

A Flat Country, with Hills

A Sri Lankan Journey

Edward Arruns Mulhorn



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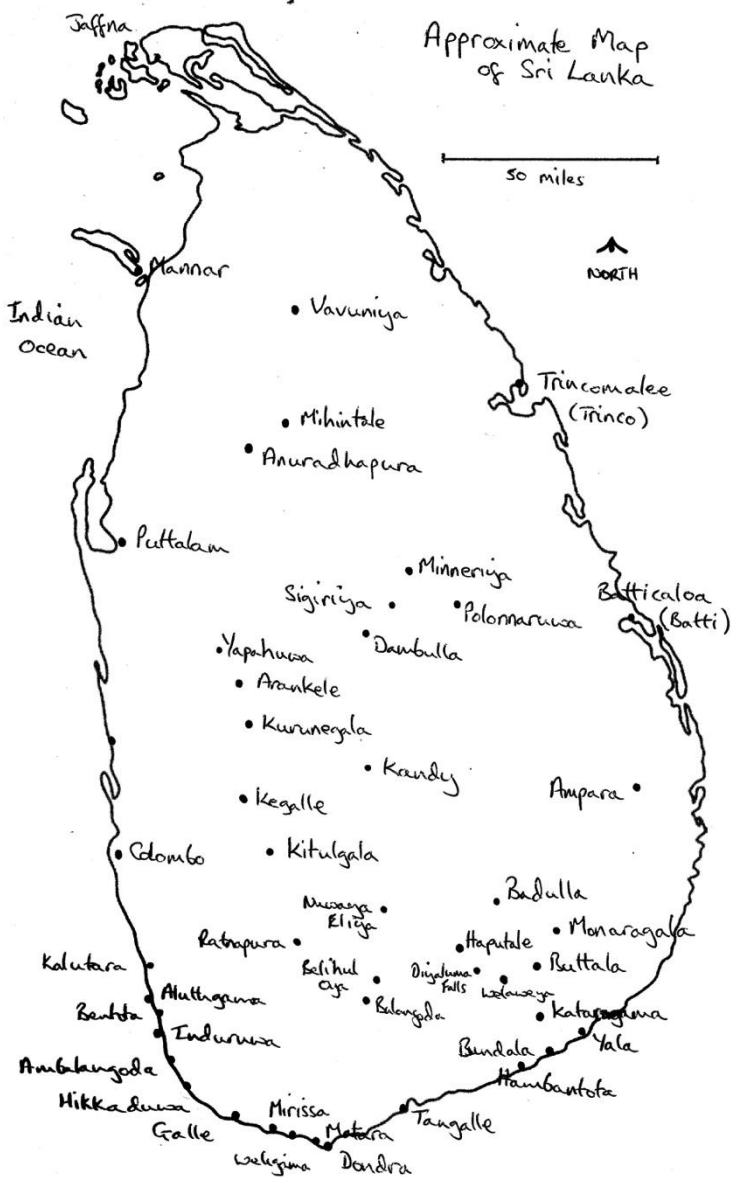
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I am constantly trying to communicate
something incommunicable,
to explain something inexplicable,
to tell about something I only feel in my bones
and which can only be experienced in those bones.
Basically it is nothing other than this fear
we have so often talked about,
but fear spread to everything,
fear of the greatest as of the smallest,
fear, paralyzing fear of pronouncing a word,
although this fear may not only be fear
but also a longing for something greater
than all that is fearful.

Letters to Melina

Franz Kafka



Preface

I was restless in my youth. Over the long summer holidays, I would pack a small rucksack and hitchhike across Europe on my own for several weeks at a stretch, camping wild, and going wherever the next ride might take me. It was the journey not the destination that seemed to matter. The experience of travel, of survival, of staying alert in an unknown environment where I continuously had to respond to the unexpected. It stimulated me; it brought me alive.

The day after my graduation I packed the car and took a ferry to France. I didn't know where I was going. I headed south, driving through each day for just shy of a week, till I found myself in the Peloponnese, in Greece. I stopped at a small café in a village in the Mani – one of the fingers of land which stretch into the Aegean Sea – and an old woman came out and gave me a plate of souvlaki. She told me I looked hungry and refused any payment. I looked out across the bay of the small fishing village, and down the single street with its café, its one shop, its guest house and its cluster of white-washed houses, and decided to stay.

