *give* you a portion. You for your part can plant the trees for us both. Cinnamon, or *cadju* or whatever.'

Siri's eyes brightened. There was a slight smile playing around his lips. The smooth boyish cheeks rippled. 'Why, Sir? Why do you want to do this for me?'

Ray could say nothing except that he wanted to.

'You are good Sir, very good.'

Ray made arrangements to buy the land. He felt better for it. He had followed his

instincts. But his instincts had changed. They were not the fine financial instincts that had served him in London: land prices plummeted as the troubles in the country spread. But this did not worry him. Things had to improve, he thought. Meanwhile he was happy to be serving in his turn.

In about ten minutes he reached the top of the hill on the side of the park. His route had already curved so that he was in fact now on his way home. A few minutes' walk along the road would bring him to the shop where he collected his paper.

He noticed the sky was dark and smudged. Crows were flapping about. Down the road he could see the white dome of the temple near his shop. The flowers of the temple trees, frangipani, were out. White blossom. Those were the trees he would like to have on the borders of the land he bought for Siri. But the white of both the dome and the flowers was grubby, as though settled with ash.

240 Ray thought the sky should have cleared by now. He walked quickly towards the temple. By the wall he stopped to look again at the frangipani. Many of the white flowers had fallen. But in the garden next to the temple a tree with the blood-red variety of the flower stood in rich bloom. Ray was sweating.

Then, around the corner, he came to the shop: the charred remains of the shop. Bits were still smoking, thin wisps disappearing into the grey sky. A small crowd had gathered.

The vague thoughts in Ray's head evaporated; every muscle in this body was tense, but he felt extraordinarily calm. He stepped forward. 'How did this happen?'

Several people started talking. One man said the police had a statement from the JVP claiming responsibility. The shopkeeper was dead. He had been asleep inside. Kerosene had been used. Ray picked this way through the shattered glass and boiled sweets strewn along the roadside. Practically the whole of the tiny shop had been burned. One or two big blackened timbers still remained at the back, and buckled bits of the corrugated tin from the roof lay like petrified sheets of magma. The old *na* tree that had shaded the shop-front was scorched; the trunk looked as if it had been gouged with a hot knife. Two policemen had cordoned off the place.

260 Ray waited for a while absorbing the babble around him, watching the smoke rise in small puffs out of the heaps of ash. The veins in his arms were swollen. *A store burns like so many others up and down the country. Only this one's closer to home. Nothing else has changed.* But Ray knew that proximity made a difference. The air was pungent. He wondered whether the dust on his shoes now mixed earth with the ash of the shopkeeper's burnt flesh.

When he got home Siri was at the gate. 'Did you see . . . ?'

Ray nodded and brushed past him.

Siri had heard about the fire from a neighbour. 'Is it very bad?'

'The whole shop has gone. Completely burnt out.' 'Mister Ibrahim?'

'Dead. He was inside.'

Ray went to his usual place. The tea tray wasn't there. A fine layer of dust covered the table.

'Water's boiling, Sir. I'll bring the tea now.'

In a few minutes Siri came with the tea. 'Will you have it here on the veranda?'

'Inside may be better today.'

'You know Sir, they warned him. He was very foolish.'

Ray asked him who had warned the shopkeeper. Why?

'Several times they told him to stop selling those newspapers. Mister Ibrahim didn't listen. Even two days ago he told me that he will not stop selling newspapers just like that. But they said he must stop, or it will be the end for him. I don't know why he continued.'

Who had warned him?

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'I don't know, Sir. These thugs who come around.' Ray raised his eyes. 'Why do you think he didn't stop selling those papers?' he asked. 'He was not a Party member.'

Siri shrugged. 'He was a *mudalali* - a businessman. Making money. You make money by selling what people buy. People wanted his newspapers, so he sold them. That is his work. Was his work.'

Ray wondered whether Siri was right. Was Ibrahim killed by the market? Or was he simply caught in between? He could see the flames leap at Ibrahim's straw mat; within seconds he must have been wrapped in fire. But he must have screamed. How did they not hear it? The shop was not far, and the night had been so silent. The smell of kerosene? Flesh? But then, countries have been in flames before and the world not known.

