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Pradeep Who?

Begin with a question. An obvious one. So obvious it has already crossed your mind. Why have I not heard of this so-called Pradeep Mathew?

This subject has been researched lengthwise and breadthwise. I have analysed every match our man has played in. Why, you ask, has no one heard of our nation's greatest cricketer?

Here, in no particular order. Wrong place, wrong time, money and laziness. Politics, racism, power cuts, and plain bad luck. If you are unwilling to follow me on the next God-knows-how-many pages, re-read the last two sentences. They are as good a summary as I can give from this side of the bottle.

Deadline

I made my decision after the 1996 World Cup. The last years of my worthless life would be dedicated to a worthy cause. Not world peace or cancer cures or saving whales. God, if he exists, can look into those. No. In my humble opinion, what the world needs most is a halfway decent documentary on Sri Lankan cricket.

No one knows about this visit to Nawasiri Hospital. Not Sheila, who has begun to notice my falling hair, my swollen fingers and the rings under my eyes. Not Ari, who has remarked on how my hand shakes as I pour. Not even Kusuma, the servant, who wakes up every other morning to clean up my acidic, bloodstained vomit.

The doctor is younger than my son and has a put-on smile that does not soften the blow. 'Mr Karunasena, your liver is being destroyed. And it will get worse.'

'At least I have my heart.'

My giggle is as pathetic as my attempt at humour. He ignores it and begins scribbling.

'Can't you give me pills?'

'I can give you pills for the nausea and the fever. I can also refer you to our alcohol counsellor.' The doctor tears off a chit branded by a pharmaceutical company I have not heard of. 'The rest, Uncle, is up to you.'

'How much time?' I keep my tone even and my eyes fixed, hoping the pup won't see that the old dog is ruffled.

'If you stop drinking and start eating, exercising, Uncle can bat on for another ten, twenty years.'

The things they don't teach you at school. How to love. How to die. How to stage a dramatic comeback.

Is it possible to hammer 3 goals in extra time after trailing 2-0? Or to land a knockout punch at the end of the 12th? Is it too late to score at 10 an over and turn a paltry 170 into a magnificent 300?

In my life I have seen beauty only twice. I'm not talking *Tharuniya* magazine front-cover beauty. I'm talking staggering beauty. Something so beautiful it can make you cry. Sixty-four years, two things of beauty. One I have failed to cherish, the other I may yet be able to.

Sheila at the Galle Face Hotel, 31st Nite Dinner Dance, 1963.

PS Mathew vs New Zealand, at Asgiriya, 1987.

'What if I cut down to two drinks a day?'

He doesn't look surprised. But at least he lets go of the smile. 'A year or two. Maybe more.'

Thus it was settled. I would attempt to do a halfway decent documentary on Sri Lankan cricket. There is nothing more inspiring than a solid deadline.

Sheila

'I don't mind you writing as long as you don't depress people.'

My beloved wife is making me sweep the kitchen. The last time I held a broom, Diego Maradona was a thin, teetotaling teenager.

'You used to be a poet, Gamini. Now you're just a grumpus.'

She says I cannot spend my retirement in my room reading about cricket and drinking. So I have chores, which at sixty-four, I find abominable. But as long as I am helping around the house, we are not talking about my drinking, and in my retirement such mercies are welcome.

'Don't talk rot, Sheila. When we were young anger was fashionable. Angry young man and all. Now I'm a grumpus?'

'That's not a cricket bat, Gamini. Sweep properly.'

It is true. The world has changed and I have not. As with everything, my fault entirely.

'Heard from Garfield?'

'Just go, men.' Sheila is cutting onions and not crying. She keeps jabbering. 'He's doing well. You better stop this business and talk to him. He's calling tonight.'

'Tonight I will be writing.'

'Do whatever the hell you want.'

She adds the red chilli to the dry fish.

I say nothing, keep sweeping, and decide to do just that.

Pradeep Why?

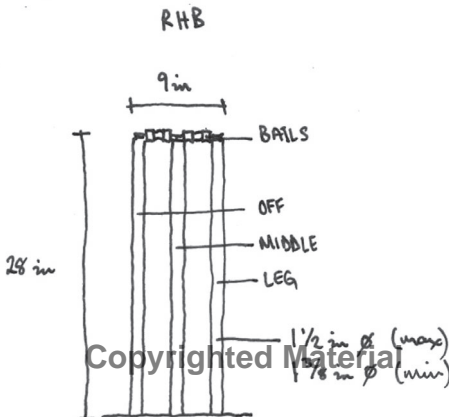
Another question. Why am I chasing a man who played only four test matches for Sri Lanka? A man who denied me interviews, delighted me on occasion, disappointed those he played with, and disappeared three years ago. A man whose name is remembered by a minority smaller than our tribal Veddah population.

