

S. Shakthidharan & Eamon Flack: *The Jungle and the Sea* (Extract)

Morning.

They walk.

Each of them carries their life in a bag.

Madhu carries a chicken in a basket.

ABI Highway, Amma - A35 highway. No cars, many many many people, mostly walking. Many carts. Some buses. No soldiers.

A UN worker joins them.

MADHU Where is everybody going?

UN WORKER There is a Safe Zone. No-Fire Zone with the UN. It will be safe there. [*to Himal and Madhu*] Biscuit?

MADHU No, thank you.

UN WORKER I am UN. Local staff. Stay with me. [*to Gowrie and Abi*] You want a biscuit?

ABI No, thank you. [*Describing to the blindfolded Gowrie. This act of description repeats throughout.*] A nice man from the UN, Amma. An arm chair in the middle of the road.

MADHU I thought the UN had left?

UN WORKER Yes and no.

MADHU Yes and no?

UN WORKER The government says they “cannot guarantee the safety of humanitarian workers in final stage of a war”, so all the UN international staff pulled out. Gone home. Only two left. Germans. Maybe Dutch. Or Swedish. Who can tell? Blond hair. So ok, there are still many local staff [*indicates himself*]. But oh sorry, no Government doesn’t want UN observers observing the war. So Government has declared all UN staff “on leave”, therefore UN staff in the middle of the war cannot observe the war, because all UN staff are on leave. But then a different problem LTTE does not want any Tamil people to leave, so Tamil UN local staff on leave [*indicates himself*] cannot leave. So. We will all go to the UN hub in the No-Fire Zone. East. In Suthanthirapuram. We have sent coordinates of the hub to the Sri Lankan army so they will not bomb. Should all be ok. You don’t want biscuit?

ABI No thank you. Shops all empty. Houses all empty. So many people.

Gowrie nods.

The sound of a bird.

MADHU Devil bird!

GOWRIE *Aanthi. (she makes the sign of the evil eye)*

UN WORKER Spot-bellied eagle owl.

MADHU *Bubo nipalensis blighi.*

HIMAL One of you must be right.

UN WORKER [*laughs*] We are all right. [*to Madhu*] You know this *genus*? Cousin species to the barred eagle-owl, *Bubo sumatransis*?

MADHU *Bubo sumatranus.*

UN WORKER Really?

MADHU Yes, really!

UN WORKER Ok very good. You are...?

MADHU No, just an amateur. [*shows him a book in her bag*] Helm's field guide.

UN WORKER Ah. I was a biologist once.

MADHU Really?

UN WORKER But I couldn't keep up my research during the war. (*he shrugs*) Now I recite the names to distract myself when I am waiting at check-points. *Tyto alba stertens*.

MADHU Barn owl. Easy one! *Otus thilohoffmanni*.

UN WORKER Ah. Serendib Scops Owl. Endemic to Sri Lanka. Discovered only in 2004!

ABI Maybe I have reception. I am messaging Lakshmi, Amma.

Himal gives Abi his mobile phone and she turns it on.

HIMAL Are you telling her you got married?

ABI I am telling her we are safe. Why would she care if I got married?

UN WORKER No phones will work.

MADHU What? Why?

UN WORKER The army bombed all the satellite towers. See?

They all look up for a moment.

UN WORKER Did you say you just got married?

HIMAL Last night.

MADHU Childhood sweethearts.

UN WORKER That is excellent news! Oh I am very happy! Oh very good! No very good! Yes!

His delight makes them all laugh.

UN WORKER I am sorry. You are not my relatives but I am very happy. Yes good. *Ninox scutulata.*

MADHU Brown Hawk Owl.

UN WORKER Yes very good!

*

Still walking.

UN WORKER Biscuit?

MADHU No thank - Yes ok. For the chicken.

UN WORKER Shouldn't be far now.

ABI Tell me. Why did the Germans or Swedish -

UN WORKER Dutch, I think -

ABI Why did they stay in Sri Lanka?

UN WORKER There are no journalists anywhere in the Vanni. Nobody in the rest of the world knows what is happening here. If the blond people stay and observe, international governments will believe them. Ok. Here we are. UN Zone. No Fire Zone.

Smoke.

He looks ahead.

UN WORKER Mooroooha...

The UN Worker runs ahead.

ABI It's ok *amma*, some smoke, I don't know what...

Abi takes out her puffer.

MADHU Shall we go in?

HIMAL Let's wait for the UN man to come back-

A woman on a bicycle rides past.

HIMAL Friend! No-Fire Zone?

WOMAN Yes but no good. Army was shelling all night. Shelled again just now, just now.

HIMAL They bombed the no-bombing zone?

WOMAN *(exiting)* Yes!

They have stopped and are looking out from a rise in the road.

An old farmer sits nearby.

GOWRIE Abi, tell me.

Beat.

The others look away as Abi looks and describes.

ABI Many rows of white and blue tents. Cloth. Plastic. All ripped apart. Bodies. Bicycles, some trucks, all mixed up together. A child's body in a tree. No feet-

HIMAL *(Stopping her)* It's ok darling.

The UN Worker enters.

UN WORKER We asked the government to stop killing civilians, stop targeting the UN, but the government said, "We are not targeting civilians, so there can't be any civilians killed." Some are going back into the bunker, but I think they're going to shell us again.

MADHU So what do we do now? Where do we go?

UN WORKER Most staff are pulling back to PTK. Trucks are coming to take the wounded to the hospital there. But the Tigers are there too. The blonds are leaving, but I am Tamil so I cannot. This morning I would say, go with the UN. Now, I don't know.

HIMAL PTK?

MADHU Puthukkudiyiruppu. To the East.

Abi shakes her puffer.

ABI I need more Ventolin.

MADHU Is the hospital still there in PTK?

UN WORKER It's the only hospital left in the war zone.

ABI We will go to PTK. Now.

UN WORKER Okay. Then we go East again, along A35.

FARMER *Aiyah*, Can I walk with you?

UN WORKER Of course, brother.