

# THE LINE OF LANKA

Myths and Memories of an Island

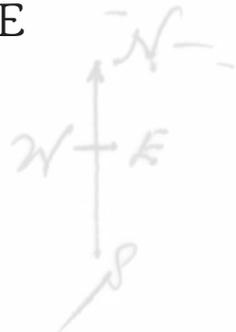


*Essays on travel*

SAILFISH

SUNELA JAYEWARDENE

SAIL FISH  
COLOMBO





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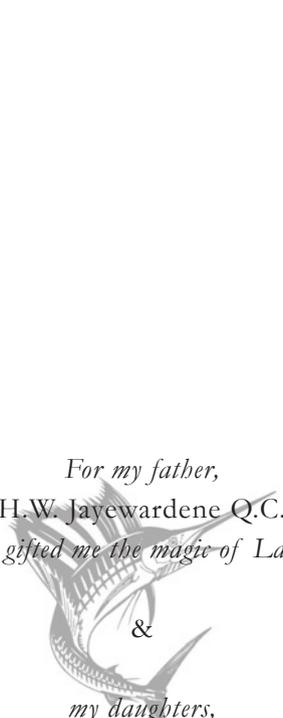
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*Sua Mullakku*

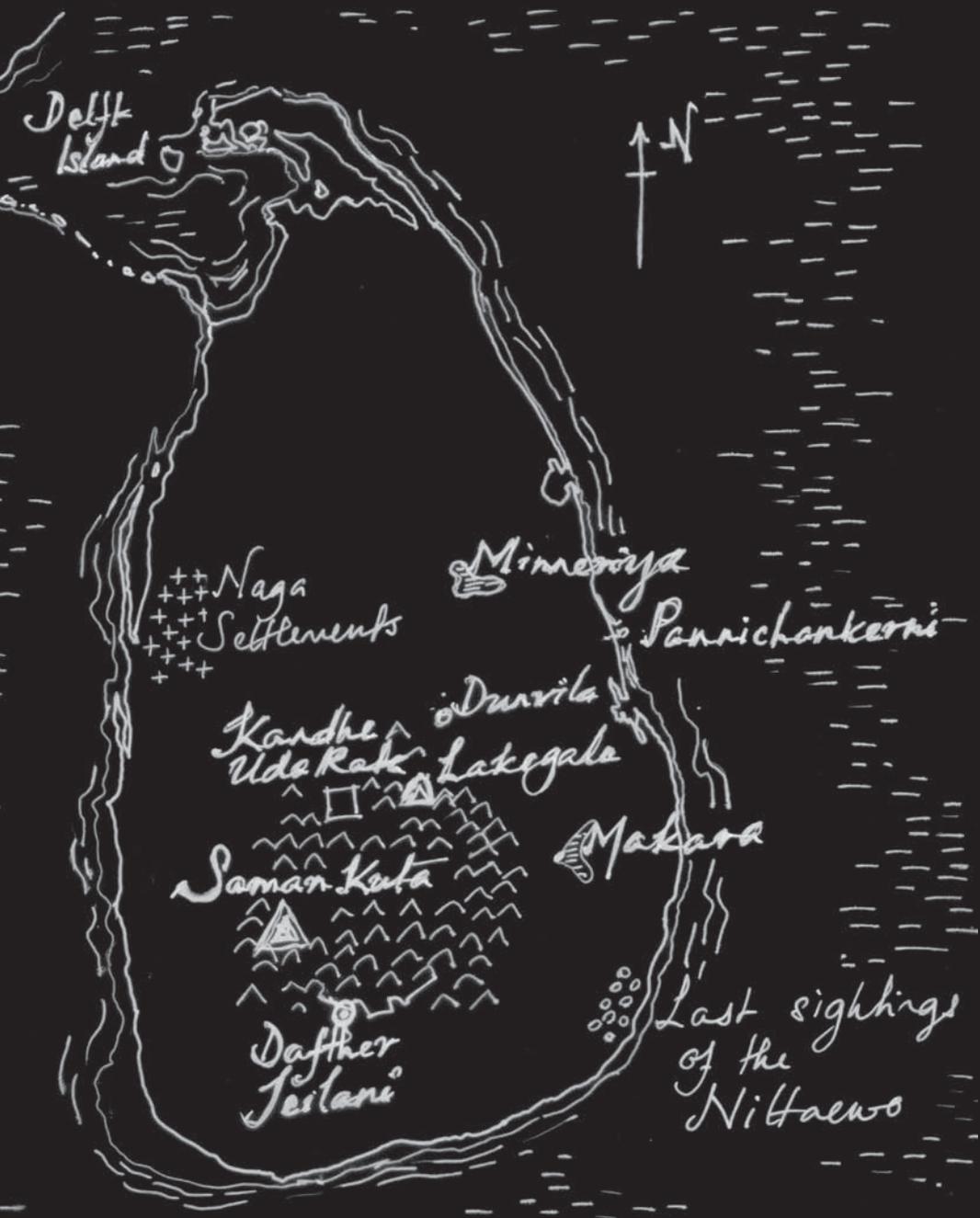


*For my father,  
H.W. Jayewardene Q.C.  
who gifted me the magic of Lanka*

*&*

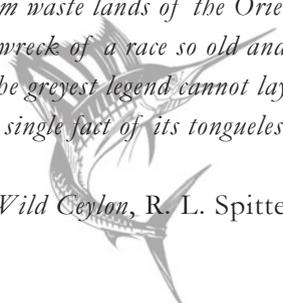
*my daughters,  
Amaya Suradha & Akhila Savera  
The next generation of this magical, ancient island*