I ask myself this right after my bath and my morning tea. My tea is taken milk-less with three teaspoons of sugar and five tablespoons of Old Reserve. As you will soon see, I take arrack with a lot of things.

So when did Pradeep Mathew stop being just another Lankan spinner of the 1980s? When did he become something worth obsessing over? A cause I would champion? To answer that I will take you to a boxing match between two men in dinner jackets. One was my dearest friend; the other, my oldest enemy.

Wicket

The word wicket can refer to the three stumps that the bowler attempts to hit. 'The ball almost hit the wicket there.'



The surface they are playing on. ‘The Eden Gardens wicket is dry and difficult to bat on.’

The bowler’s performance. ‘Laker’s taken 7 wickets in this match so far.’

The batting line-up’s mortality. ‘South Africa lose 5 quick wickets.’

Its versatility is bettered only by a four-letter word that serves as noun, verb, adjective, adverb, and expletive.

Clean Bowled

The simplest dismissal is when the bowler knocks over the batsman’s wickets. Mathew did this with most of his victims. He sent left-arm chinamen, googlies, armballs and darters through pads and feet. Here is a not-so-random sample of batsmen whose bails he dislodged. Border. Chappell. Crowe. Gatting. Gavaskar. Gower. Greenidge. Hadlee. Imran. Kapil. Lloyd. Miandad.

You are shaking your head. You are closing the book and frowning at the cover. Rereading the blurb at the back. Wondering if a refund is out of the question.

Punch-up at a Wedding

In the buffet corner, weighing over 100 kilos, from the bridegroom’s hometown of Matara, sports journo, talent broker, amateur coach: Newton ‘I came to eat, not to be insulted’ Rodrigo.

In the champagne corner, weighing under 180 lbs, teacher, preacher, video fixer, uninvited guest: Ariyaratne ‘I have watched every test match since 1948’ Byrd.

Ari is my neighbour and my drinking partner. I have smuggled him in and he has smuggled in a bottle. The Oberoi wasn’t Ari’s usual watering hole. He has tanked up already at somewhere far less plush. I should have expected trouble.

We are at the wedding of the Great Lankan Opening Batsman, or the GLOB as we shall call him. The GLOB is a man of the people and has invited to his wedding members of the press, ground staff, and a sprinkling of international cricketing celebrities.

Thirty tables away, Graham Snow and Mohinder Binny are swooning over a gaggle of girls. Both were former players who became commentators and then became players. The buffet table has seven types of buriyani. Next to vats of chicken, Tyronne Cooray, the Minister for Sports and Recreation, is laughing with Tom Whatmore, the then coach of the Sri Lanka cricket team.

And this is where it begins. At the Lanka Oberoi in 1994. With Ari Byrd, Thomian blazer torn along the creases, pressing a chicken drumstick into the face of Newton, shrieking, 'You came to eat, no? Ithing kaapang! Eat!'

I have seen many fights. Boxing bouts in Kurunegala, barroom brawls in Maradana. Never have the combatants been less skilled, more drunk, or better dressed.

A waiter guards the buffet table as the men in torn suits roll against empty chairs.

Newton takes a hard bite on the chicken, chomping down on two of Ari's fingers.

'Ah-wa!'

Ari's scream is high and girlish. Our table, composed of inebriated journalists like myself, chuckles, sips and gazes around with pleasure at sari-clad women, exotic dancers and international celebrities, who, thanks to Ari's scream, are gazing back, though perhaps not with as much pleasure.

Most observe from the dance floor. Disapproving aunties and jolly uncles push through the has-beens and never-will-bes. Hand on mouth in mock shock. 'This is what happens when you invite the riff-raff,' cackles a crow in a sari. No one for a moment considers stopping the fight just then. Not even us.

Two reasons: (a) Sports journalists rarely see anything in the way of entertainment, especially these days, especially on the cricket field. (b) We all dislike Newton and feel he deserved this bludgeoning with buriyani chicken.

