

..... Dilukshi Jayawickrema

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### Not Singlish Either

As a young Sri Lankan man fresh to New York, the only thing Anil could do was work in the porn shop. On every seedy street in New York City; by the reeking alley where Bowery meets 2nd Avenue, between the dusty fruit stand and the ninety-nine cents store on Columbus, dotting every squalid corner of Washington Heights was a peeling-lettered, graying porn store, run by a Sri Lankan. Anil found a job at a small, nondescript place called *Movies & Videos*; name which he thought was both misleading and redundant. He couldn't imagine how anyone would even know that the place sold porn. To his bewilderment, a vast number of people managed to figure it out. Anil couldn't have better experienced New York's celebrated melting pot than by sitting behind the rotting, wooden counter of the porn store. Every kind of New Yorker, from sheepish-eyed, hair-dyed Asian girls to twitchy, white businessmen carrying expensive, leather briefcases, came to borrow movies with names like *Good Will Humping* and *Edward Penishands*.

Unlike the other Sri Lankan workers, Anil didn't have to suppress a smirk when he rented out *Saving Ryan's Privates*. He had yet to understand double-entendres in American popular culture, so he couldn't see why the other boys found hours of raucous enjoyment from reading off the faded movie titles that lined the musty walls of the dimly-lit, filthy store. Anil thought that *Movies & Videos* would benefit from a sound cleaning. He once grabbed a dilapidated mop and proceeded to scrub a space clear on the grimy, tiled floor, if only to see what the original color was. His boss, Ranil DeSilva, stopped him immediately.

'Na, Anil. Dirty store is good. Make the people feel less dirty, see?' Ranil said, patting Anil's thin shoulder.

Anil did *not* see, but Ranil DeSilva owned a successful chain of porn stores that stretched from Manhattan's Lower East Side to Bensushurst, Brooklyn, so Anil didn't question him. At the



moment, Ranil was entangled in a furious battle with a Romanian immigrant, named Volstaf or Volkaf, over the fruitful pornography market in Flushing, Queens. Anil had no doubt that Ranil would win. As far as porn store owners went, Ranil DeSilva was King. As far as Anil went, Ranil De Silva was King.

The hot debate at the Sri Lankan Embassy in New York was whether or not to invite Ranil DeSilva to the annual Independence Day celebrations. Most of the Embassy employees were against inviting him. They said that letting him come would support the moral bankruptcy which defined America. They said that their children didn't need to be more corrupted than they were bound to become by watching the Britney Spears and smoking the pot.

"There is shame, yes Anil," Ranil said, his brows furrowed. "We sell dirty movies to dirty, white people. So? Embassy men take the United Nations funds that is supposed to go to the poor children in the flooded villages in Sri Lanka and build big, vacation houses by the coast. No shame in this? Sri Lankan problem is this: we think we better than what we do. But you not too good for your own life."

Ranil DeSilva, Anil's champion, had one champion of his own: the Deputy Prime Minister of the Sri Lankan Embassy, Lionel Palikara. Lionel Palikara pointed out that Ranil made substantial, monthly donations to local Buddhist temples. He reminded the Embassy that half the Sri Lankan boys who came to New York only got footholds in the city because Ranil DeSilva gave them jobs.

"Great man, the DPR," Ranil said, his eyes moist, when he heard this through the Sri Lankan grapevine. "Great man. He will be president one day, when he goes back home. He will be president and our country will be better for it."

Ranil was not invited to the Independence Day festival, but he did not take great offence. Ranil DeSilva was kind without any expectation of return. Anil, like every boy who came to New York bearing nothing more than a passport, a small hoard of rupees that

was barely worth 200 dollars, and the weight of his entire family's hopes, found a refuge in Ranil. Ranil placed him in a one-bedroom apartment off Fulton Street, which housed eight other young, Sri Lankan porn store workers. The nine of them led a cramped but satisfying life. They pooled their wages at the end of the week to pay the electric and water bills. They bought giant, plastic bags of *Basmati* rice, and if it was a good week, a gallon of cheap *Poland Spring* vodka which tasted like lighter fluid but did the trick. On vodka Sundays, they crowded around their very old, very small television, which they kept on the dusty floor of their one-bedroom, and watched the week's featured porn.

