

NAMES & NUMBERS



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COLOMBO



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For my parents and my sister



THE DANCERS

If not for the insistent sound of the telephone, he would have slept until noon. Through a haze of sleepiness he automatically pushes the button to answer and immediately wishes he hadn't.

“Ajith, is that you?” a female voice asks.

Her voice is loud. Much too loud. He holds the phone away from his ear, but her voice continues. “You said you would be here at nine, what happened – where are you?”

“I'm on my way,” he says, thinking quickly. “I'm driving there now. I'll be there in ten minutes.”

He rings off. Silence. He lies in bed, staring upwards. Instead of the white ceiling, he sees colours, bright blue, green and red. Garish overblown colours, like the shades seen on shiny tissue paper stuck on paper lanterns during Vesak. He thinks he should have come home before three in the morning.



The road leading there is lined with stalls. A miscellany of goods are on sale – incense, oil lamps, baskets, and

puzzlingly, soft toys – pink teddy bears, plastic flowers, jewellery and sweets. It's a very worldly mix of goods for a place like this. He ignores these and he walks. One foot after another. He walks and walks, and then, he comes to the river.



The colour soaked images stay with him as he staggers out of bed. Brush teeth, wash, shave. He goes through the morning ritual and still the images of the dancers with their brightly painted faces linger. He dresses; denim trousers, black t-shirt – it's going to be a long day ahead. He looks at his reflection in the mirror as he plaits his long hair into a braid. It falls just below his shoulder. The dancers disappear momentarily as he concentrates on the task – it needs a steady hand. Many of the dancers had long hair too. Their hair would fall over their faces as they danced and they would shake it back with a vigorous toss of their heads.

He applies hair gel to smooth the top down, checks his reflection one last time and heads out of the house. He backs the car out of the garage, switches on the air conditioner and slips on his sunglasses. Now he's ready to face the road.

He has just turned onto the main road when the phone rings again. It's a female voice again, but a different one this time. "Amali? Yes, I'm on my way, almost there," he says hastily. "Yes, yes of course I remember, you called last night."

How many promises did he make last night? Why can he not remember? He shakes his head. The dancers shake their heads back at him, laughing.



Now he's crossing the river. It's night time. In front of him is a row of small stalls. Flames flicker uncertainly from the oil lamps. Lamps and flowers and incense for sale. The women at the stalls snap the stalks off the flowers with impressive speed and hand them to the devotees. It's like an assembly line. Everything is a little business, sprung up around the god.



He drags his mind back to the road. He's late. He presses his foot on the accelerator and nearly drives into a cow standing in the middle of the road. The car swerves at the last moment. The cow gives him a reproachful look and continues to happily obstruct traffic.

The phone rings again. He answers tersely.

"Putha," not a female voice. He relaxes. A flurry of words washes over him. "Yes, I'm on my way, I'm still driving there," he says.

More words. "You want me to come now?" his voice rises. He looks at his watch. Another detour will delay him further. The voice on the phone continues. A volley of Sinhala words cascade over him. He shrugs. All right then. Stopping will take less time than arguing.

The house is on his way. He turns the car into a narrow lane and eases his foot off the accelerator. Driving fast is not a good idea. The rains seem to have washed away a good part of the surface and there are potholes everywhere. He carefully inches forward. The car lurches over the uneven road and he winces at the sound of an object grazing the undercarriage. He passes familiar landmarks, the abandoned garage, the tiny shop that sells old papers and groceries. He finally stops the car in front of the rusty grey gate.

An elderly man wearing a sarong and rubber slippers is standing by the gate. His father wakes early.

Ajith gets out of the car. His father hands him a parcel wrapped in brown paper. A fragrant scent of freshly cooked rice and spices wafts out of the parcel. He handles it gingerly. Now his fingers will smell of curry for the rest of the day.

“What time did you get back yesterday?” his father asks him.

“Around one or two in the morning maybe,” he says vaguely. His father would not be happy to hear how late it actually was.

“How was the trip?”

He pauses a moment before answering. What should he say?

When he was a child, his mother used to take him on this same pilgrimage. His father would not come. They left in the pre-dawn hours, before his father awoke. When they returned late at night his father would be seated in his room. He would ignore them. These were things his father refused to believe in.

“It was good, crowded, but then it’s always like that,” he says casually.

He notes with the familiar sense of exasperation that his father’s nails are grimy and overgrown. A few straggles of unkempt hair float over his scalp. He smoothens back his own gelled hair and adjusts his sunglasses.

His father opens the gate and he reverses the car. The gate is rusty and needs to be replaced. The walls need painting. His father – that gentle unworldly man – drifts through the house, he does not notice such things. Since his mother died there has been no one to see to those things.

The polished surface of the car contrasts with the fading paint of the house. No one in his family owned a car. Not until him. Not until he started his business, and money started coming in at last.

And if he has anything to do with it that’s how it will continue. He will make sure of that if he has to follow the dancers every year for the rest of his life.

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Now he is finally near the temple premises. He’s walking when the crowd makes way for a procession. It seems to be one family. Several men are in front, followed by a young girl of around seventeen or eighteen and a middle-aged woman. They are all dancing. Their feet move to the rhythm of the drum played somewhere in the crowd. Their eyes are closed. How do they know where to go? How do their feet know the ground even before they step? They must be fulfilling a vow. The dancers.