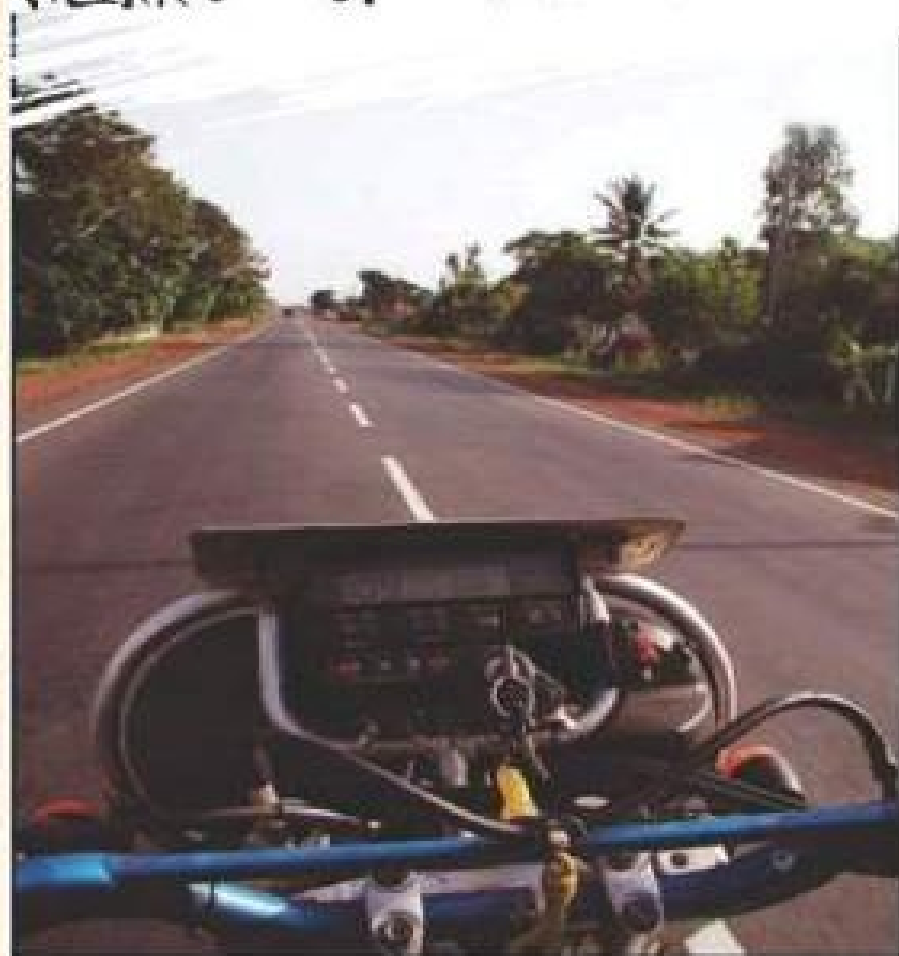


Tea Time ~ with ~ Terrorists

A MOTORCYCLE JOURNEY INTO THE
HEART OF SRI LANKA'S CIVIL WAR



Mark Stephen Meadows

"Provides an insight to civil strife that is unprecedented
in other works. An excellent undertaking."

—Greg Mortenson, co-author of *Three Cups of Tea*

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Tea Time with Terrorists

A Motorcycle Journey
Into the Heart of Sri Lanka's Civil War

Mark Stephen Meadows



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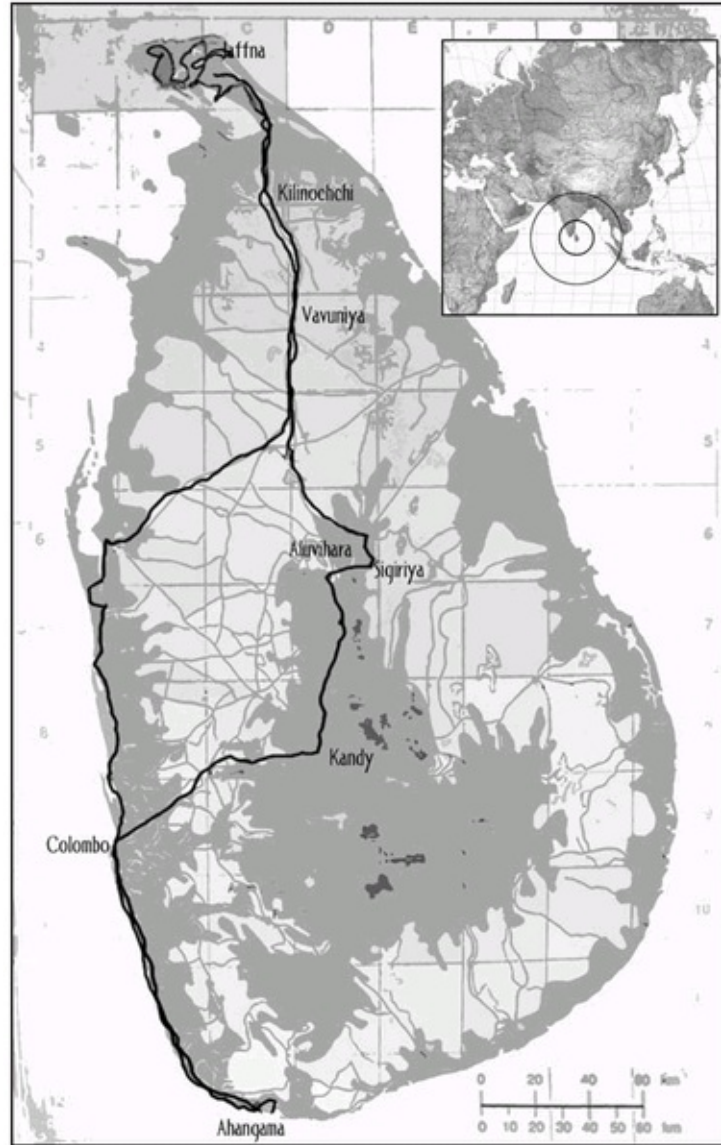
Thanks & Acknowledgments

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Thanks most of all to each of the patient individuals who were interviewed. Here's hoping I've relayed your stories with the same precision and at least a portion of the passion with which you generously offered them.