Anil's only other experience of sex consisted of hot afternoons in Sri Lanka during which he and his friends would peer through a gap in the muslim curtains of his neighbor's window to watch the man fuck his maid while his wife took her nap. Mr. Jayewardene fucked his maid in the kitchen, fully-clothed, standing up and from behind. Anil was amazed by the sheer variety of positions and locales that porn actors managed to invent: upside down/underwater, on her shoulders/behind a preschool. The combinations were endless. Anil was even more astounded by the volume of porn sex. Mr. Jayewardene panted hard, but was otherwise silent as he screwed Lila from 4:15 to 4:25, every day like clockwork. Anil remembered the boredom on Lila's face as she balanced herself, palms flat against the white-washed wall. He remembered how she would sometimes pick at flakes of paint while Mr. Jayewardene wheezed behind her. The women in the pornos moaned, squawked, writhed in consuming passion as the men offered brief, repetitive phrases such as 'Yeah baby, yeah baby,' or 'You like that? How about that? That?'

Anil found that his comments on the inelegance of adult film dialogue were highly unwelcome on Sunday porn nights, as they sat in a sweaty, silent half-circle wearing sarongs and looks of strained concentration, passing the dripping vodka jug from boy to boy. Anil learned that porn featured bad dialogue delivered badly by a great many overstuffed-looking blondes, a few petite, Asian girls (never Asian guys) and a random, well-endowed black man thrown in for



good measure. But never, not even in *A Passage to India*, a heartwarming tale of a group of soccer players who systematically have sex with a woman named India, was there a brown person to be seen. India was a peroxide blonde, with monstrous, swinging breasts and blue eye shadow smeared across the lids of eyes perpetually shut in apparent ecstasy.

'We sell, not stay,' Ranil said, when Anil mentioned that there were no South Asians in porn. 'Where you get porn anyway?'

'Uh... ' Anil began, struck dumb, gazing around at the rows and rows of videos.

'It's not right, watching dirty porn.' Ranil turned on his heel to go take a call from Volstaf or Volchak, who was ready to negotiate a selling price for the Parson's Boulevard, Flushing porn shop. A week later, Anil watched his boss deliberately turn away as one of Anil's roommates, Suranga Rajakanuna, slipped *Debbie Does Dallas*, apparently a classic, into the waistband of his jeans.

'Of course he saw me, fool,' Suranga said later that day, blowing a perfect smoke ring out of their apartment window. 'DeSilva is a smart man, practical man. He knows we take the porn. You can't put a cat in a room full of mice and expect him not to chase them, can you *machung*?'

Anil didn't suppose you could expect that.

'But DeSilva is also very moral man. Very moral,' Suranga said, a small frown creasing the corners of his smooth, brown cheeks. 'He doesn't believe in porn. And he doesn't believe in stealing. We return the porn, you know, but we steal them, only because we can't afford to rent them, *machung*. Cigarettes at eight fucking dollars a pack, who can afford porn?'

'Uh, well, not you, I suppose...' Anil said, because he had yet to understand rhetorical questions, and he thought that Suranga's dark, furrowed brows demanded an answer.

'A practical man,' Suranga said. 'And a moral one. It doesn't work. Can't be both at the same time. What is the English word for that problem, *machung*?'

'Paradox?' Anil offered.

'Para-docks,' Suranga nodded. 'So he ignores it. Best you can do *mali*.'

Suranga crossed his defined, dark arms behind his neck, leaned against the windowsill and gazed at the dark symmetry of the neighboring buildings against the pale pinks and faded oranges of a New York City dying sun. Sri Lankan suns always set in golden blazes.

Four of Anil's eight roommates came to New York to become distinguished neurosurgeons; the medical profession of choice among poor, Sri Lankan porn store workers. They sold pornos by day and studied molecular biology by night. Anil thought that if lucky, one of them would have the strength and money to get through medical school, maybe two. South Asian would-be doctors were such a cliché that Anil was delighted to hear that Suranga's dearest ambition was to take over Ranil's porn business after the old man passed away. 'That's right, porn forever. No shame in my game,' Suranga would say, thrilled to find an opportunity to employ one of the many American phrases that he collected in his memory like rare coins. Anil was also fond of Mahesh and Migara Perera, a pair of sharp-eyed, dirt-cheap twins who didn't care for lofty vocations and planned on becoming filthy rich investment bankers. They saved every dollar they could, often begged to be let off from paying the weekly bills and continually hit up the other boys for spare change. Gayan Jayatunge, a kind and soft-spoken boy, always gave them a dollar when he could. Gayan hoped to someday open a cosmetics store. He glided rather than walked, had small transparent hands and sneaked in pornos with names like *The Real Eden: Adam and Steve* when the others weren't around. They all knew.