After six months in Greece, I lived in Turkey for about 18 months. After that, I travelled to Egypt and stayed there for almost four years. I eked out a living doing a variety of jobs – cutting fishermen's hair, teaching English, recruiting staff, managing small businesses, and compiling crosswords.

It was in Egypt that I met Natasha. At the time, I was managing an educational institute in Cairo that offered cultural immersion to people from all over the world who were being posted to the Middle East, and Natasha was working as a sub-editor on an Egyptian national newspaper.

We steered clear of the expatriate existence; instead, we chose to embed ourselves in the community and culture, living in a dilapidated flat in Imbaba, near the camel market, with a loudspeaker from the mosque riveted on the wall outside our bedroom window.

It was an exhilarating experience. Life came at us from the moment we opened the front door, brimming with wonder and surprise. We engaged and explored to the full, and the more we discovered the greater rewards that it yielded. We travelled extensively across the region, but even at work the encounters were enriching. During Ramadan, at iftar in the communal hall of our institute, amongst the fifty or so people who were seated around me, there were perhaps fifteen nationalities represented and conversations in eight different languages being held simultaneously, sharing diverse experiences and perspectives.

After a time, it came to a stage where we forgot we were even abroad. This was my life – the only life that I knew – and I lived it to the full. The benchmark of the world I came from eroded imperceptibly; I became a different person, assuming a different guise. We could have stayed longer. The easy choice would have been to stay, because it didn't require us to choose. Though I knew, had we done so, we would have remained there forever. We decided it was time to return.

The cultural shock of return is greater than that of departure. Things that should have seemed familiar felt alien, like distant memories, like other people's dreams. People assumed I was still the same person as I was when I left. They had moved on, but apparently not me. The legitimacy of my learning and experience was also questioned, in the context of both society and work. It took some time to adjust.

We put down roots in Hackney and got married. Jessie was born in 1996, and Joe in 1998. I got a job as a strategist, while Natasha pursued more artistic interests. We gradually reintegrated ourselves into Natasha's circle of London acquaintance, and we spent many weekends in a cottage in Suffolk owned by my parents-in-law while the children were growing up.

In many respects, we assumed a more conventional existence. Yet living abroad distorts personality to some degree, necessarily emphasising certain characteristics, habits and attributes while obscuring others, as demanded by circumstance. Natasha and I had to get to know each other all over again, through the prism of English friends, expectations, motivations, and that brought some surprises with it.

A decade on, I was directing programmes for a consultancy in London, and Natasha had set herself up as a potter. But both of us were frustrated. Our close and conventional lifestyle was getting us down and creating friction. It was too predictable, too lacking in challenge and adventure. More fundamentally, friction was also growing between us, as who we were was becoming more apparent, and our aspirations had begun to diverge. I was hoping to settle down – somewhere, anywhere – to invest more time in the family; Natasha wanted to continue pushing her bounds. The idea of living abroad once more was something that appealed to us both, as a means of satisfying our different desires, and perhaps providing the stimulus to reset our relationship. The issue was that moving abroad seemed unrealistic – at least until the children had left school.

Towards the end of 2006, I seized the initiative and quit my job, with the intention of deploying my skills in the voluntary sector, in the hope of achieving more job satisfaction and a better work life balance. I took time off to draft two novels – *Snake* and *To everything there is a season* – before working as an independent strategist while I searched for a role that would suit me.

Coincidentally, at the start of 2007, an unforeseen window of opportunity opened for us all. I had just completed a consultancy assignment, the lease on Natasha's studio was expiring, the children were about to transition from primary to secondary school. We looked around us and realised that all of us were free from obligations requiring us to remain in England. Moreover, the children were just of an age where they were old enough to engage with and benefit from the experience of living abroad, while young enough not to have ties which prevented them from accompanying us. And the intention of taking them with us was never in doubt.