This book is dedicated to anyone who has reasoned along enemy lines.



Chapter One:

COMPROMISES

“We took some tea as a symbol, as a gesture, to the Palestinian people, picked by the Tamil people, as if to say, ‘This is our sweat and blood, this is the only thing we have to give.’ ”

—*Shankar Rajee*

The Day That Started with a Bang



The hand that set the 1984 bombs, Colombo, Sri Lanka

It was 5:01 AM, October 22, 1984. It could have been a morning two thousand years ago. Sri Lanka's capital city, Colombo, slept under the pink clouds of dawn, palm fronds nodded in the tropical breeze, large-billed birds summoned up the sun, and the 5:00 AM train blew its whistle. In the street below, a couple of three-wheeled tuk-tuks sat, their engines pattering: taxi drivers waiting to take children to school or businessmen to their desks. One of these drivers leaned forward to turn on his radio, and his tuk-tuk was thrown backward in a spray of dust and debris, as if by a silent hurricane. The corner of the church across the street rose several meters from the ground. It sagged back down, crushing a Tamil man underneath, and then it rained cement shards and pieces of glass for a full minute afterward as people scrambled awake.

The explosion was heard over ten kilometers away. Since the country was in the teeth of a civil war, this wasn't as much of a surprise as if it had happened in, say, Oklahoma City, but, just to be safe, security forces, medical personnel, and a bomb squad were deployed, quickly scurrying to the address that was broadcast on the radios. They expected that the mop-up would be quick and minimal. Multiple ambulances were called—again, just to be safe. The Sri Lankan army was put on alert. More than a few people assumed that the explosion was caused by a gas line that had caught fire, or that maybe the church had collapsed just because it was so old.

These teams pulled up to the front of the smoldering church at the moment that another bomb, in the south end of town, ripped open a bus station. Phone lines started to jam up, police and security forces were told to station themselves at the edges of town, and the Sri Lankan army picked up its

weapons and headed over to the bus station, since these events were turning the dawn quite dark.

Five minutes passed. As this second emergency team arrived at the second scene, a third bomb, the one at the west end of town, detonated at a television transmission station owned by the state-run Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, dropping the tower into a smoking mess of steel shavings. Five minutes later, an office building downtown erupted in a spray of concrete, spitting pebbles, rebar, plaster, carpet, and a few twirling chairs into the sky. Then, as if inhaled back into the building, the material returned to earth, floor after floor collapsing under its weight, instantly burying four people.

In a suburb, two people, clueless as to what was happening in the city at that minute, opened a book they found on the sidewalk. An enormous smoking mouth opened in the middle of the road, and the limbs were launched more than ten meters away. About two minutes later, at Fort Railway Station, a unexploded bomb was found by the police. While the Sri Lankan army was busy defusing that one, a second detonated nearby, flicking a train car that had just blown its whistle onto its side like a matchbox.

Six minutes of peace followed. Just as the police dispatch began to breathe a sigh of relief, someone called in to report a blast near the foreign ministry office.

There were no more emergency workers available, and the Sri Lanka Broadcast Corporation, from what remained of the broadcast tower, pleaded that people stay indoors, remain calm, and wait for authorities to unwire a city that had been turned into a distributed detonation device.

But it wasn't over. Five more explosions were yet to come in the next ninety minutes. And since that morning in 1984, more than a hundred thousand people have died early deaths in Sri Lanka as a result of "civil war," "terrorism," and "political unrest."

The attack was organized by a man named Shankar Rajee, who, over afternoon tea, told me why he had done this. He said his intent was to cause terror. He said,

We realized that we needed to make the ruling class and the bureaucrats feel the pressure and tension of the war. We needed to make them listen to our grievances. With this in mind, we drew up an action plan . . . These would be symbolic explosions that would be designed to create enough panic, and, well, terror . . . to make the government realize that they were not as powerful as they thought.

Rajee brewed many dangerous ideas in the course of his life, and he spread the danger generously. An exporter of the concept of suicide bombing to the Middle East and one of the founders of the Sri Lankan Tamil militant movement, he fueled enough terror on that October morning to draw the attention that the Tamil cause needed. He felt justified. He had grown up under the heavy weight of riots, lynchings, arson, refugee camps, and an intimate education on the finer points of segregation. Raised in the war zones of Sri Lanka, and finding himself muzzled because of his ethnicity, he'd had enough. So in his early twenties he moved to London. While there he met Palestinian militants, traveled with them to Beirut for training, pulled a trigger on the front lines, and explained the basics of suicide terrorism to the Fatah party. He left with a souvenir given to him by the PLO: enough ammunition to start a small war. Which he did promptly, as soon as he arrived back home.

The decade leading up to this bombing had been a politically charged competition of physical force

between the Tamil minority and the Sinhalese majority (both of whom have been living on the island of Sri Lanka, formerly Ceylon, for as long as either group can remember). Up until Rajee's bombing of Colombo, the civil war had grown gradually from attacks by petty criminals to deadly discharges launched by organized groups. Murders committed out in the farms triggered riots in the towns, which in turn provoked multiple murders in temples, which then set off massive riots in the cities. With each blow, the government grew more hardened and conservative—and this in turn led to more hardened and conservative militant groups.