Newton has made a lot more money than any of us. 'For me, of course, journalism is a hobby. A calling. Pocket money.' Newton brings young cricketers to Colombo and sells them to clubs; he also studies race sheets, politically and literally backing the right horses always. I know this pudgy man as well as I know the gentleman who was dousing him in gravy.

'Shall we do something?' asks Brian Gomez, TV presenter and prankster. Brian once typed a letter on Oxford stationery asking Newton to visit the British High Commission to receive his Queen's scholarship. The next day Newton wore a suit to work.

'Let them be,' says Renganathan, Tamil cricket writer. Renga is a good bugger, but unhealthily obsessed with Roy Dias. When he was editor at the *Weekend*, he ran one issue with seventeen articles on this wristy batsman of the 1980s.

Newton gains the upper hand. He smears rice in Ari's eyes and crawls under the table. Elmo Tawfeeq of the *Daily News* tries to separate them, gets elbowed twice, and decides to sit down. Elmo once told us that he hit Imran Khan for a 6. In actuality, he played club cricket with a Bangladeshi who Imran once hammered for 6.

These are the men I have spent my years with and they are all drunk. Failed artists, scholars and idealists who now hate all artists, scholars and idealists. The band has stopped playing and I hear raised voices in the distance. Newton and Ari knock into veteran scribes Palitha Epasekera and Rex Palipane and I decide to intervene.

I gulp down the last of my rum, but before I can offer my services, the bride of the GLOB enters, shining under yellow lights. A delicate petal, bouquet in hands, tears in eyes.

In the distance, her husband advances with concern smeared across his brow, thinking what I am thinking: that these animals would tear his flower apart. The flower drops her bouquet and screams in an accent that sounds like Sydney but could be Melbourne, in a voice that is anything but petal-like: 'Get the fuck out of my wedding! You fucking arseholes!'

We can take a fist from a brute, but not a curse from a bride. The waiters assist us in packing up the fight. Released from Ari's gin-powered grip, Newton picks up a mutton curry with intent.

'Put that down!' The GLOB descends on the scene. 'Yanawa methaning! Get out!' Both Newton and Ari heed the great man. With the GLOB is Ravi de Mel, has-been fast bowler. He looks for the softest target, finds it, and snarls. 'Ah, Karunasena. Who else? Kindly take your friends and bugger off.'

Fearing unfavourable press, the GLOB puts on his man-of-the-people smile and pats me on the back. 'Don't get angry, Mr Karuna. Wife is bit upset. Don't you know?'

As we are led out, I see a dark man with a crew cut. He is leaning on table 151, surrounded by sycophants. Indian captain Azharuddin is chatting to him, though the man doesn't appear to be listening. Our eyes meet and he raises his hand. I return the wave, but he has already averted his gaze.

That may or may not have been the moment that started what you are about to read. But it was most certainly the last time I ever saw Pradeep Sivanathan Mathew

Slide Show

Today Newton looks like a hippo, those days he was more like a rhino. Mathew may have caused the fight, but it was started by Newton. He had issues with me that went beyond cricket and provoked me knowing I would not respond. He didn't count on noble, smashed-on-stolen-gin Ari leaping, quite literally, to my defence.

The ballroom smells of flowers, buriyani and thousands of clashing perfumes. Strategic buffet tables separate cricket refugees from social parasites. The deluxe section features the national team, some minor celebs film stars, models and people wealthy enough to own film stars and models.

The middle section is filled with aunties and uncles, media and business types. They have the best view of the dance floor and the band, neither of which seemed to interest them. And then there are us. The journalists, coaches, ground staff, B-grade cricketers, C-grade friends.

Our table sits ten: me, Ari, Newton, Brian, Renga, Elmo, a Pakistani from the Associated Press, his friend and a young couple who look lost. At the other end of the room, there is a bar serving scotch, vodka and champagne. Our table has a bottle of arrack and several glasses of passion fruit cordial. We are men of simple tastes: anything, or even with nothing, with arrack will do.

'I should be drinking Chivas with Snow and Sobers,' says Newton. 'They must've misprinted my ticket.'

'So go, will you,' says Ari. 'Maybe Mohinder Binny will ask you to dance.'

The band plays a synthetic love song and the happy couple hold each other and move from side to side. We make quick work of the booze. Everyone whacks two shots, Ari and I whack four. The Pakistanis, Allah be praised, do not drink. As the lights dim, I explore unoccupied tables for bottles to steal. When I return with gin, the conversation has turned to cricket.