I approached the international development organisation Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), which at the time placed paid volunteers into local environments to catalyse change. I was accepted to work on their Governance Programme and needed to be matched into a suitable opening. VSO is remunerated at a marginal rate, and therefore tends to attract single applicants. We found there were scant opportunities for a whole family to be deployed. When a position in Sri Lanka came up, I took it immediately.

The decision was arbitrary and spontaneous. It was not borne of any research into the country, or the role, or the organisation I would be joining. It was motivated by their willingness to accept all four of us, and by our need to move

at pace, having started to declutter our house and then rent it out, and having built expectations within the family that would not be assuaged until we had actually landed in a new country. These, I realise, are lamentable grounds for making such a decision, and may provoke your derision, but in this book, I have committed to spelling it out as it was.

I looked at Sri Lanka on the map. It was a small tear-shaped blob falling from the eye of the jewel that is India. I was vaguely aware there was a war in progress, but it had rumbled on for so many years that it seemed to have been absorbed into the fabric of the country. Similarly, I read a short briefing paper on the Business for Peace Alliance (BPA) – the Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) I was to join – and discovered that it billed itself as a recently-established entity working with regional Chambers of Commerce to bring about regional empowerment and conflict resolution across the island. They needed someone to put in place all the business mechanics to make it breathe and sustain it. I felt I was probably up to the job, and I investigated no more.

Instead, the focus of our pre-departure preparation was on the children – on what they would need, what they would do, where they would go to school. Besides them, I gave some thought to how we would stay in touch with those we left behind. My previous experience of living abroad was of isolation and detachment. That had worked for me at the time, but it wouldn't suit the children or their grandparents. Moreover, technology had advanced in the interim. In Egypt, I would receive letters from my mother written three weeks previously, informing me it was raining in England. Now, we could email each other and hold video calls, creating a meaningful immediacy and intimacy to bridge the physical divide.

In addition, I thought it would be a good idea to start a blog, as a means of recording our experience. I decided to keep it informal, opening the platform to a few invited members, consisting of family and close friends. They knew us well, and knew as little about Sri Lanka as we did, so we had a common basis of understanding to build on, with little need to go into explaining characters and context.

I started the blog shortly before we left England. At first it was a nervy affair – its entries short and intermittent – but through time it evolved and became a routine, with each segment being written and then posted on weekends. Occasionally, I would add a photo, or receive comments from someone, but for the most part it was pure narrative, capturing a week of thoughts and experiences, and sent blindly into the ether.

Several years after coming back to England, I chanced to reacquaint myself with the blog. For reasons now forgotten, I decided to transpose the entries into a single document. And that document then became this book. In doing so, I made the conscious decision to avoid making significant changes, or retrospectively editing the text. I realise this means that the book is ill-suited for the general reader, who will not be acquainted with facts and faces familiar to the originally-intended audience. But I make no apology, for in making significant amendments to these entries I would lose the spirit in which they were written and subvert the purpose and motivation which initially inspired me. I apologise for these shortfalls, but offer this preface as a way of laying out context, together with a list of characters, on the opposite page, which may aid your enlightenment as you read.

List of Characters

Agnes – lady who cleans the house in Gower Street
Beaky – my mother (nickname given by the children)
Bridget and Michael – my parents-in-law
Dudley – BPA Director
Fernando – a local minivan driver
Hannie – Dutch VSO volunteer, posted to Badulla
Hugh – VSO Sri Lanka Country Director
Jorieke – Dutch VSO volunteer, posted to Vavuniya
Juliet – my younger sister, living in Dubai
Louise – Natasha’s younger sister
Manique – Secretary General of BPA
Mutu – the VSO minivan driver
Prakash – BPA Operations Director
Pushpi – BPA conflict resolution expert
Radhika – International Alert conflict resolution expert
Rajani – BPA receptionist
Rita – Dutch VSO volunteer, posted to Ampara
Ruvanthi – my VSO Programme Officer in Colombo
Sandrina – Canadian VSO volunteer, posted near Colombo
Suresh – BPA Director, and later Chair of Directors
Wije – BPA Chair of Directors
Vidhya – Indian VSO volunteer, posted to Puttalam
Yogi – BPA management executive