'Sir, do you think there is any danger here?' 'What do you mean?'

'Will they harm this house?'

'This house means nothing. It has nothing to do with anyone.'

'I hope no harm will come. It is becoming so beautiful.'

Ray and Siri both felt uneasy all day. They avoided each other. Ray spent the morning alone and then went out to a café for lunch. He came back early in the evening and disappeared into this room. He had a shower and lay down on this bed to rest. Clean and cool; naked on the cotton sheet. He felt this body slowly relax. The evening was warm. As day began to turn to night the birds screamed again. Through this window he could see the sun set in an inflamed sky. When he closed his eyes the grey smudges came back. His skin was dry. He looked at the polished wood of this new windows. Siri had done a fine job. He had brought out the wood grain perfectly. Ray wanted to ask Siri to build another house. A house on *their* land out in the country. He thought if he provided the materials Siri could design and build a house with two wings, or even two small houses. One for each of them. If Siri were to marry it would make for a good start. Ray wondered how he'd feel if that happened. He would lose something. The intimacy that had yet to be. But he would feel some satisfaction. He would have made a difference.

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Later, when he came out on to the veranda he found Siri sitting on the steps. Siri looked up; his hard black eyes gave nothing to Ray.

'Sir,' Siri said in low voice, 'I want to go.'

'Where?'

'Away, Sir.' Siri remained sitting on the steps. His face was in shadow.

'What's wrong? What is it?'

'This destruction. I want to go away.' The eyes softened slightly. 'And you, Sir, have seen the world. Tell me where. Where is a good place?'

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Ray looked down at Siri. 'What do you mean? You know, shops have been burned many times before. In Matara, in Amparai, here in Colombo it has happened before.'

Siri shook his head.

'It has happened all over the world,' Ray said.

Siri kept shaking his head. 'But it can't always be like this. It can't.' The night air slowly curled around him.

'We have to learn. Somehow. We are no better, but we are no worse.' Ray turned on the wall lights, pushing at the darkness. Then he saw one of the new shutters was broken: several slats were splintered; the wood was raw. Ray felt a pain in this chest. He took a deep breath. 'Never mind. It can be fixed.' He was determined.

Siri stared up at him, then shook this head again as if at a fly. 'Sir . . .' this face slowly crumpled. 'Sir, my brother back home. They've used a lamp-post for him.' Siri shut his eyes.

Ray's throat felt thick, clogged. 'You should have told me,' he said at last tugging at this neck. The body would have been mutilated, then strung up as a beacon; the corpse would swing in the wind for days. 'Why?'

Siri's bare feet dangled over the steps. When he spoke this voice was hardly audible. 'Who can tell, Sir, in this place?'

Ray looked at their shadows cupped in a circle of yellow light on the gravel below the veranda; the light on Siri's arms. He tried to lean forward but couldn't move. He couldn't clear the space between them. Siri's skin was mottled.

'It happened last night,' Siri said.

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Ray nodded, 'Maybe you should take a few days off. Find your people, he heard himself say. 'The veranda can wait . . .' His voice faltered. They were not the words he wanted. Ray saw himself alone again in his house, picking his way through the debris at the back. There were two rooms still to be done; pots of yellow paint in the corner of the bedroom would remain unopened. He found himself thinking that without Siri he would have to make his own morning tea again. Drink alone on his incomplete veranda; wait.

But Siri said nothing. Ray could not tell whether he had heard him. Siri slowly straightened out and stepped down on to the path. He looked at Ray for a moment, then turned and started walking towards the back of the house, towards his room in the servant's quarters. Ray opened his mouth to say something about the new house, the cinnamon garden, but Siri had melted away in the darkness. Ray remained standing on the veranda. He felt he was on fire, but the palms of his hands were wet. Out in the garden fireflies made circles. Frogs croaked. The sky trembled like the skin on a drum.

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