Brian Gomez, ever the patriot, proclaims that this Sri Lankan team could be our greatest. Ari says they are OK, but nowhere near the true greats like Lloyd's Windies or Bradman's Invincibles. 'Clive Lloyd's team is the best I've ever seen,' proclaims Renga. We hide our smirks. Every time Renga sees a film or witnesses a cover drive, he proclaims it to be 'the best he's ever seen.'

The Pakistani journalist talks of an all-time football XI featuring Zico, Best and Maradona. We sip stolen booze and begin fantasising.

What if Ali fought Tyson? Or Navratilova played Billie Jean? It's a good way to pass the time. Better than staring at the dance floor, pretending to grin.

We agree that Lloyd's team were literally head and shoulders above the rest. Elmo offers that Bradman's Invincibles were invincible only because of Bradman. 'You eliminate him, good team. Invincible? That I don't know.' We all drink a toast to Clive Lloyd. The young couple slink off to another table.

Newton is petulant throughout. 'Our team couldn't even draw a two-day match with Bradman.'

'Don't say that,' says Brian. 'We beat New Zealand.'

The dance floor writhes with famous names and dolled-up women who do not belong to them. From the roar of the house band and the machinations of the dancers, it is evident that the alcohol denied to our table has been flowing freely on the other side of the room. Understandable. Dolled-up women prefer to have their bottoms pinched by international cricketers and not by those who write about them.

The Pakistani journalist begins scribbling on napkins. As the only man at the table with an education outside of Asia, he convinces us with diagrams and eloquence that the perfect cricket team should be composed as such:

- Two solid openers
- Three aggressive batsmen
- Two genuine all-rounders
- One agile wicketkeeper
- Two unplayable fast bowlers
- One genius spinner

Seduced by his Parthan lilt and logical arguments, we nod collectively. The Windies were great, but not perfect. No spinner. No all-rounder. Lloyd had four types of hurricanes at his disposal: the elegant Holding, the belligerent Roberts, the towering Garner and the fiery Marshall. Who needs spinners, counters an argumentative Newton.

Booze flows and conversation splinters. Graham Snow toasts the GLOB and his bride, who begin doing the rounds of the ballroom. Ari and the Pakistani journalist whisper and scribble on napkins. The rest of us charge our glasses and clap as the band switches to traditional baila and a bald man with a moustache commandeers the mic from a

bearded man in a hat. Both are middle-aged, potbellied and wearing leather trousers.

Ari and the Pakistani journo silence the table with an announcement. Elmo, Brian and Renga listen while wiggling their bellies to the bajaw beat.

‘Gentlemen. We have constructed the world’s greatest cricket team.’

Ari and the Pakistani have prepared a slide show of napkins. Dinner arrives at the table, but is pushed aside for the presentation. ‘Of course, I don’t agree with some choices,’ says the Pakistani.

First slide:

Openers

- Jack Hobbs (Eng-20s)
- Sunil Gavaskar (Ind-80s)

Newton raises his glass. There is much nodding. ‘The masters,’ says Elmo.

Next slide:

Middle Order

- Don Bradman (Aus-40s)
- Viv Richards (WI-80s)
- Allan Border (Aus-80s)

There is applause. We grin at each other with appreciation. ‘How about Zaheer Abbas?’ says the quiet friend of the Pakistani journo. We all glare at him and he pipes down into his passion fruit.

Next slide:

All-rounders

- Garfield Sobers (WI-60s)
- Wasim Akram (Pak-90s)

I mention the word Hadlee. Ari and the Pakistani inform me that sadly there are no New Zealanders on this team. ‘What about Sri Lankans?’ asks Brian and we all snigger. This was 1994. We were drunk, but not stupid.

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Next slide:

Wicketkeeper

- Denis Lindsay (SA-60s)

And here the group erupts. Denis Lindsay over Tallon? Knott? Bari? Madness. Newton calls the list pathetic. The rest of the critics hurl their knives. Not me.

I saw Lindsay tour Sri Lanka as part of a Commonwealth side in the 1960s and keep wickets to the fire of Wes Hall and Freddie Trueman and the wiles of Chandrasekhar and Prasanna. I have never seen that level of agility in anyone outside of a cartoon film. Apartheid was responsible for many tragedies. Somewhere at the bottom of a long list would be the short careers of Graeme Pollock, Barry Richards and Denis Lindsay.