Other VSO people – Carole, Caroline, Helen, Hillie, Ianthi, Jesse, Jianthi, Julia, Lal, Liz, Loku Sarah, Manchula, Narelle, Nilanga, Paolo, Podi Sarah, Rize, Stanley, Upali

Other BPA staff and Directors – Bandula, Chandra Mohan, Devinda, Dinesh, Faslan, Kapila, Lakshman, Navod, Nirushan, Pathulla, Riyas, Sarath, Suwarnaraj, Thanuja

Starting Out

23rd November

When does a journal begin? I thought of making the first entry at the end of last week, when sitting on my own in a darkened office in St Albans, hearing the rain smashing into the pavement outside, on my last day of delivering a strategy consultancy, having pressed ‘send’ and having nothing to do – absolutely nothing left to do – till five o’clock came round. I thought of it again at midnight on Wednesday, a glass of red wine in my hand, as I sat in my attic study listening to music, digesting a meal of bangers and mash with my erstwhile Cranfield University friends. I should wait, I tell myself; wait till the last day, wait till the first day. What am I waiting for? When does a journey begin?

It seems we’ve been de-cluttering for months. I have taken so many carloads to the dump, to Oxfam, to the cottage in Suffolk, to the children’s school. My Great-aunt Nan’s books have all but gone – those hundreds of tomes I packed up and shipped from west to east London almost ten years ago. Gone too, so many clothes, so many toys – the children’s and my own – Natasha’s ceramics, videos, university essays, old computers, pots of paint. Even the guinea pigs, with luck.

Harder than the tangibles are the invisible claws. Writing to memberships, to financial institutions, to utilities. It’s so difficult to disappear this time. I tell them we are off; I need to cancel, to redirect, to postpone; but back they come with counteroffers and complaints. Why can’t we cut ourselves free? Talking to Natasha we both remember going – separately – to Egypt, some thirteen years ago, with none of these constraints. We put clothes in a rucksack and left. It was that simple then. No inoculation, no preparation; no house, no job, no fuss. No kids.

What has changed? Us or circumstance? On the face of it, things are much the same. We are disentangling ourselves from a known world to enter something new – a culture, an ethnicity, a creed we know nothing about. A place more than a thousand miles from where any of us have ever been.

Is that scary? No. It wasn't last time, and it isn't now. Beneath it all – the endless lists, the journeys to the dump, the complete unknown of ten days' time, the fantasy, the reality – there is no anxiety nor uncertainty. Just a quiet sense of purpose...

Wrapping Up

28th November

We spend the weekend at the cottage in Suffolk. With my in-laws, Anton and Will, we hack our way along the hawthorn that borders the road, cutting it back by two feet. We take hatchets and saws to a group of ash trees which rise splayed and exposed in the autumn air, steering them away from the pond and felling them into the street. We drag the huge timbers through to the field behind the house, building ourselves a pyre. I look out across the flat frozen field – so barren, so cold. Such an antidote to London.

In other years, I would be digging the vegetable patch now, spreading bags of horse muck over the earth, treading its oiliness into the ground, letting the soil beneath me breathe. Where will I spend my energies now? Without the digging, the bike rides, the building of tree houses, the kayaking down the River Waveney, where can I release it all? Perhaps with games of tennis with Joe, or swimming, or exploring the hills. In truth, I haven't given it thought. So much of my focus is still on the sorting, the chasing, the mental agonising to assure myself that everything gets done. Time creeps, and yet it slips through my fingers. I long to do, not think of doing. I crave the being of being there. Despite having no concept of what it will be like; despite being trapped in the furious mundane – in the relentless petty chores of rupture – which denies me sight of what lies beyond. A week is a lifetime, yet two years of adventure seem like no time at all.

Natasha and I wake frequently during the night. We have bizarre half-conversations in the darkness. As often as not, one or other of us is up from 4am. Anticipation perhaps. Perhaps just managing this collapsing universe. Writing more lists in our minds. We are worrying not for ourselves, but the

children. Such different attitudes they have. For Jessie it is about the animals, the hills, the beach, the sea. She delights in the fancy she weaves in her mind, knowing so little of the truth. Joe is more cautious; the order to his life will be disrupted. He has to create a new equilibrium, a clutch of new friends to keep him engaged.