One of the militant groups born in these hotbeds was the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—or the Tamil Tigers. Founded in 1976 in the extreme north of the island, the LTTE waged a violent campaign against the Sri Lankan government and, like most Tamil groups, sought to create an independent Tamil state in the north of the island, which would be named Eelam.¹ The LTTE became notorious for civilian massacres, child conscriptions, drug smuggling, weapons stockpiling, and high-profile assassinations. They came up with the wearable detonation device known as the suicide belt, invented suicide bombing, pioneered the use of women in suicide attacks, and were proscribed as a terrorist organization by more than thirty countries by 2002. And they had their dark side too.

The Tamil Tigers waged war with the Sri Lankan state for three decades. Nearly a hundred thousand people died in the longest-running civil war in South-east Asia. The Tamil Tigers attacked not only shrines and monuments of symbolic importance, they also carried out the assassinations of public figures such as Sri Lankan president Ranasinghe Premadasa and former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. Then, on May 17, 2009, the Sri Lankan government announced the death of the elusive and dictatorial Vellupillai Prabhakaran, the founder and leader of the LTTE, claiming victory in the war and an end to this chapter of a three-thousand-year-old story.

The war the LTTE waged was cultural, ethnic, social, and economic. What I saw was a cultural dialogue: Sinhalese chauvinism fueling Tamil chauvinism, and vice versa. The LTTE argued that the ruling Sinhalese (primarily Buddhist) majority was suppressing the Tamil (mainly Hindu) minority. The LTTE's justification for its felonious acts was simple: Ethnic suppression demanded military response. Indeed, over the years the vision and mission of the LTTE managed to earn some support among the diaspora of seventy-four million Tamils currently living in Europe, North America, and India.

Rajee's goal, like the goal of many Tamils, was to make the government realize that it was not as powerful as it thought. A former colleague of Rajee's and one of the cofounders of the Tamil Tigers, Dharmalingam Siddharthan reiterated Rajee's message when he told me, "The only way to move the elephant is to prick it with something small. You can't move it. You have to make it feel something."



Sama the Elephant, Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage, Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, the elephant is a symbol of governance. The effigy of the elephant (and the deity Ganesha in particular) keeps an easy eye on restaurants, in bedrooms, over cash registers, next to telephones, and, down by the ocean, at the beach where the tourists turn red. Local craftsmen hawk tiny elephant sculptures for a few pennies apiece. They sit on dashboards and on roadside advertisements. There are huge temples dedicated to the elephant.

The power of Ganesh is based on the esteem that Hindus have for elephants. The elephant represents kingliness, kindness, power, wisdom, wealth, authority, and the removal of obstacles. The elephant is governance itself and the model that government workers attempt to emulate.

It has been correctly said that, aside from being as stubborn as a grandpa hog, elephants have a fine memory. For thousands of generations, Sri Lankan elephants have traveled the length of the island on paths they've worn smooth over the years, ambling slowly in lines of families hundreds of elephants long, each touching the one it follows, slowly polishing their route, heavy footstep by slow tread along the shining eastern seaboard of the island. Woe unto construction workers foolishly building on these ancient trails. Since the pachyderms are large enough to push over a house with a shove of shoulder, smart enough to consider the process before beginning it, and passionate enough to intentionally trample the little humans who get in their way as easily as you or I might step on one of those little purse dogs, it's not hard to understand a Sri Lankan's childlike awe of elephants. They are four-legged gods.

A few years ago there were several farmers who were growing sugarcane on one of these elephant paths in eastern Sri Lanka, along the outskirts of a national forest. Naturally, after months of careful plowing, weeding, and watering, they didn't want a multi-ton animal stomping up their field. So the farmers erected a fence. That year the elephants knocked it down and walked through. The farmers then erected a bigger fence, and the next year the elephants knocked that down too. By the third year, determined to solve the problem, the farmers put up a very big electrical fence. Thinking they had the problem licked, they returned home to their families, ate dinner, and went to sleep, peaceful in the knowledge that not even a four-legged god could get through that.

The next morning, when they returned to their fields, they found a strange raft-like structure on top of their fence. It was made of several dozen palm trunks, each one laid carefully next to the other, forming a bridge over the very big electric fence that was now pressed very deep into the mud. They soon discovered that their fields had received an abusive stomping that had nothing to do with the path the elephants had walked in the past. This sort of behavior, it hardly needs pointing out, needs to be interpreted as a reprimand.

Elephants will do as they deem appropriate. An elephant is far too large to be forced, too smart to be herded, too strong to be threatened, and too confident to be cowed; but it can be trained with a curious process that looks a bit like negotiation.

The first step in training an elephant is to catch one. In order to do that, you need to find one of the elephant paths. You should bring along some good strong rope, about a hundred candies, and a few boxes of crackers. It is recommended that you also bring along several brave friends. To catch your elephant, you must first tie nine or ten very strong deer-hide ropes to large trees (deer hide is almost as strong as hemp but is more pliable and lighter). Tie one end to a tree, and tie the other into a noose. Set the noose on the path, being careful not to disturb the bushes, then go hide with your friends and wait until the elephants come. You'll hear them. It may take a few days. When an elephant steps in one of the nooses, pull it tight. This is where things get difficult, because the elephant will make lots of noise. He will stomp around and try to free himself. As he does, make sure one of your friends is keeping an eye on where the elephant's other feet land. When he steps in the second noose, have your friend pull that noose tight too (but don't let the elephant catch him doing it or the elephant might pick him up like a doll and throw him down to the ground, and that would be the end of your friend). Now you have two of the elephant's legs tied to two trees. If you can get all four you'll be in good condition, but three will definitely do the job. With his legs spread out like this the elephant will be unable to walk. He will also be mad as a wet cat, and so this process is dangerous, but if you can manage to get that far, you have the hardest part of the job complete.