Next slide:

Fast Bowlers

- Sidney Barnes (Eng-10s)
- Dennis Lillee (Aus-70s)

Some say ooh. Some say aah. Some say Sidney who? I mention that the great Lillee took all his wickets in England, Australia, and New Zealand. That over a twelve-year career he never took a wicket in India or the West Indies. No one listens to me.

The clatter of plates and chatter of guests replace baila as the dominant noise. Across the ballroom everyone digs into the roast chicken and richly flavoured rice. But our table is undivided in its attention.

Who could the genius spinner be? A leggie like Grimmet or Qadir? An offie like Laker or Gibbs? A left-armer like Bedi or Underwood?

Final slide:

Spinner

- Pradeep Mathew (SL-80s)

And pandemonium begins. The Pakistani shakes his head and says he had nothing to do with it. Renga, Brian and Elmo hoot with laughter.

‘Y’all are cocked, ah?’ Newton launches into a tirade. ‘If you want to put a Lankan, put Aravinda or Duleep. Pradeep Mathew? How can you call yourselves sports journalists? Bloody fools.’

Ari puts up his hand. ‘This list is based on stats and natural ability. Both Mathew and Lindsay have strike rates and averages that rank them with the greats.’

I step in. 'I saw Lindsay in '63. Maara reflexes. Jonty Rhodes is nowhere. He jumped in front of the batsman to take a catch at silly mid-off.'

'You bloody drunkard, it was '66,' says Newton. 'Y'all are idiots. Mathew can't even make the current side.'

And in the economy section of the crystal ballroom, gobbling chicken buriyani amidst famous acquaintances, Ari and I begin telling them. About the multiple variations, the prize scalps, the balls that defied physics, and that legendary spell at Asgiriya. No one believes us.

Newton calls me a drunk a few more times. I call him a bribe-taking pimp. The rest of the table retreat, while Ari begins slurring.

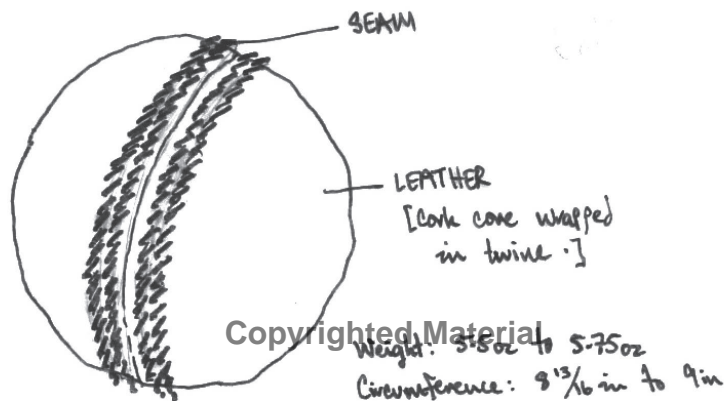
And as the temperature rises, I look around and see the man himself in a circle of people, looking lost. At his side is a pretty girl, whispering in his ear is the Indian skipper, hanging on each syllable are career reserve Charith Silva and Sri Lankan cheerleader Reggie Ranwala.

Mathew is glaring at me, as if he knows his name is about to cause a brawl. As if he knows I will spend the next five years searching for him. As if he knows he will never be found.

And then, Newton calls me a talentless illiterate who should be writing women's features. And then, Ari stuffs a chicken into Newton's open mouth. And then, all is noise.

Willow and Leather

The ball is made of leather with a hard seam running its circumference. The bat is made of willow. The sound of one hitting the other is music.



Birds

Today I cannot write. There are birds outside my window. They are being shrill. People, mainly birdwatchers, think birds are treasures of Lanka and their songs more melodious than the collected works of Boney M and Shakin' Stevens.

I find a fish market more melodic. These sparrows and parrots remind me of parliament during my reporting days. I cannot write. I cannot think. There are birds outside my window. So I will drink.

Spinners or Plumbers?

The GLOB once claimed that just because he could hit a ball with a bat it didn't make him better than anyone else. Was he being falsely modest or genuinely humble? Like many of our local umpires and selectors over the years, I will give him the benefit of the doubt.