For her, there is the danger of disappointment and frustration; for him, the mild surprise of finding it not so different at all.

Creeping Closer

30th November

A swirl of farewells. An excuse to drink the dregs of the wine cellar, and to concoct curious recipes to kill off what remains in the fridge and the kitchen cupboards. A Vietnamese meal for Jessie's friends; Joe's early ninth birthday; then my father-in-law's birthday; then a final goodbye to some friends to round it all off in our local pub, The George. And tomorrow – bizarrely – I go to meet a woman called Ruvanthi, who will be my Programme Officer in Colombo, who by chance is visiting London. Strange world.

Tomorrow, too, we meet Gaspard, the new tenant of our house in Eleanor Road. I can't help feeling favourably inclined towards a person who wants to know if we will leave behind our plants in the bathroom. It's curious looking over the house now to see it so sanitised, so depersonalised. Only residual traces of character remain. The bathroom where Joe was born; the kitchen where Christmas parties were held; this attic, where the hum of Natasha's wheel made way for a desk and some Turkish kilims when my study replaced her studio. It is a part of us, and we are woven within it. I want it well-owned, used well.

For the first time, we experiment with the packing. Six big bags, four rucksacks for hand luggage, two kids. Will we ever take off the ground? We are already tens of kilos overweight. I have visions of unpacking in the departures hall; of going through the ritual humiliation of decimating clothes and heaping them on my mother-in-law Bridget, who – whether out of kindness, or just for a laugh – has agreed to come to Heathrow with us.

Heathrow. An interminable flight. An unknown destination. Apparently, we are being given an apartment for the first month whilst we follow an itinerary of cultural, culinary and linguistic classes, held first in Colombo and then in Kandy, before we spend Christmas in Polonnaruwa, an ancient city up in the hills. I read the words that I have been sent, but still, I do not picture it – not us within it – not the sharp reality of us being there. Still my mind is crowded with questions – how many shirts, how many books, sandals or walking shoes?

I know none of this matters. It will all fall in place. It will all happen naturally, as it must, as it has happened so far. I didn't appreciate quite how fatalistic I am becoming when preparing myself for this trip. What are others in my family feeling? Do they sense it too? This unfocused inevitability: this name that will become a thing that will become a home. This dislocation from a familiar dimension. This chance to explore something new. To build, to grow, to develop, to learn. I search their faces, their words, their behaviours, for a sign of what they are thinking. They continue being just as they are. And that is good, too. They are confident in themselves. They will take that being on the journey with them, and in times of need they will draw on its energy, its resourcefulness, its strength.

Touch Down

6th December

The unsmiling man at check-in looks surprised. Ten bags declared, and we come within our baggage allowance with a single kilo to spare. It was worth all those hours of standing on the scales in order to get it just right. Ecstatic to be taking so many trifles with us that we had mentally come to terms with leaving behind, we say farewell to Bridget and Michael, who have conscientiously journeyed with us, but who now will return empty-handed to Hackney. This is our final goodbye.

The flight is long. Joe sleeps throughout, having watched the film *Ratatouille* for the second time in three days. Jessie finds it harder to sleep, and as the flight progresses, she grows increasingly pale. Twice she is sick. On the second occasion, a lady across the aisle passes us a spare sick bag.

We have arrived. It is one thirty in the afternoon, though Big Ben would be sounding eight in the morning. Walking from the plane, we feel the heat. We took off in winter and have landed in comparative summer. Neither too humid, nor uncomfortable. Just right.

We meet Manchula from VSO at the airport, and discover that the lady who gave us a sick bag is actually Rita, a fellow volunteer. What a welcoming gift to have had.

Tumbling our rather excessive 120kg of bags and hand luggage into a van, we speed past a blur of banana trees, pots on sale at the side of the road, cows, a machine gun post, cars and bikes veering in and out of the frenzied main road, relentlessly driving towards Colombo. It is a game of sudden braking and switching of lanes. Like Cairo in so many ways, yet somehow unlike.

The rush of familiarity and anticipation fades as Jessie is sick again. Repeatedly. I stop to buy a bottle of water. I only have a thousand rupee note, and the water costs forty-five rupees. The girls at the counter giggle nervously and spend ten minutes hunting down change.