Wait two to five hours until the elephant calms down. Talk to him; say nice things to him. Tell him he'll be okay. Talk to him just like you would talk to a person. This is very important. Fortunately for you, elephants have a sweet tooth of legendary proportions, so give him candies as another way to calm him down. Just toss them in front of him, and he'll pick them up. Crackers also work. It's important that you stay calm and let him relax. Don't hit him. You won't accomplish anything that way other than getting yourself killed. Elephants have been used as execution machines, wrecking crews, and lumber lifters for good reason. Even a small elephant could pluck you from the ground.

with less risk and less effort than it would take you to pick up a drugged dog.

Now that you've caught your elephant and have given it all of your candies and crackers, bring another elephant that you or your friends have already domesticated. If you're lucky enough to have a tame female on your side, everything will go smoothly. Some reports say that males don't even need to be caught, as they will just naturally follow a female back to the stables, but I'm recommending a safe and tested approach.² The elephant that you have tied up will greet the strange tame elephant. Keep the tame elephant around for four to five days. If you need to move your captive to a better grazing area (they eat about 250 kilograms, or 550 pounds, of foliage a day), release a couple legs, let the elephant walk a bit, then tie him to a new tree. By the end of the week, with the other elephant nearby, all should be fine. If you aren't lucky enough to have a tame elephant on hand, then patience, kind behavior, and more candies can also do the trick.

The elephant will soon see (since behavior is more learned than taught) that life isn't so bad as a captive: He gets cookies and new friends. Generally, things will go fine, and he will come along and work with you more out of the cooperation of friendship than the shackles of necessity.

Mahouts are an Asian kind of cowboy. They capture, train, raise, and work with elephants for a living in both India and Sri Lanka. Over the millennia, mahouts have developed a vocabulary they use when they talk to their elephants. Remember, talking is very important; any mahout will tell you that it is key to his relationship with his elephant. The words are derived from Hindi. *Daha* means "go forward," *ho* is "stop," and *deri* means "pick that up." Some of them are more complicated, like *meheidan*, which means "move to this side." The "sic 'em!" command, *pour-duh*, tells an elephant to drub a poor sap with his trunk, but only once. The words can be strung together to form short sentences such as *daha deri meheidan*, which means "go forward, pick up that object, then stop sideways toward me." This means that you can lead an elephant to water, and you can tell him to drink, too.

Mahouts carry long sticks with a hook and a pointed tip—something sharp that makes an elephant move. They might, for example, say *mehe-idan* and hook the elephant behind the ear with this tool to reinforce the verbal message. Occasionally they poke the elephant with this stick. But the elephant will be pricked only gently, and only if he has already been trained. Unwise or aggressive mahouts simply don't die old.

Elephants do what elephants must: They drink over one hundred liters of water each day, eat trees for breakfast, and need a river for their daily bath. Since humans do similar things with similar resources, competition for space and water has grown increasingly acute. Humans erect a fence, the elephants push it over, and the humans retaliate. The elephants then retaliate for the retaliation. The ancient war, which is called in a perfectly serious tone, "The Human-Elephant Conflict," is going very poorly for the elephants, great symbols of governance and power though they may be. The 2000 census set the score at twenty-five million people and twenty-five hundred elephants.

I have personally seen about a hundred elephant veterans of this conflict. Most of them are at the Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage, a conservation breeding center run by the National Zoological Gardens of Sri Lanka. The orphanage, established in 1978, is a government-sponsored institution aimed at preserving elephants. If a wounded elephant is found, the animal is brought to the orphanage, given the best medical care in the world, and offered residence with the others that live in the refuge. Some of these elephants are found separated from their herds, some are sick or wounded, and some of the

simply get caught in the crossfire of Sri Lanka's civil war.

In 1984, only a few weeks before the morning bombs went off in Colombo, the elephant orphanage received news from up north that a small female elephant had been found lying in a ditch outside some rice fields. Dr. Rajapaksa and another veterinary surgeon from Pinnawala drove their jeep up to investigate. When villagers led them to where the elephant was lying, they saw that the calf's front leg had been blown off after she had stepped on a land mine. Unable to walk, she had lain herself down and prepared to die in that ditch, one more casualty of the war. But Dr. Rajapaksa would have none of that. He and his colleague bundled her up, hoisted her onto a trailer, and carted her back up to the orphanage. There they wrapped her stump in a very large white bandage and gave her a massive dose of medication, a dozen buckets of fresh water, and a fresh pile of palm fronds. They named the young elephant Sama, which means "peace."

Dr. Rajapaksa worked steadily with Sama for five months. He gave her vitamins, talked with her, fed her freshly cut foliage, and kept her stump clean and in fresh bandages. There were four daily baths, medication, and cleaning. Eventually her health returned. But problems of a lost a leg don't go away, especially if you need to have three feet on the ground at all times, as elephants, massive as they are, do. Sama started having difficulties since she simply wasn't able to keep her weight well-enough distributed for her other limbs to bear.

As soon as the problem came to light, Pinnawala contacted an engineering firm in Germany to manufacture a prosthetic leg. The limb, a flexible cylinder made of steel girders and cotton fabric, fit Sama perfectly, but she took it off and threw it against the wall. The following day, the good doctor fastened a couple of loose screws back into their sockets, bent the frame back into shape, and gently reattached it to Sama's leg with Velcro and a cotton wrap to keep her comfortable. That afternoon it was found at the base of a different wall, again bent.

After three tries, Dr. Rajapaksa decided that Sama had executive power on this topic and that there was no room for negotiation.