But there is some truth to what he says. Does Sri Lanka need more schoolteachers, more soldiers, or more wicketkeepers? What's more useful to society? A middle order batsman or a bank manager? A specialist gully fieldsman or a civil engineer? A left-arm spinner or a plumber?

I have been told by members of my own family that there is no use or value in sports. I only agree with the first part.

I may be drunk, but I am not stupid. Of course there is little point to sports. But, at the risk of depressing you, let me add two more cents. *There is little point to anything.* In a thousand years, grass will have grown over all our cities. Nothing of anything will matter.

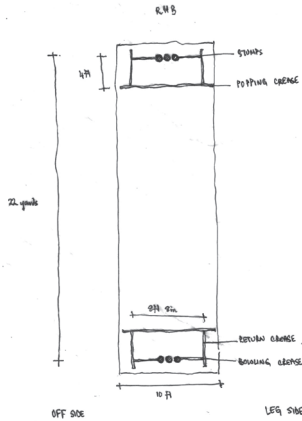
Left-arm spinners cannot unclog your drains, teach your children or cure you of disease. But once in a while, the very best of them will bowl a ball that will bring an entire nation to its feet. And while there may be no practical use in that, there is most certainly value.

Pitch

The battleground. 22 yards, punctuated at either end by three stumps. If the pitch is grassy and moist, the ball whizzes through. If it is wet or bone dry, the ball will spin. The pitch serves as a scapegoat for many failures, though it is seldom referred to by those celebrating success.

The Articles

Inspired by napkins and wedding punch-ups, I decide to write short articles on the ten greatest Sri Lankan cricketers of all time. I will not tell you who are on my list. I am already sick to death of lists.



At the risk of sounding like Renga, I will say that the articles are the best things I have written in forty-one years of wielding a pen. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, the *Observer* refuses to publish them.

The *Observer* and I have a history. I was there from '58 to '71, winning Ceylon Sportswriter of the Year in 1969. I left to find my way in the world. I then lost my way in the world, and returned a prodigal in '91. In between I had won a few more awards, done a stint in radio, been sacked twice from reputed newspapers and acquired a reputation as a belligerent drunk.

I'm not sure why the editor of the *Observer* despised me. It could have been my debonair, devil-may-care swagger. Or it could be the fact that I spilled brandy on his wife at a Christmas party in '79. He could not sack me before I was pensionable, for fear of labour courts. So, sadist that he was, he kept me away from the sports pages and put me on parliament duty, the role of a glorified stenographer.

He refuses to publish my articles, claiming, maliciously, that they are poorly written. The *Weekend* doesn't think so. They publish three before going bankrupt. Or more specifically, before going bankrupt due to their printing presses being set on fire by men with gold jewellery and cans of petrol a week after publishing a story involving the government and an address that was too accurate for its own good.

Kreeda, a magazine I helped start, publishes all ten, but has the circulation of an illustrated porn rag. Palitha Epasekera agrees to translate the articles for *Ravaya*, but that never happens. But then

in '95, over a year after they are written, *Sportstar* say they are interested in three: Aravinda, Sathasivam and Mathew. *Sportstar* pays handsomely, which is just as well, because the *Observer* is in the process of terminating my employment for freelancing for other publications.

This too is just as well. I am tired of sitting in parliament, watching fat men braying like mules and squabbling like infants. I send a letter to the company accountant on 26 April, the day of my birth, informing him of my recent elevation to the age of pensionability. I now never have to work or worry about drink money ever again. There are some perks of ageing.

There are also some perks of working forty-one years in journalism. Free buffets, free booze, free hotel rooms, free invites to functions, free tickets to matches. In exchange for no pay, no respect, and the very real possibility of being bludgeoned to death by a government-sponsored thug.

Cheerio to the lot of you. You will not be missed.

Sales Pitch

If you've never seen a cricket match; if you have and it has made you snore; if you can't understand why anyone would watch, let alone obsess over this dull game, then this is the book for you.

Definitely

Ari Byrd is my next-door neighbour. He teaches maths at Science College in Mount Lavinia and lectures at the University of Moratuwa. He calls himself a fixer of gadgets, but I would describe him as more of a breaker. His front room and his garage are littered with carcasses of video players, walkmans, spool machines and Polaroid cameras. He buys these gadgets through the *Sunday Observer* classifieds, obsolete technology with broken parts at a cut price.

