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Spirit of the Soil

The looming trees whipped by him; they were merely green and brown blurs racing along on either side. It was dim in the forest, the skyscraper-trees leaning their heads together to close out the warmth and light of the mid-afternoon sun. A musky, woody smell pervaded the hazy air in the forest.

The forest was relatively quiet, interrupted occasionally by a tree creaking. The only other sound that disrupted the forest calm was the thump-thump of his white Nike Airs as he ran swiftly, muffled somewhat by the soft, yielding carpet of moss, fallen pine needles, and half-decomposed leaves that concealed the red earth. The white was brilliant like newly-fallen snow—pure and unblighted, save for the streaks of fiery orange that zigzagged down the sides.

Just to look at him was to see the embodiment of speed and agility. The corded sinews on his neck and arms stood out, straining against the constraint of his beautiful brown skin. His mop of black, unruly hair was buffeted by the wind generated with his sprinting figure. His seemingly bottomless chocolate-brown eyes swept a sharp gaze over the trees. The black, form-fitting T-shirt proclaimed in bold white letters, “A God Stands Before You.” The dark blue jeans covering his long, lean legs had a bought-with-the-faded-look look. The haughty way in which he held his upper body as he ran and those powerful legs indicated that he was a soccer player.

Only the intermittent flashes of white through the stands of trees were visible as he leaped forward, spurred on by some invisible force behind him.

The trees ahead began to thin, and sunlight brushed his arm, pure and golden, dancing off the hairs of his arms. A wide curtain of light was visible ahead, topped with a layer of creamy blue sky. He put on a spurt of speed, and was suddenly thrust into the blinding sun directly in front of him.

He was forced to shut his eyes against the fierce glare, and so he did not see the ground give way into an outcropping of rock, jutting out over a wide expanse of blue several hundred feet beneath. Eyes still squeezed shut, his right foot crossed the lip of the edge, and then... he was in freefall. Now his eyes opened, and terror flooded his mind as he stared straight down, his body horizontal in the air, at a teardrop-shaped patch of brown encircled by glittering blue waves that rushed up much too quickly to meet him. The foaming wave crests were mere feet away from crushing his body...

“Sanjay.”

...a huge roller curled upwards, ready to snatch his body from the air...

“Sanjay!”

...and this was it, he could feel the icy spray stinging his cheeks...

“Get up, Sanjay!”

The voice pierced his stupor, and his eyelids snapped open. With a groan, Sanjay tried to pull himself upright against the cushioned back, but had to stop; his legs had fallen asleep. He forced his bleary eyes to focus on the long legs splayed out and jammed under the seat in front of him. He struggled with them for a minute, willing the blood to start circulating again, but had to resign himself to waiting.

He glanced to his left: two tightly bound pigtails bobbed excitedly as the head of their owner glued herself to the plane window. It was Swetha's, his little sister's, first time on a plane.

Two rows ahead, Sanjay could see his parents still sleeping, standard-airplane-blue blankets wrapped around their huddled forms.

Again he stretched, and this time his legs moved. Lacing his hands behind his head, he leaned back, and pondered his strange dream: why had he been falling towards that island? The very same island he would be landing on within minutes? Was there symbolism behind it?

Silly, he chided himself; ever since his advanced literature class last year, he seemed to be seeing symbolism in everything. And of course, this black t-shirt he was wearing today must mean that he was feeling depressed and gloomy. He turned to glance out the window, and all thoughts of his odd dream were driven out of his mind at the sight that greeted him.

The glittering blue expanse of the Indian Ocean lay undisturbed; from this distance not a single wave marred its calm beauty. Cradled in its vastness was a teardrop-shaped island, its tan soil and lush greenery in stark contrast to the bottomless blue surrounding it. The view was breathtaking, surreal, just like the fact that in less than thirty minutes, he was going to set foot on his native soil: Sri Lanka.

Two hours later, after a rush to collect all nine pieces of luggage, opening and forcing them shut again for the customs officials, and a stop at the currency exchange booth, they exited the airport, setting foot on land after roughly eighteen hours in the air.

“Okay, as I said before, we’re going first to my sister’s house,” Sanjay’s mother reminded them, “to drop off the luggage, and then we’ll go into town, to visit the afternoon market.”

“And, if we’re lucky, they’ll still have fresh rambootan!” his father butted in, his eyes shining with anticipation. He and his wife shared an excited glance, remembering for a brief

moment the bright red skin of the small fruit, studded with harmless spikes, and the sweet white meat surrounding the large seed—a childhood favorite.

