

Home

All of the coastline of Sri Lanka is indented, mysterious, and beautiful—but no place is more mysterious than Batticaloa. The city is famous for its lagoon, where extraordinary things can happen. The fish here can sing: true. Absolutely true. Place a reed to your ear, lean down from your paddleboat, and you will hear the music of the fish of the lagoon. At midnight, the water's skin breaks, and the *kadal kanni*, mermaids, emerge out of the lagoon dripping with moonlight.

From the time he was about four or five years old, Danny had wanted to talk to a mermaid.

From the rooftop of his school, he could look over the palm trees and brightly painted houses of his city to the spot where the many-pointed, many-lobed lagoon narrowed before flowing into a greater body of water. Just before joining the Indian Ocean, the lagoon's face burned like fire, like the unriddling of an ancient puzzle: the motto beneath his school's coat of arms. *Lucet et Ardet*. Translated by the gray-robed priests as *Shines and Burns*. (But *what* shines? And *what* burns?)

Now Danny, standing up here, understood.

This lagoon shines. This lagoon burns.

He knew, as he watched the burning spot in the distance, that there was a second place where the lagoon joined the ocean; and that this spot was a secret one—hidden for most of the year, in

a spot called Mugathwaram, the Face of the Portal, near the old Dutch lighthouse. Danny was sure it was there, at this hidden portal, that the *kadal kanni* came out into the open.

He had to wait till he was fifteen, a few years after his mother's death, to find the Face of the Portal. One Saturday, telling his father that he was going to a school picnic, he sat pillion on a friend's bicycle and went, for the first time in his life, to the old Dutch lighthouse and then beyond it, to the hidden beach, from where, he was told, you could see the second opening. When he got down from the bicycle, he was disappointed, because all he could observe in the distance was a continuous sandbar blocking this part of the lagoon: "There is no way it could flow out into the ocean here." After covering the bicycle with palm leaves so that it would not be stolen, his friend, a Tamil Christian, said: "We have to go out there, and it will appear." So he and Danny stole a boat from the lighthouse and then took turns rowing it all the way out to Mugathwaram. They drew nearer and nearer, beneath them the music from the fish grew louder and louder, and then it happened: the sandbar parted, its unity revealed to be an optical illusion, and now a gap of meters showed between the two arms of sand.

The Portal had opened.

In the middle of the gap gleamed the magic island of Mugathwaram, coral- and jellyfish-encrusted, on which the two boys alighted to watch—as cormorants, red-breasted sea eagles, broad-winged pelicans circled over their heads—the meeting and churning of waters. Currents of the lagoon flowing out and those of the Indian Ocean flowing in neutralized each other, producing an illusion of perfect stillness in the water: a solitary white egret stood with one black foot in the spot, to mark the gateway to the world.

Danny knew he had guessed right. This was where the *kadal kanni* were most likely to come up. Sitting side by side, he and

the Christian friend waited for a mermaid. The tide began to rise, and the boat they had brought began to rock. The light dimmed; the ocean had become the color of old family silver. By now his father, who expected him home at five-thirty every evening to begin his homework, would be sitting outside with a rattan cane. Danny waited. He had a friend by his side; he was not frightened. They were not going back without talking to a mermaid.

Australia

Housecleaner, Danny was about to reply, sixty dollars an hour, but instead smiled at the woman.

Strapped to his back was what resembled an astronaut's jet-boosters—a silver canister with a blue rubber nozzle peeping out and scarlet loops of wire wrapped around it—but it was just a portable vacuum cleaner, Turbo Model E, Super Suction, acquired a year ago at Kmart for seventy-nine dollars. In his right hand, a plastic bag with the tools of his trade.

"I asked," repeated the Australian woman, "what *are* you?"

Maybe, Danny thought, she's annoyed by the golden highlights in my hair. He sniffled. From the outside Danny's nose looked straight, but from the inside it was broken; a doctor had informed him when he was a boy that he was the proud owner of a deviated septum. Maybe the woman was referring to it.

"Australian," he hazarded.

"No, you're not," she replied. "You're a perfectionist."

Only now did she indicate, by pointing with a finger, that she was talking about his way of having breakfast.

In his left hand was a half-eaten cheese roll, which he'd made himself while walking by opening a packet of Black & Gold \$2.25-for-ten cheese slices that he'd brought with him along with

his cleaning equipment, and placing two slices in the middle of a sixty-cent wholemeal bun—and then the woman, who had apparently been observing him combine things into a sandwich and take a bite out of it, had made these remarks to him.

Shifting his vacuum on his back, Danny chewed and examined what was left of his self-made cheese roll and looked at the Australian woman.

So this is why I have, he thought, become visible. Because my way of eating bothers her. After four years, he was still learning things, still making notes to himself: Never walk and eat in daylight. They see you.

Now talk your way out of this, Dhananjaya. Maybe you should say: I used to do the triple jump in school. Hop, skip, and leap? Same way: plan, eat, and walk. I do these things all at once.

Or maybe a story was needed, a quick but moving story: My father always said no, I couldn't eat while walking, so now it's a form of rebellion.

Sometimes, though, with white people, all you have to do is start thinking, and that's enough. Like in a jungle, when you find a tiger in your path, how you're supposed to hold your breath and stare back. They go away.

Although she certainly appeared to be going away, the woman suddenly changed her mind and turned back to shout: "That's *irony*, mate. What I just said about you being a perfectionist."

Did she mean, thought Danny as he finished the sandwich on his way to the end of Glebe Point Road, from where he would take a left and walk up to Central Station, that I don't do anything well?

His forehead was furrowed now with the woman's word: *irony*.

Danny knew what the dictionary said it meant. In practice, he had noted, its uses were more diverse, slippery, and usually connected to a desire to give offense with words. Irony.

So by calling me a perfectionist, she must have meant . . .
 Fuck her. I like eating like this.

Danny made himself another sandwich on his way to Central, and then a third one on the platform, as he waited for the 8:35 train to St. Peters Station.

His five-foot-seven body looked like it had been expertly packed into itself, and even when he was doing hard physical labor his gaze was dreamy, as if he owned a farm somewhere far away. With an elegant oval jaw, and that long, thin forehead's suggestion of bookishness, he was not, except when he smiled and exhibited cracked teeth, an overseas threat. On his left forearm a bump, something he had not been born with, showed prominently, and he had let his third fingernail on the right hand grow long and opalescent. His hair had fresh highlights of gold in it.

8:46 a.m.

The train was nearly full. Danny had a seat by a window. Stroking his fingers through his golden hair, for which he had paid \$47.50 at a barbershop in Glebe, he became aware that he was being watched and turned toward the Asian man with the black-and-white shopping bag.

The man was looking not at Danny but at his backpack.

Even worse.

An astronaut faced growing competition these days, it was a fact. Two-man, three-man Chinese teams were spreading over Sydney offering the same service, at the same price, in half the time. And let's not even talk about the Nepalis. Four men at the price of one.

That's why Danny came with his own stuff. He had invested his capital. In addition to the portable vacuum on his back, he