'Wije, God has given you a gift that you are wasting,' he says. 'You must write a book.'

This was many years before the stomach pains.

'Yes. Yes,' I reply. 'One day, the stories I will tell... Definitely.'

Promises uttered by Sri Lankans ending in the word definitely have a high likelihood of being broken. We use the word as the Mexicanos would say mañana.

My friend Jonny Gilhooley likes the articles and is not a man given to insincerity. He says, 'WeeGee, me bonnie lad, you should write for

Wisden.' Renganathan calls me and says 'Karu, those were the best articles I have ever read.'

Of course, there are the critics. My sweet, darling Sheila in her kind, gentle way says, 'What, Gamini? Those three were hopeless, no? Your Duleep and Arjuna ones were better.'

Thankfully, the years have given me the maturity to deal with criticism. I bump into my nemesis Newton Rodrigo at a club game.

'Heard you got sacked from the *Observer*?'

'I retired. Unlike some, I know when to quit,' I parry.

'If that was the case, you would've quit in the 1970s,' he chuckles.

'When I was at the top. True,' I muse. 'As I recall, even in those days you were feeding at the bottom, no?'

He stops laughing. 'I don't have time to talk baila with you. Why are you obsessed with that Mathew? Your articles were OK. In the hands of a better writer, they could've been good.'

I submit the articles to *Wisden*, and receive no response. So in the early months of retirement, I spend my minutes hidden in my cluttered room, trying to write more words for syndication. I end up wasting afternoons arguing with Sheila about our son, Garfield. The boy is just out of his teens and shows no interest in anything other than listening to noise in his room and pretending not to smoke.

My favourite waste of time is daydreaming unanswerables about Mathew. Who did he get his talent from? Why did he not play regularly? Where did he disappear to?

I haven't yet told you about the Asgiriya test. I'm hoping there will be world enough and time.

The phone rings. The phone is always for Garfield. Giggly girls and boys shouting swear words. I have ways of dealing with them.

'Could I speak with DubLew Gee Karoonasayna, please?'

'Speaking.'

'You been writing for the *Sportstar* on Shree Lankan cricketers?'

'That is correct. To whom am I...'

'Great stuff. Especially that piece on the spinner Mathew. I saw him, you know, in the '87 World Cup...um...hold on, please.'

I hear the same voice barking in the distance. 'Oh, for fuck's sake... I thought we weren't going live. OK. OK. Now piss off.'

'Hello, Mr Karoonasayna...'

'Call me Gamini...'

'Mate, I've to go on air. Can you make it to the Presidential Suite at the Taj at 10?'

'Of course.'

'Oh, and come alone.'

'Definitely.'

And that was how I got to meet Mr Graham Snow.

Presidential Suite

It has its own entrance and its own lift. Both are carpeted and plated in silver, shined to the point of reflection. The lift is as big as my office room, designed, presumably, to transport bodyguards and entourages to the seventeenth floor in one go.

We aren't the only ones heading to the Taj Renaissance Presidential Suite. We share the lift with Hashan Mahanama and career reserve Charith Silva, both a year away from being immortalised as members of the '96 world-conquering squad. They are flanked by no less than five young lasses. All with straightened hair, knee-length skirts and varying degrees of make-up.

The security guards body-search me and Ari, and leer at the display of thigh and cleavage that they are forbidden to touch. Silva and Mahanama, knowing that they know me from somewhere, give me the tiniest of nods before shepherding their harem from the lift.

'You bugger,' says Ari as we enter the darkened room. 'This is a bloody opium den.'

'Just go, men,' I say, walking past supine bodies and crimson lampshades. The air is filled with smoke and desperation and the thump of something resembling music. Ari is prone to melodrama.

'If I didn't know better, Wije, I'd say we were at a party. As my daughters would say, we are crashing the gate. Are you sure this is...'

'Fellow told me 10 at Taj Presidential Suite,' I say, pasting a smile on my face to mask my terror at being surrounded by women in various states of undress. We elbow our way through the corridor, glancing at the populated rooms. In some, people are sitting on rugs and puffing on teapots made of glass. In others, strobe lights are flashing reds and pinks and a man with headphones is scraping a table.

'You wan tequila?' She is Chinese and blonde and wearing boots and shorts. Her friend looks East European and is wearing no bra.

'Tequila. Tequila. Gimme. Gimme,' says the Russian. She looks at us.