Swetha nodded, her eyes wide with delight as she took in the crowded streets full of people bustling about, fulfilling their midday errands. But Sanjay spaced himself a bit apart from his family, his Adidas duffel casually slung over his shoulder. Unease had settled back into what seemed to be its permanent nesting place—his stomach. He felt out of place, standing on this dusty, unpaved road, lined with small, concrete houses topped with baked-clay tiles. The blood that coursed through these thin, dark brown people who littered the streets couldn't possibly be the same blood that was pounding in his head right now. These people were much darker than him, for one thing, and they were *poor*. Most of them stared curiously at his family, as if they were intruders to the island, as if they didn't belong. And at the moment, Sanjay agreed with them. This was his homeland? These grimy streets, those tiny shops with cheap merchandise, this odor of sweat, cow dung, and urine, all mixed together? What was special about this place, that both his parents claimed it to forever be a part of their hearts?

His friends *had* warned him. Two nights before they had left, his buddies had come over for the usual Friday night poker game. Joey had said, “You do know that this is not like traveling to England, or Canada, or anything remotely like that? This is Sri Lanka. It's going to be a whole different ballgame, dude; do you realize that?”

At the time, Sanjay had nodded his head noncommittally.

“Man, that sucks. The entire soccer team is going to be at conditioning camp, except our captain,” Craig had complained, poking him in the chest.

“Come on guys, how many times have we been over this? My parents won’t let me back out of this trip, especially for some ‘unnecessary’ soccer camp. I tried telling them that sitting next to Swetha on a plane for more than fifteen minutes could be detrimental to my health, but that didn’t work either.” Sanjay had ended the conversation with that, and tried to put thoughts of the camp and summer with his friends out of his mind.

Now, standing on this parched, cracked ground, he felt disconnected, different. He scratched the back of his neck; already he was sweating, and not even five minutes out of the airport. *I guess I’ll just have to take things as they come and deal with it; maybe if I just imagine the awesome season we’re going to have when soccer starts in a month, I can get through this.* With a sigh of resignation, he shifted the duffel on his shoulder into a more comfortable position and followed his family into the yellow auto his father had flagged down.

All thoughts of the upcoming soccer season were driven out of his mind as he got to know the island and its people over the next few days. It was as though a curtain had been ripped aside to reveal an entirely different world that Sanjay had never known existed. A deluge of sights, sounds, and smells bombarded the senses continuously. The bland tan of the dusty paths and rooftops contrasted sharply with the bright blue horizon that panned out above. The vibrant hues of the women’s saris pleased the eye on every street, at every junction, around every corner; the bright oranges, maroons, turquoises and fuchsias threatened to overwhelm the mind. The clear, pure air thrummed with energy as constant chattering in Tamil filled the streets: vendors hawking their wares with “Hot paan, fresh from the oven! Only 100 rupees for fresh, hot paan!” and little children screaming in delight as they chased each other around. A medley

of smells always hung in the air: curry leaves, cumin, banana leaves, and fresh-picked flowers mixed their scents together to produce a unique aroma that left the nose tingling.

Sanjay tried to stay on the sidelines, but the culture, too intense to allow spectators, swept any and everyone into the game, and forced them to participate. Sanjay found himself pulled along as his mother and father began their visiting, whirling from house to house: from that of great-aunt, where they were force-fed crunchy muruku, sweet kolukaddai, and warm milk, to that of godfather, where they had the chance to draw up water in the backyard well, to that of second cousin's nephew, where they were introduced to the family goat and chickens. The eight shopping bags they had spent a whole day filling at the mall back in the U.S. were rapidly emptied, as this toy car and that shirt and these chocolates were presented to delighted young nieces and cousins. Sanjay tried to maintain a distance from the engulfing culture, but like a whirlpool it sucked him in: he joined his cousins and their buddies in cricket matches every afternoon, yelling and running along with them as his team struggled to knock out the other team's wickets. Afterwards, they would refresh themselves with hot, fried vadai and cold bottles of Necto before setting out to the latest Tamil movie running at the Raja Theater; he found himself enjoying the typical cinema mix of fight scenes, witty banter, and catchy music. Out of fear of what his friends would say, he never ate with his hands at home, although his parents always did. But here, in this place where everyone dug into their food with gusto, he found a special delight in mixing the pittu, spicy eggplant colombu, and chicken curry and eating it with his hands, biting into fried chili peppers on the side to send fire surging through his mouth. He relished that feeling, and never picked up the spoons his relatives always carefully laid out for them.

The bloody civil war between the Singhalese majority and the Tamil people that had torn the country asunder was still ongoing, as was evident by daily reminders: the warnings posted on trees to beware of mine fields, the army trucks rumbling through town on a Sunday morning, the scarred villages passed by on the way to temple. Here and there, spotting the landscape, beggars could be seen, hunched over on ragged straw mats, nothing in their hands save calluses and blisters, direct victims of the conflict and the rampant poverty. But just a few miles beyond that row of beggars, a group of laughing children played traditional kabadi, hopping after each other, screaming in delight. Following the example of the majority on this island, Sanjay tried to avert his eyes from those suffering, and instead tried to concentrate on the lively island life.