'Faggot,' Suranga spat one day as soon as Gayan walked



out of their apartment. Anil could sense how Suranga liked the definitive flatness of the word. The Sinhalese word for homosexual, *ponaya* was far too musical of a term to put to a faggot. 'Perfect country to come to,' Suranga said. 'America, land of faggots and whores.'

And us, porn sellers,' Anil snapped. 'You're not too good for this life you know.'

Suranga chortled. 'Yes Anil *mahathaya*, I know.' Suranga suspected that Gayan was in love with him. Anil looked at Suranga, lean and beautiful against the chaotic outline of brick buildings, and suspected that he was right. If it were possible to have a heterosexual crush, then Anil too, was a little in love with Suranga. Suranga flirted with Gayan in a casual but deliberate way that disturbed Anil until he came to understand Suranga. Suranga was nineteen; he had been in New York for four years. Every evening, he chain smoked as he sat unsupported on the windowsill of their twelfth-story apartment and flicked ashes onto the heads of the Latino gang members below him, just because he could. To Suranga, this was America, this was freedom. It was the freedom to bark 'faggot,' then let his hand linger on a gay man's arm. It was the freedom to challenge coked-up Dominicans who carried switch-blades in their iron-toed boots.

'So what are you going to study, Anil?' Migara asked, soon after Anil moved in. Migara needed to calculate the costs of maintaining Anil's friendship (birthday presents, occasional dinners) subtracted from whatever benefits his friend's future profession (business man? lawyer?) might procure for himself.

Anil hesitated.

'Uh, well... I would like to learn to write.'

'*Machung*, you don't know how to write?' Migara asked in a low voice.

Anil felt his face grow warm. 'No,' he said. 'I want to write books...fiction...books.'

Suranga shifted on his windowsill and squinted at the sky.

'*Malli*, you didn't have to come all the way to America to write fucking books,' Mahesh spat, already severing ties with Anil in his mind. He was certain that he couldn't afford to house Anil when he ended up on the streets because nobody wanted to read whatever he wrote.

'Perfect country to come to, faggots, whores and writers,' Suranga finally said.

'And us,' he added, turning to Anil with an appealing smirk.

When Anil called his mother every week, he told her two necessary lies over the crackling long-distance line. He said that he was a bag boy at A&P and he didn't say that he was taking English classes. 'Did I spend all my money to send you to America to take English classes? What you need English for? You already know English!' he imagined his mother's voice coming strident and clear from half-way across the world. The only thing that would shame his mother more than a porn-store worker son would be a writer-dreamer fool son.

'Never mind, Anil,' Ranil said. 'You want to write, you write. The DPR has gone to Sri Lanka now and will become president and things will change. There will be places for writers in Sri Lanka soon, Anil. You write.' Ranil's dark eyes shone brightly in the store's dim light.

So over the next four years, for every three science courses that Anil took at Pace Community College, he took one creative writing class. In his second semester, Anil met an Irish girl in his Intermediate Creative Writing seminar who said that his writing was captivating and sensual. Anil's personal experience with sensuality had been limited to furtive fumbling under his high-school girlfriend's uniformed skirt, beneath the shadows of a big mango tree behind the rough brick wall of their school, until the bus came to pick them up. He was disappointed when he eventually found out that real female nudity harbored nothing of the melon-breasted,



taut-stomached perfection of the porn stars that he was used to, but America had taught him to adjust swiftly. When he told Lara that he had never had sex before, her swift 'Oh' contained such suppressed eagerness that he realized conquest was something women craved as much as men. Suranga scoffed when Anil told him that he was a virgin, informing Anil that he, Suranga, had been having sex since he was fourteen years old and that he had fucked fifteen chicks to date.