These days, more than two decades after her accident, Sama and the other elephants of the Pinnawala orphanage continue their daily routines. When the mahouts bring the elephants to the river to bathe, Sama can be found at the back of the group, slowly swinging her mass under a misshapen spine, making what pace she can manage. The mahouts follow her patiently, and the tourists gather around the railing. All of the onlookers have the same pitying expression written on their faces as they watch this symbol of government, this little veteran god, find her way to the river below for her afternoon bath.



Original Coat of Arms, British Colony of Ceylon

Chapter Two:

Ahangama

“They hate our freedom.”

—George W. Bush, March 18, 2002

The Island



Yakkinidua Island, Ahangama, Sri Lanka

The brooding blue of the Indian Ocean stretches for thousands of miles, slowly echoing waves between continents until, finally, the waters break upon the island's yellow and green flanks. For as long as the record books go back, Sri Lanka has always been a densely populated island brimming with rich vegetation. Just south of the Indian subcontinent, Sri Lanka stubbornly guards her spot near the middle of the ocean, where there are no neighbors, except India to her north. There is no land for over a thousand miles in any other direction.

People live in Sri Lanka today in much the same way as they have for about eighteen hundred years. Water is pulled from the wells, coconuts are knocked from the trees, fish are dragged from the sea, and the big tropical sun swings overhead, tying the days into each other in a steaming, sweaty rhythm of ancient customs. People eat more or less the same food they've eaten for the last several millennia (curries), and the language hasn't changed much either (unlike India, Sri Lanka never adopted English as an official language). Most Sri Lankans live in little houses that are built of coconut fronds, and the roofs are replaced seasonally. The monsoons roll through the skies, usually arriving in May or June, and the dust of the previous year is rinsed down into the sea so that the year can begin anew.

Some things have changed. Schooners and brigs of the sixteenth century used to stop here often to take on water, food, and wood before moving on. It was common for shipping lines from Singapore, for example, to stop over in old Ceylon before taking a southwesterly bearing toward Madagascar. As a result of this traffic, the island attracted the notice of the Chinese, Dutch, and Portuguese, who each took turns chasing out their predecessors. For most of the rice farmers, mahouts, and monks, the

conquests were no more than skirmishes localized within the capital city and hardly had any effect on their lives, if they were heard about at all. But then the British arrived, bringing to the island not only a new and harsher definition of imperialism but the industrial revolution as well.

Just before 1900, some metal railroad tracks came slithering out of the jungle. A few years later a big black strip of asphalt road snaked its way down the coast, and soon cars and motorcycles were chugging through the towns. The mob of cars carried an increasing number of tourists, many of whom brought enormously fat wallets. Televisions appeared in some people's living rooms. Bizarre advertisements followed, and in the heartbeat of a generation, Sri Lankans saw the arrival of industrialization and its children: pollution, automation, overcrowding, malnutrition, and factory mass production.

During the monsoon season, however, the island becomes ancient again, and silent. Both the trains and the tourists make fewer appearances, going back to whatever time they came from. If you allow yourself to pay attention to the details of the island, the jungles brim with strange voices, hoarse, toothed phantoms, and the old gods that step quietly through the jungle just before a storm arrives. The ocean whispers some dreadful secret again and again, the winds argue a more complicated rebuttal, and the fronds listen to both sides, one, then the other, then back again. Then the falling rain starts simply enough with a few sprinkles. These build to an applause and then a roar as the streets fill with water and run brown with the jungle silt on its way to the sea. And each drop in this huge falling crowd is saying the same word they all have said, over and over again, in precisely the same way since Vishnu came down from India and lifted the island of Sri Lanka up out of the sea.

The monsoon rains become sheets, and the sheets become descending walls of water, magic walls full of falling lenses, and through it, if you look closely today, you can see things just as they were thousands of years ago, before all the wars and empires and spice traders. Sri Lanka remains Ceylon, and all of her old lessons roam, like ghosts, among the modern wars of today.

It wasn't the spice trade or imperial conquest that brought me to Sri Lanka, or even tourism, but the media. My interest grew when I began to encounter the word "terrorist" so often on television, radio, the Internet, and in print that it seemed terrorists must be very important, and very frightening, people.

Terrorists had already had a big impact on my life. In September 2001, I'd been in Europe. I'd been clowning around at an event in Linz, Austria, and after the festival I motored back to Paris, planning to spend a few days there before flying home to California on the twelfth. While I was taking a nap on the afternoon of the eleventh, the phone rang, and a friend told me to turn on the television. So I stood there, staring at the screen, with millions of others around the world, as planes sliced first into one World Trade Center tower and then the other, launching the twenty-first century with the most fantastic media event in history.

The next morning, news outlets were scrambling to find an explanation for what had happened, but I had finished my coffee and planned on going to the airport anyway, only to find out my flight home had been canceled. As a result, I was stranded in Europe, which led to my getting rid of most everything I owned, staying in Paris for over a year, and being separated from friends and family for far longer than I had imagined possible. September 11 had an immediate and profound impact on my life.

"Terrorists," they told me, were the reason.

Then, after George W. Bush got back from wherever he was in the week following September 11, he was all over the airwaves with the same word. “Terrorists” was on the front page, headlines, splash screens, television banners, and everyone’s lips. And it didn’t let up in the months and even years that followed September of 2001: Terrorists were responsible for everything bad.

But was this fear caused by terrorism, or by the media that was spreading terrorism? If no one had filmed September 11, 2001, what impact would it have had? What was the link between terrorism and media? And what was a terrorist, anyway?

I’d never seen a terrorist with my own eyes, nor had I ever talked to anyone who had. If it weren’t for my faith in the integrity of editors at my news sources, I’m not sure I could even have said that terrorists were real. It was a bit like everyone in the neighborhood telling me to watch out for Sasquatch: I’d seen videos of him, and he seemed strange and different, but I was just not getting the entire picture as to why I should be so, well, terrified.