As he strolled along the endless beaches, and watched the sun set over row upon row of rice paddies, and heard the twittering of myna birds in the trees, and as he watched the twinkle in his parents' eyes, their happy laughter and delighted exclamations, he began to see a little bit of what this country meant to not only his family, but to him also, because its blood pounded in his veins. He began to see the soul behind the country, the soul his parents loved and treasured.

One night, Sanjay walked home after another Tamil movie at the theater; this one had been excellent, with unbelievable fight scenes of superstar Vijay taking out the bad guys big-time. He had sent his cousins on ahead; he wanted to walk alone. In the daytime, the sun never relented, its bright, penetrating rays suffusing everything that it touched with a golden glow. But at night, only the dim moonlight touched the crude houses and sleeping cows in the yards; he found the calm soothing and peaceful.

A boy was crouching on the side of the street, clutching a ragged, obviously handmade wooden truck. His huge brown eyes were made even bigger by the emaciated face framing

them; Sanjay knew that underneath the boy's worn undershirt, each and every rib could be seen. Sanjay would have walked on past—he had gotten used to the countless beggars squatting by the roadsides, wrapped in thin, torn blankets, nothing in their hands but calluses and blisters.

But the calm resignation of this little boy stopped him, stopped him cold. His eyes told the world that he accepted his fate, that he accepted what the cruel world had done to him. That's what stopped Sanjay.

He cautiously knelt beside the little boy.

“How old are you?” He was careful to ask in Tamil.

“Nine,” came the reply.

“Why aren't you going home? It's nearly dark outside,” Sanjay pointed out, though he had a sinking feeling he already knew the answer.

“I don't have a home. The Tigers shot both of my parents, and they took my brother. They beat me and threw me out of the house, which was a good thing, because they burned it down.” Not a trace of emotion entered his voice as he relayed this information.

Sanjay was stunned. He had heard of many atrocities committed by the rebel group in this part of the island, the northern part. He even had some relatives who'd lost a loved one either to the group as a brainwashed recruit or to death by the fighting. But he'd never personally met someone whose life had been ravaged by their horrible deeds. Such a terrible story, and the boy, only nine, was able to retell the story with acceptance of his fate.

“Why don't you go to an orphanage?” Sanjay had heard of one in the city next to this village, several miles to the east. “I know they can find a place for you, and then you don't have to be by yourself out here.”

The boy shook his head emphatically.

“No thank you, sir. I want to stay out here.”

“But...why?”

The boy motioned around him, indicating their surroundings, the countryside stretching out to the horizon, bathed in light from the moon and stars.

“This is where I lived with my family and was brought up, sir, and I don’t want to leave it. If I’m in the orphanage, I’m sure I won’t get to come here again, and see all this.”

Sanjay’s shoulders sagged, his mouth dropped open a little. He suddenly felt very young and innocent. For such words to come from a nine-year old boy’s mouth...

After giving the boy some money and telling him to get some food, and promising to visit him again the next day, Sanjay slowly walked home, trying to sort out the jumble of thoughts and emotions swirling around in his head. As he lay on his cot, staring up at the rickety fan whirring overhead, he felt a sudden shock of feeling lance through his body. He understood. He understood the reason why his parents loved this country, why they said it would always be a part of their soul. It wasn’t the just the tangy aroma of frying vadai that wafted about the villages on Saturday afternoons. It wasn’t just the chittering of the sparrows and crows that filled the dewy air of morning, or that pure, undisturbed tranquility of the countryside. It wasn’t just the breathtakingly carved deities set into the stone of temple walls. It wasn’t any of these things by themselves; it was all of this, the entire country wrapped up and embodied by the inhabitants of this rich soil.

It was the spirit—the unwavering, passionate spirit of the Sri Lankan people.

And as Sanjay lay there, on a cot on this island, he felt a surge of pride run through his veins, and he knew it would forever hold a place in his own heart.

Again, the looming trees whipped by him, and he was sprinting, his body taut and confident. But something was different. This time, when he reached the brink of the cliff, he stopped for a moment, letting the gentle breeze caress his cheeks. Then, with a running leap, he shot off the cliff wall, suspended in mid-air for a brief second. As the clouds thinned, he could make out the outline of Sri Lanka, its brown and green blurs waiting for him, calling his name, calling him to come be a part of his homeland. He joined his hands palm-to-palm, as if praying in midair, raised them over his head, and without a moment's hesitation, angled his body into a steep dive; he knew where he was going, why he was going there, and nothing else mattered. With his destiny solid in his mind, he dove into the blinding sunlight.