'Fifteen, man. Time's a-ticking,' Suranga said, tapping his watch-less wrist.

Worried about this ticking time, Anil managed to get Lara's clothes off as soon as humanly possible. He was relieved that she didn't seem as bored as his old neighbor's maid.

'I love your skin,' Lara said afterwards, running a pale forefinger across his chest, as they lay together in her cramped, lumpy dorm-room bed. 'It's like the color of ripe wheat.'

Anil turned away. Writers, he thought with exasperation. He wondered if Lara had ever seen more than a picture of wheat. He tried to hold the green paddy fields behind his grandmother's house in his mind. He remembered the flash of the silver sickle as the reaper harvested the long grains. Anil's skin was at least two shades darker than wheat, and nothing was the color of ripe wheat unless it was ripe wheat. At that moment, he hated Lara a little bit.

When Anil had met Lara she had asked him if he was Indian, her voice harboring the same contained excitement that it would later have as she reached for the zipper of his jeans.

'I'm Sri Lankan,' he had said.

'Really? What part of India is that?'

He had gazed at the golden brown flecks in her grey-green eyes, the way that her caramel hair fell in soft waves around her translucent cheeks, and decided to overlook the question.

He was so used to being mistaken for Indian that he sometimes forgot that he wasn't. Ranil had smacked his wide hand on the countertop the day that Anil nodded absently when a customer asked if he was a Hindu.

'He is Sinhalese, from Sri Lanka. And Hindu is religion, not race,' Ranil had snapped. 'Here is your porno, buh-bye.'

'Sorry,' Anil had muttered, when the man had shuffled out, shooting dark glances at the belligerent Hindus.

'Nothing to be sorry,' Ranil had said gruffly. 'Even people in Sri Lanka forget they are Sri Lankan, all watching the *Bollywood* movies and obsessed with the fair-skinned Punjabi girls. How would you remember what you are?'

As Anil watched the morning light fall across Lara's milky back, he wondered if he had chosen her because of a taught obsession with lightness. He wondered, with a ripple of anger, who had instilled in them this love of fairness? He remembered that his mother's first question at the birth of her niece had been if the baby was light-skinned. As Lara pressed herself against his body, as if she wanted to absorb him, he wondered who had taught her to crave darkness.

The next day, Anil came to work early to find Ranil sobbing into his folded arms behind the dusty counter of *Movies & Videos*. Anil froze in the doorway, horrified. This was Ranil DeSilva, the King of New York porn stores. This was Ranil DeSilva, who forced his Romanian rival, Volnask or Voltam, to go back to Romania in shame, bankrupt and beaten.

Ranil looked up, red-eyed, the determined lines of his dark face melted. 'The DPR, Anil. They killed him. They killed him.'

When Anil had arrived in New York, he had been surprised by how seamlessly he managed to adjust. In a few days, he knew which vendors to buy hot dogs from and knew how to avoid the more dangerous junkies. It took him longer to realize that all Sri



Lankans were the same way. 'We are chameleons,' Ramil had said once, half in admiration, half in disgust. 'We are not like Indians, no attachment to home. We fit in America so easy because we are willing to let go of roots.' Willing to work in porn shops, Anil thought. Suranga often described Sri Lankans as the underachievers of South Asia. He cheerfully pointed out how they had long given up on the caste system and took it easy with religion. They wanted nothing more than sunny beaches, good food and peace. In Sri Lanka, they had all of this, except peace. Ramil didn't specify who the 'they' who killed the DPR were. 'They' could have been the LTT, a fundamentalist Tamil terrorist group or the GVP, the oppositional government mobsters. It could have been the government itself, because most Sri Lankans tended to hold all lives a little cheap. But like Ramil DeSilva, Anil didn't think that life should be weightless in the palm of your hand. He couldn't so easily let go of roots, at the same time that he had to admit his roots were not very deep, not very intricate. Neither of them had ever met the DPR, but Lionel Palikara had become to them a rare breed of man, a carrier of principles that his country never owned. Lionel Palikara harbored ideals that existed only in their minds. Anil understood why Ramil cried and cried.

'Don't go back there, Anil,' Ramil said shakily. 'There is no place for you.'

This, Anil already knew.