The media had left me with more questions than answers. I wanted to know how, for example, someone could justify to themselves the killing of thousands of people for a political cause. What ethical complaint or grievance could be so sharp you’d decide to become a suicide bomber? I had read of terrorism schools, so I guessed you got, what, an MA in terrorism? I was also confused about the way terrorists lived: in caves, in the wilderness, and hating me for my freedoms? Maybe a terrorist was more like a golem than a Sasquatch, I thought, but it was too simple to believe and I was suspicious. Right and wrong were too clearly demarcated for this portrayal of terrorists to be true. I finally hypothesized that the myth of the monster was not the thing to be feared; it was, rather, the media that was to be feared, because the media was causing terror by reporting on terrorists. I decided that if I couldn’t solve this equation, then I would at least muck it up further.

For me, believing is seeing. If terrorists were dangerous enough to provoke sweeping changes in our federal laws, I felt, then they were dangerous enough for me to try to understand them. If the government was passing laws to protect me—laws that determined what I could and could not do, laws that changed what I could and could not say, laws that affected habeas corpus, even—then I figured I should go find out what it was I needed to be protected from.

The laws seemed potentially more dangerous than the terrorists themselves. Several months before I left on my monster-hunting expedition, I found out I could be jailed simply for talking with terrorists. A recently issued presidential decree, the “Detention, Treatment, and Trial of Certain Non-Citizens in the War Against Terrorism” military order, stated that what I was setting out to do could potentially get me tossed into a secret jail far away from home. Since Germany had a similar policy during the Second World War (they called it, far more poetically, *Nacht und Nebel*³), I became more afraid of my own government in nearby Washington than of terrorists in faraway caves. More important, however, was the fact that I didn’t want to be afraid. I wasn’t interested in buying into what I saw as a nation of people reduced to a slobbering insane asylum of terrorized lobotomy victims watching television. The fears were not, nor would be, mine. And making sure of that required some action on my part.

Enjoying a career well scarred from a lifelong habit of touching stoves, I bought a ticket despite my fears, packed a bag with a small laptop, camera, and voice recorder, and got on a plane. The instruments I brought were my terrorist-trapping tools. I also brought my favorite boots, some clothes, a couple of books, a lighter, and my sunglasses (my pocketknife and shampoo didn’t make the

journey, however, as they were confiscated at the airport).

I decided to take the job because I fit the role. As a boy I lived for nearly eight years in rural areas without electricity, I had worked in high-risk environments as a forest fire fighter, I had been trained to provide emergency medical care, and I was able to document what's happening from a first-person point of view. I fit the qualifications. It wasn't about adrenaline addiction. Calling me an adrenaline addict is a bit like calling me a curry addict; neither have anything to do with why I went. Surely both curries and adrenaline were on the road ahead, but it wasn't necessary to buy an airline ticket to get them. No, I took the job because nobody else was stupid enough—or was possessed of the (rapidly evaporating) sense of immortality I still doggedly maintained—to visit a war zone, act as a witness, and collect and document alien points of view, all without the backing of a major media outlet.

Corporate news is unclean, untrustworthy, and made to satisfy the agendas of those who can afford to buy the truth. Believing that there is no such thing as objective news, anyway, even if it's statistical information (stories we have to tell are always more true, even if less accurate), I set out to find and report the most subjective and inaccurate news I could. If a terrorist existed, I would talk with him. I would see for myself and write about what I found.

I would go because knowledge is terror's strongest antidote.

So I decided to do a little terrorist ethology. It was not terrorism that interested me, mind you, because that is just the act; rather, I was interested in the psychology of the people who undertook the acts—specifically the people who were involved in suicide terrorism, which seems to be the most feared (and therefore the most effective) form of terrorism. At first I considered going to Afghanistan, then I decided I should study a purer specimen, as it were. Afghanistan was too anti-American, and I wanted to talk with terrorists who had little to do with the United States or with American or anti-American causes; I wanted, instead, to find a group of terrorists who had evolved their own local gripes yet had also influenced other terrorist groups with their own unique solutions. I was interested in seeking patterns and models that could be generalized, then compared with the behavior patterns of those who did have a gripe with my country. I wanted to find a way the United States (and other countries) could learn something from that petri dish. I wanted to find something like a Galapagos, a place where the evolution was contained enough to be unique, so that it might offer general information applicable elsewhere.

Looking at terrorist watch lists, I finally came across what I had been looking for: a small island; an ancient conflict; racial, religious, and political boundaries that were all in a tangled contention. By 2003, India, the United States, England, Canada, and the European Union had all designated the Tamil Tigers a terrorist organization. I decided to go because, just as a bird thrives in the sky and a fish comes from the sea, it would be necessary to go there to learn about their country, customs, and culture, to understand their context, the conditions that created them. Plus they invented suicide bombing.

I told my wife about it. We weren't married at the time, but we were in Paris (she's French) and it was springtime in 2002, and we were walking through Place St. Michel and I said that I was going to go interview terrorists.

She stopped, turned to me, and said, "That's so American of you."

Now, I found the village where I'm staying, Goviyapana, after a good deal of research about the island. I knew that I wanted to be on the beach, I knew I wanted to start my investigation in a small town, and I knew I wanted to start in the south, where there is a considerable tourism industry. It was legally easier as well as logistically simpler to start here, since finding a hotel in the demilitarized zone, much less the active war zones up north, would have proven impossible before arriving. So I decided to wade into the shallow end first, and the southern end of the island was just that. This small village of Goviyapana happened to be located between the tourist resort, the deep jungle, the coast, and the museums and libraries I wanted to research, and meanwhile at the extreme opposite end of the island to where I'm ultimately headed.