The journey is endless; a spew of houses built up on either side of the road, unrelentingly and unbroken, till we reach the centre of town. Colombo is relatively small I am told, yet we seem to have been driving through it ever since leaving the airport, over an hour ago. I cannot feel the sense of a centre. It is everywhere and nowhere. Elusive. There are a few high-rise buildings, but not yet a heart.

We tuck through some alleyways, and suddenly we are facing the sea. A few more turns, and now, we are here.

It is raining as we remove a white-faced Jessie from the back. Joe says he is not feeling well either, and is promptly sick on the forecourt. I wonder what our generous hosts, who crowd around us eager to greet us, are making of this spectacle. Inside, we meet our fellow volunteers, and the children's stomachs are settled with Sprite. There are brief introductions, then we pile back into the van, and cut once again through the shapeless city – heading this time towards the northeast. Eventually, we come to a stop in front of a formidable security gate which guards a complex of towers.

On Monday evening I met Ruvanthi, my new Programme Manager, in England. She had told me then that where we were staying would be pristine and well-furnished. But I had not been expecting this. We find ourselves in a fifth floor flat with air conditioning, mosquito mesh, and spotless polished floors. There is even a wireless network on hand to access the internet.

We go downstairs. There is a communal swimming pool and a tennis court in the garden. It feels more like a hotel than a home. We are here for the month, till we find a place of our own. I feel both guilt and relief they have been so generous as to lay this on.

Sleep. Sleep does not come easily though we are all tired. The tiredness takes its toll. I awake in the morning at around nine thirty and the others are still asleep. Only Jessie is awake by the time a man called Stanley arrives to take me into the office.

I meet the team from VSO – Voluntary Service Overseas. All morning, I am dying to vomit. I concoct scenarios in which I puke on the table, on the projector, into my shirt. How many times can I go to the loo without them thinking I have some sort of condition? The lunch looks fantastic, but I stick to dry rice. It is the coffee that settles and revives me.

We learn much, and, as ever, we fill in forms. I have a chat with my fellow volunteers, then go for a coffee with Hugh, the Country Director. There is a need for a delicate conversation with him, as he is uniquely placed – not just for shaping the first few weeks, but for having a knowledge of Colombo from the perspective of being a parent. He agrees to us all receiving induction, including the chance to learn the language, including the trip to Kandy. Success.

Back home. I forget it has been Joe's birthday. He has been given some video games and some table tennis bats, which we brought with us and hid in the luggage. Loading the game, the computer crashed, and when rebooted the screen lock kicked out and rotated ninety degrees. Uncertain of what he should do to fix it, Joe has been lying on his side on the floor, doggedly playing his games.

It appears the others have had a mixed day. The kids have been attacked by mosquitoes, but otherwise they are rested and well. They have been in the garden and into the pool, but somehow the bathroom door has got locked from outside so nobody can get in.

We walk up an uneven path between a shantytown and a drain which Natasha calls a canal. Fireflies fill the air, dogs rummage around, cows are wandering home. I am reminded of Hugh telling me that he found two cobras in the garden of the VSO offices, so I walk ahead of the others with Joe's new dynamo torch. What do I think I will do if I see one?

The birthday meal is a McDonald's. Burger, chips, and ice cream. A final, indulgent comfort food before we separate from the past. We return to the apartment, and Natasha and I share a beer and some curry. The children swim in the pool, which is magically lit from beneath the water, and shimmers like a silver-blue spectre.

There is a playground here, too. A place for Jessie to stretch her monkey-limbs and for Joe to develop new friends. But it is Jessie who appears to strike first. An English girl, who is travelling tomorrow in the other direction, but who will return to Sri Lanka once Christmas is over, so perhaps in the new year they will meet up at school.

In their exuberance, Jessie and her new friend run off in the darkness. We put Joe to bed, then go back in search. Jessie re-emerges a short while later, having had a full tour from an expert guide – a girl who has lived here for over three years. Together we go upstairs, tired but content. I have good news to tell Joe when he wakes in the morning. Jessie has found the ping-pong room.