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## The Match, by Romesh Guneseekera

By Paul Binding

*He may be Sunny, but he ain't happy...*

'Robby and Herbie were strolling up the drive, rapping the roofs of the parked line of cars with their knuckles and making karate kicks at invisible villains.' Sixteen-year-old Sunny has invited these best mates to lunch at his home, where they will find not just good food but a party with a purpose going on. Sunny's father, Lester, has decided to enliven his Manila "swanky enclave of executive households" by introducing it to cricket, so dear to his native Ceylon. And Sunny himself has been dreaming about the game, which he's relegated to his Colombo childhood. After his mother's sudden death, his journalist-father moved to the Philippines, lured by President Marcos's promise of "the freest press in Asia". But now Lester, aided by his oldest friend Hector, also from Ceylon, is laying plans for a grand one-day match of their favourite national sport, against a visiting team from Hong Kong. Sunny and his laid-back mates get caught up by an enthusiasm which sweeps in Tina, a desirable neighbourhood girl, also Ceylonese. Her performance on the pitch will linger in Sunny's mind as an icon of feminine panache.

For Sunny doesn't remain in Manila. Though temperamentally apt to take the line of least resistance, he becomes sufficiently disenchanted with his father to leave him. Here's an erstwhile leftist accommodating himself to, indeed actively extolling, the despicable Marcos regime. Besides Sunny has belatedly understood a distressing truth about his parents' marriage. So, in 1973, he goes to London, and studies engineering - a mistake, for his interest is scant. London doesn't provide friends or a social network as did Manila suburbia, and even his great pal, Robby, when he too moves there, turns curiously elusive. Sunny feels cut off from English life; from the Philippines, adolescence and father; from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), childhood and mother. But it's not altogether coincidental that when he eventually finds friendliness, it's from a young student, Ranil, whose father is not only Sri Lankan but connected to Hector, that old cricket-loving buddy of Lester's. Ranil takes Sunny to his home in Birkenhead, and introduces him to his girl-friend, Clara - a meeting of great import.

As he moves through the 1970s into the more affluent but xenophobic 1980s, Sunny does not evolve into a happy man, though he is, we see, capable of both passion and enterprise. Ironically the very detachment that preserves him from the worst consequences of exile also prevents the kind of commitment which strengthens one's hold on life. Giving up engineering, he turns to photography, first as an ambitious practitioner, then as a dealer in cameras. He follows in the media Sri Lanka's descent into brutal ethnic war, and visits the country during a comparative lull. Yet its sufferings never quite galvanise him; his emotional distance is too great. And while he goes on caring for the woman he fell for and now lives with - as he does for their son, Mikey - even here there's aloofness, as if the lessons he's learned in human indifference have made him unable to affirm loyalties.


Sunny's salvation lies in his self-awareness, the other side of the coin of detachment. When in 2002, after successful Norwegian peace-brokering between the Colombo Government and the Tamil Tigers, Sri Lanka sends a highly talented Test cricket team to England, something in him stirs at the news - memory, buried hope, an all-but-forgotten identity. He takes himself to Lord's and later to the Oval, where a one-day-match will be played, bringing up from psychic depths that distant event of his adolescence.

A principal subject of this fine novel is how the wear-and-tear of living corrodes the self presented to the world, curbing its responses, burdening it with exhaustion and distrust. Yet Sunny, even at his most disillusioned, retains somewhere within the person who rejoiced in the company of Robby and Herbie.

This is a most intimately and precisely imagined novel. Those who have followed Gunesequera from the debut stories of *Monkfish Moon* and his subtle first novel, *Reef*, won't be surprised. Yet so complete a match (to use the novel's central image) between empathy and artistry, between lively observation and intellectual grasp of cultural tensions, always surprises. Henry James said about Balzac's relation to his characters: "It was by loving them that he knew them." Loving, while remaining in sharp moral control, is a hard business, but it leads to the profoundest kind of knowledge, as *The Match* so movingly demonstrates.

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