Goviyapana has electricity, but I haven't seen a working phone; the village has water, but I haven't seen a running faucet.

I'm staying in a tiny hotel that is quiet and clean and very inexpensive. It is full of disturbing dreams and harmless nightmares. There is a bed that is made each morning by a bent old man who comes in and arranges the sheets in a fancy way and puts a flower on the pillow. This is lovelier than chocolate, and he organizes whatever I happen to have knocked over during the previous day and brings in milk tea and hoppers (a kind of griddle cake made of rice) before he makes the bed. He is generally nearby, as there aren't many guests other than the stray dog that he throws rocks at, an occasional gecko, and the silent bald man from Austria who mostly hides in the room upstairs. The man comes to the hotel at this time each year (the cook has told me) and talks with no one but simply rotates himself and his lawn chair with the sun each day, eats his curry in the evening, and hides again at night. He reminds me of Kurtz. Sometimes I see a young woman dressed in a sari walk up the stairs to his bedroom, usually around sunset. I don't know who she is, but the man seems lonely nonetheless.

My bedroom, which costs about U.S. \$12 a night and overlooks the ocean, has a small and primitive Victorian-style writing desk and a patio where my food is brought in the evenings. My bedroom is large, and I spend time here peacefully. The other room here is the bathroom. It is a large and square concrete room with a shower spigot shoved into the wall at about chest level, and a short garden hose on the floor (the green kind, about as long as my forearm), and no shower curtain—but in a land as wet as Sri Lanka no one really cares if a little water falls on the floor. Next to the shower are two foot impressions with a hole behind them. This area, if I happen to miss my mark, is easily rinsed off with the rest of the floor. Just for practice I turn around and put my feet in the impressions like they're stirrups, then step out again for fear I'll be catapulted or receive an enema. I'm not used to this.

Okay, I tell myself, this is not a bad idea. This is a simple toilet that doesn't waste water, doesn't use nasty cleaning products, and doesn't have any moving parts, and so it doesn't require replacement plastics to be manufactured. It is simple and easy to maintain. It is so simple it seems superior to the toilets I grew up with. It's connected to the city's plumbing, or seems to be, I think, as I look down the hole. So I suppose it is hygienic. But, wait. There is no toilet paper here. Is it not customary to use toilet paper, or did the old man that changes my sheets just forget? There is no roller on the wall. It would be nice if there were toilet paper. Perhaps that, also, is what the hose is for.

A hole in the floor I can deal with. But not having toilet paper is leaving me feeling abandoned. This seems primitive, especially since the right hand, rather than the fork or spoon, is the national eating utensil of Sri Lanka. In such an otherwise nice hotel this shortfall seems so uncivil.

But the truth is, civilization and industrialization have nothing to do with each other. A country can be ancient and civilized and not have any of the manufactured appliances that we Westerners might consider essential. Perhaps civilizations should be measured by their toilets. A rudimentary toilet can be a sign that the civilization in question is not concerned with unimportant matters. I have seen both Los Angeles and Tokyo heated toilets that measure the pH level of shit, its consistency, and its quantity. I've seen entertainment toilets in Sydney with video games mounted on them. I've seen luxury toilets in Paris that squirt mint-blue water into the bowls when you turn the gold-plated flush handles. And I've seen little antispash shelves in the bowls of toilets in Berlin that would make any scatologist or coprophiliac smile. These toilets, however, are harder to maintain, are more expensive to buy, use more resources (plastic, metal, glue, and, most of all, water), and are, ultimately, complex sales efforts. They have nothing to do with being civilized, or even civilization. Maybe industrialization, the cause of so much pollution, is itself uncivil.

The notion of "First World" is absurd.

Maybe the societies with the simplest toilets are the most civilized. Maybe what makes civilization such is not the things we buy but how we treat one another—how we, if you will, avoid getting ourselves and others dirty. That a country's toilet uses a nearby shower as a flushing system says nothing about how its people greet one another, about what guides their moralities and thoughts about their history, what their dress codes represent, or how their families interact. What this house next to my shower, next to my toilet, says is what any toilet in any country says: Don't shit on the floor. But this is hard for me to understand, and so I spend a good twenty minutes in the bathroom pondering over such things, then I go downstairs to ask if I can have a roll of toilet paper.

I'm walking along the beach. It is warm, and the wind is lifting ribbons of coconut smoke out of the jungle (presumably from a farmer's campfire?) into the air and tracing strange designs out over the sea. The beach is a beautiful slab of paradise with all the trimmings: the bent fronds hanging over the opaline blue, waves sliding up and over the white sand, one or two people bathing, gentle clouds hanging on the horizon, and all of it slowly turning cardamom yellow as the sun exhales into the sea. A skinny man with a turban sits on a single stilt that holds him some two or three meters out of the water. One leg up, one net down, patiently fishing.

About a quarter mile off the coast a perfect equilateral triangle of an island holds its place in the swell of the Indian Ocean. A footpath on the island spirals up past a cluster of boulders, through some patches of grass, and—above the steep face of the cliff—into a thatch of trees, which stand on the top of the island like a clod of hair on a triangular head submerged up to the eyebrows. Faces can be seen among the reeds and thorns—the faces of ghouls and devils that still guard the island and work its machinery. But you can see them only with your peripheral vision. If you concentrate on them, they quickly change into rocks, or trees, or shadows of the two. The island is perfect, pristine, and suspicious.

For the last five or ten minutes, two young men have been walking behind me, not saying a word. With skeletal high cheekbones, long noses, and dark eyes, these two look like they've lived on a diet of amphetamines for the last twenty years.

I stop and turn around to find out what's happening here.

They smile at me.

“What is your name?” asks one.