*In the dim waste lands of the Orient stands  
The wreck of a race so old and vast  
That the greyest legend cannot lay hands  
On a single fact of its tongueless past*

*Wild Ceylon, R. L. Spittel*



SAILFISH





# 1

## Reaching for Ravana *Lakégala, the last target*

**D**awn lights the harsh face of the Knuckles range. Unlike at any other time of day, that golden light reveals easterly crags, contrasting with shadowed and mysterious clefts in a pitiless visage. Long forgotten valleys huddled below are fleetingly highlighted by the morning shadows. As the sun climbs out of the eastern sky, the curious plateaus and enigmatic rock forms slowly dissolve and disappear while the blue shadows flatten. With the sun's ascent, scarves of mist drift and float lazily out of the hidden valleys and carpets of forests. They rapidly evaporate, swirling like delicate twists from a lazy cigar. My husband, Karu, and I sit with our coffee on the stone bench at our cottage on the lip of Dunvila lake. We watch in wonder as the sun briefly reveals secret places then rides higher into the sky concealing them once again. A quick exposé that tantalizes and leaves us dreaming of lost kingdoms and faraway lives.

The glassy lake reflects the mountainscape between waxy green discs of lotus leaves and their lush, large white blooms wave languidly on stiff stalks. Even in this tremulous reflection, the oddly smooth dome of Lakégala soars out of a clutch of sharply faceted ridges and peaks of the Knuckles mountain range. The polished dome with its shattered countenance seems to gaze northward, across valleys and

monsoon forests, glowering down on our distant Dunvila lake. Dunvila, where it is said, Lord Rama planted his bow firmly in the ground and his arrow flew true to his *illakké* or target — Lakégala. The rock shattered on impact, and with its destruction brought down the great dynasty that ruled lands way beyond this island of Lanka. Rama fired that fateful arrow at the rock fortress with fore knowledge. On that lofty peak is where it is believed Lanka's King Ravana died, even as he drew plans for the final battle.

It is this legend of Dunvila lake that draws us to Ravana. In this region where the massive rock that is, Lakégala rises dark and brooding and dominates the horizon, tales of a vast, lost kingdom spread like ripples. Over the years, we gathered myths and poems, songs, yarns and even prayers to the legendary king who ruled ten kingdoms from his seat, the island of Lanka. As we sit each morning on the stone bench by the lake, the magical tableau of the mountains is showcased with shadow and light and then thrown back again in reflection on the cold lake waters. Confronted with this stupendous view, and the seemingly endless waves of monsoon forests, we are humbled by the power they emanate and yet lured by energy that seems to beckon. Through our years at Dunvila, the mystery of Ravana spins itself like a silken web and ensnares us.



The mountains that sweep across our horizon are now commonly known as the Knuckles range. But the vernacular, *Dumbara* resonates more. For most of the year, this really is the mist-laden mountain range. The tightly pinched folds of the valleys, the sheer faces of rock and impenetrable forests differ from the generous contours of the rest of Sri Lanka's mountains. Beside the onerous geography of the range, their north-west to south-eastern orientation, ensures they are lashed by rain for months



on end and provide an additional deterrent to ingress. Thus, the island's weather patterns help create a long-recognized mountain fastness.

The monsoon and inter-monsoon winds that the mountains capture howl like trapped banshees, through the ravines and passes, tearing at branches and uprooting old-growth trees. This extreme weather makes walking in these monsoon forests dangerous for the greater part of the year. The ripping winds, the rains that turn steep pathways into cascades and the inescapable clusters of leeches that wave around looking for blood in everything that moves ensure this. Every year, only a tiny window of a few weeks is favourable for trekking into this mountain stronghold. Each year, we wait for this short interval between wind and rain, when it is safe to walk beneath the high canopy without being injured by falling branches and perhaps, sleep on a reasonably flat rock or in a cave without being bled by leeches.

The people of the island recognized the value of this wilderness long ago, and used its natural defences to their advantage. When in need of refuge, kings and bandits, mendicants and sadhus, rebels and offenders retreated here. The last monarchs of the island even exiled their officials and aristocrats here, effectively removing them from society. The British imperialists who followed, saw no reason to deviate and assigned 'punishment transfers' to minute administrative points at the periphery of this wild range. British civil servants, who sailed from the grey ports of Plymouth, Liverpool, and London, cherishing dreams of prospering in the exotic east, erred in the tropics, and suddenly found themselves transferred. The 'punishment transfer' sent errant officers into tangled forests bound by blinding mists, where they battled swathes of bloodthirsty leeches and surly natives. These were wild tracts with no familiar sign of civilization. Here, would-be colonists lived unsuccessfully and died, succumbing to the jungle tide. Under