Anil didn't stay for work that day. He found himself running back to his apartment, his feet pounding the asphalt pavement. He burst through his front door, leaned against the peeling wall and panted out to Suranga and Gayan that the DPR had been murdered.

'So?' Suranga asked, his face as blank as paper. 'One less rich *padaya* in the world.'

'That's too bad,' Gayan said serenely, wandering out of the room. 'He was such a good looking man.'

Suranga glared at Gayan's retreating back. 'Fucking faggots, *machung*.'

Anil thought that it was time he began to think about moving out.

By the last year of his college career, Anil had saved up enough money to leave the small apartment for an even smaller apartment of his own. He quit his job at *Movies & Videos* when he managed to find work at a small dentist's office as a receptionist, floor sweeper, coffee-maker and holder of the shiny, metal spit-sucking device. The day that Anil left, Ramil clapped him hard on the back, nodded once and turned away. Ramil didn't have time for long goodbyes. There was a new Polish immigrant, Jerwadaska or Jewadslaw, who was trying to steal a chain of his Bronx-based stores right from under his nose. Ramil DeSilva's portly, upright figure disappeared into the dust of the dark, little store as Anil walked out.

Suranga came over to Anil's new place every Saturday night. He brought porn, mostly classics, for old time's sake. Ramil had stopped pretending that he didn't notice when the boys took them. He once even recommended that Anil might enjoy *Sperms of Endearment*.

Suranga kept Anil updated on the new workers and on the careers of their old roommates. Two of the old would-be doctors had gotten into medical school, and the twins were still cheap.

'Where's Gayan? How's his beauty shop coming?' Anil asked.

'Don't know,' Suranga said. 'He has a *boyfriend*, last I heard. Bet he still wants me.'

'I bet,' Anil laughed.

'How's the writing coming?' Suranga would always ask.

'Oh, it's coming,' Anil would say. It was not coming. Anil

spent a good deal of his time practicing being a tortured writer. He acted distraught and picked up chain-smoking. He drank his coffee black, though he preferred tea. He forced his fingers to shake, wishing they were long, tapered and transparent, instead of sturdy and brown. But none of this made his stories any better. This semester, he had written a dramedy about a suburban, white town plagued by an uncomfortable, sexually-transmitted disease. He read it over and wondered what the hell he was thinking. He didn't know much about sexually-transmitted diseases, but he knew even less about suburban, white towns. He chucked the story into the trash bin and began a fresh one set in ancient Sri Lanka, before the British came. He wrote about the life of a wheat reaper in the old kingdom. But he found that he didn't remember anything of the old kingdom's history and he couldn't imagine the silver of the scythe as it slipped through wheat. The reaper was lost to Anil.

This was the price that he had to pay for what he had gained in America. He realized this when he told his mother over the phone that he what he loved best about his job was washing down the sink after the patients had spit out bloody, stained mouthfuls of water.

'Strange thing to love,' his mother said. She had taken to speaking in English to Anil as if to prove that she could.

'*Amma*, I was being sarcastic,' Anil said wearily.

'What is that? Sa-castic?'

'It's just...it's when you say something you don't really mean.'

'Then why you say it?'

'Because that's sarcasm! Like I don't mean it when I say "Ooh I just can't wait to take my chemistry final."'

'So... why you lying?'

Anil used to have trouble finding English words for

Sinhalese feelings, but now he realized that in all languages, there were words that lost meaning in translation.

Anil was forgetting.

One day, in the middle of a sentence, Anil lost the Sinhalese word for shoe.

'*Quo magge*...shoes?' he asked Suranga.

Suranga smirked. 'Where are your *sappathu*? Your first Sinhalese-English sentence,' he said. 'Welcome to the brotherhood, *malli*. We are all Singlish here.'

Anil didn't think that this was true. He thought of how he had stayed up a whole night trying to find a direct translation for the word 'sarcasm,' how he had spent the past four years trying to recall the exact color of ripe wheat. He found that he had no words for either. He found that he spoke a language that was neither Sinhalese nor English. But it was not Singlish either. It was not that he belonged to two cultures, but that he belonged to neither. Sometimes, he felt that the only space he inhabited were the imperfect ones of his own creation. He thought of something that he had read recently: *the only home left now, is in writing*. Anil wrote and wrote in a language that had no name, as of yet.