The other asks, “Where are you going?”

I ignore the questions and ask the name of the little island.

The shorter one, his skin a bluish black, smiles at me with huge teeth as sharp as coral and white ocean spray, and this surprises me, this contrast, because he looks so beautiful.

“Yes, it has name!” he shouts. “It is name Lace Rock!” He has a disarmingly large smile, and his eyes shine with a pride that I’ll probably never know.

“Yakkinidua,” the other one quietly adds.

“What does that mean?”

“Yakkinidua?” the less-tall one steps in again. “Ghost Island.” Then he smiles again, and I’m shocked again so I smile back.

The taller one looks at his friend, and they say something in words of spice and flame—near Spanish lifts in the tongue combined with Chinese and the sound water makes as it runs over rocks.

Then they look at me and are silent for a second.

“Witch’s Rock,” they both say.

Once upon a time Hanuman, the monkey god, stole some potent juju from Kali. Hanuman, medicine in hand, scampered down the coast, and Kali, vowing to retrieve her magic, sent a black storm of vengeance and death after him as a plague. Hanuman hid among the rocks here at Yakkinidua, and Kali thundered past because the island is so good for hiding and has, as the young men tell me, “many secrets.”

Once upon a different time, much later, a woman lived on the island, and she knew how to knit. She lived on the island with her husband and sold under dainties to the ladies on the weekdays—nice woven petals to surprise the unsuspecting husbands. She picked berries and pounded leaves into a paste that could close a cut in a day, and everyone knew, even without asking her or visiting her on that triangle of an island, that she was also a witch.

Of course, “yakkini” means “devil” or “ghost,” as well as “witch”—I can’t quite get it straight from these guys, they don’t know—and so this is why it’s got so many names: Lace Rock, Yakkinidua, Witch’s Rock, Ghost Island, and, most simply, the Island. My two new associates find nothing strange about the legend, and so it doesn’t cross my mind that it might be a fiction. We all seem to agree that these stories are fact. Believing is the most important part of any reality.

The two young men I have met, Prabath and Krishan, are both in their early twenties. They’re out of school and not in need of jobs because they have food and friends and all that they require except entertainment, since the cricket match isn’t until tomorrow and there are no car accidents, fishing trips, or freshly dead people to investigate. They’re just looking for something to do, and it doesn’t matter what. This explains their interest when I walked by, since being white, I’m also a novelty. They’ve seen tourists walking down the road from time to time, or behind the fences and on the

private beaches, pink, puffy, reclining, and sipping, but Prabath and Krishan haven't talked with many of us. For them, we tourists are a sort of different species that's interacted with only for business reasons, or if there's an emergency that breaks a hole in the thick social barriers of race, ethnicity, and money. Thus I'm their solution to boredom, as they are a solution to mine, and so we discuss the island.

Prabath, the shorter of the two, with the big white teeth and eyes like those of a rabbit that's come back from a long journey, takes my hand and startles me at first until his sincerity stops me from moving. He even has long eyelashes, which make him look as guiltless as Grünewald's little lamb. Prabath seems alien, with thin forearms that taper down to meet a block of a wrist, leading into his large knuckles and twig fingers. With his hands pulling at my own, he asks me to sit down on a tree to talk, and so I learn that a couple of years ago he passed his advanced-level exams. Now he lives next to the railroad tracks under a cluster of trees with his mother, father, sister, and two brothers named Lalith and Shamesh. They live in a small concrete house with the standard outfitting of an entire parlor, a living room, three bedrooms, a kitchen with a woodstove, and a backyard with a palm tree. In the living room they have the customary arrangement of two chairs that face a sofa with a coffee table in between. He doesn't have a dog or any pet. Dogs aren't kept here in Sri Lanka because they, as a species, misbehave and carry fleas. A Sinhalese will tell you dogs are filthy, just as any New Yorker will tell you pigeons are disgusting.

Prabath and Krishan are cousins. Krishan, probably twenty-three or twenty-four, lives next door. He's taller, not at all like a lamb, a little smarter than his cousin, and behind his eyes is not a pleading interest, but storms of comprehension and patience. Krishan is angular and smiles too but his eyes register deep knowledge, like a Buddha. His fingers are more serpents than sticks. As Prabath and I talk, Krishan rolls a cigarette, wipes his lip, glues the cigarette together, blows softly once to dry it, and pulls out his lighter.

Prabath, still holding my hand, carefully explains that their family has owned the land for a long time, though the two of them cannot agree upon the details. They break into a good five-minute conversation over this point, neither one of them being able to go back much more than three or four hundred years. Maybe more, but they decide they don't care. At least three hundred years, it is agreed.

Their English is crummy, but a helluva lot better than my Sinhalese, since I can say only "thank you," "please," "friend," "we go," and "do you speak English?" They call me Marx since that's the closest thing they've heard to a name that unhinges an underbite as badly as the word "Mark."

The days pass, and I've found that my mind is slowing down and my heart is speeding up. My life has been blown fresh, I have no responsibilities, and my third eye is squinting its way open. I didn't know I had one until a bald monk in a saffron robe poked me in the forehead and told me so. Now I do. Sri Lanka shifts you. I have stopped eating lunches since there's so much else to be done in the middle of the day. One of these activities is fishing with Prabath and Krishan. We catch crabs, also known as *cacadua*. We just pick them up, fast before they run, then we take a stick we've sharpened with a rock and push it through the crab's soft torso, baiting the hook for the fishing line. We sling them back into the sea, their fingerlike legs desperately clutching at the air as they slowly fall over the deep water. Then we catch a fish and bury him in the sand for safekeeping (he is still trying to breathe as I cover him with dirt, but this is the way of life, and the crabs had it no better, worse even, and this is how

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