'Uncle. Ko-he-ma-da?'

'Kohee-meedi...' mimics Marilyn Ming-Roe. They both giggle.

Ari and I down the shots.

'You no take lime and salt?'

Unsure what to do in these situations, I look her square in the breast and grin like a goon.

Ari takes charge. 'Is Graham Snow here?'

'Ah, you friend of Graham? We take you,' says the Russian.

'Graham is not in good mood,' says her companion, sucking on a lime.

We pass through rooms where expensive bottles of vodka are being emptied down unappreciative throats. Where young men and younger women wiggle to bone-rattling noise. I fancy I spy some famous faces, many, like me, much too old to be here. The Russian leads us up a spiral stairway to a garden on the roof.

Gusts of cool breeze take the sweat from our shirts. To our left is the open space of Galle Face Green with the Indian Ocean curling at its feet. To our right, a troubled city of lights and silence. A more spectacular view of Colombo I am yet to see.

Perched alone next to a table of bottles, puffing on a crumpled cigarette, is Gatsby himself, Mr Graham Robin Snow. He raises a solitary eyebrow.

'Oh right.' He rises. A giant in a batik shirt and a straw hat.

'Sirisena! Bring another chair.'

He squeezes our hands and avoids our eyes. He motions for us to sit and looks down at his slippered feet. 'Didn't know there'd be two of you.'

'This is Ari Byrd. My statistician.'

Unimpressed, Snow begins pouring vodka. 'Drink?'

A man with muscles in a white T-shirt enters carrying chairs.

'Siri, bring some ice, will ya?' Snow's voice rises with each sentence.

'Siri, I can smell fucking dope. I caught two of them having it off in these bushes. Tell Upul no fucking dope and no fucking fucking! I'll kick everyone out.'

Rambo scrambles down and barks orders at an unseen security guard.

We sit with our drinks, next to one of the greatest English cricketers of the 1970s.

'Are you married?' he asks. We both nod.

'Happily married?' All nods slightly more vigorously than I do.

'It's easy for you chaps. No offence. But you don't have women throwing themselves at you all around the world.'

I look at Ari, who looks at me.
 'I just didn't think she'd leave.'

And then the man who demolished Kim Hughes's Australians in '81 begins sobbing into his vodka tonic.

Nineteen Eighty-five

The very first time I see him bowl is on Jonny's massive TV during the 1985 Benson & Hedges World Series. That's when Pradeep gets me sacked from the *Island*.

I can blame it on the stakes.

On Jonny's coffee table stands a bottle of Chivas, a bottle of Gordon's and a bottle of Old Reserve. The winner gets all three, certainly a prize worth fighting for, but perhaps not worth losing one's job over.

Jonny Gilhooley, Cultural Attaché at Colombo's British High Commission, receives his stipend in pounds. He donates the Chivas. Ari receives rupees like I do, and a meagre sum at that. But he does not wish to appear ungracious and pledges an expensive gin. I have little money and less grace. The arrack is my contribution.

Jonny refuses to discuss his life before Sri Lanka. We secretly suspect he may be a Cold War spy in hiding.

'Jonny, are you a Cold War spy in hiding?'

After four pints of ale, Ari tends to forget what is secret and what isn't.

'Aye, bonnie lad,' says Jonny. 'And I'm also the bastard who's gonna take home ya bottles!'

The bet is not on who will win. In 1985, there is only one answer to that. The team that isn't Sri Lanka.

'Absholutely shuperb delivery.'

We stop our chatter and gawk at the TV. Is Richie Benaud saying something nice about Sri Lanka?

'P.S. Mathew's figures are not flattering. 7 overs. None for 51. But thish over hash been as good as I've sheen from a left-arm chinaman bowler.'

I will no longer reproduce the quirks of Benaud's speech. I wouldn't want to offend the great all-rounder. Ari, on the other hand, has no such qualms.

'This pious bugger gets on my nerves.'

On the giant TV in this air-conditioned room, Sri Lanka is suffering its seventh successive thrashing of the year. We will go on to be soundly

beaten five times by Border's Australians and five times by Lloyd's West Indies. But never more soundly than the match that day.

The TV is the size of half a cinema. When Jonny got promoted from press officer, he insisted on a cinema room, pointing out at high-flown meetings, in hifalutin tones, that screenings of French new wave and German expressionist films at the Alliance Française and the Goethe Institute were popular with middle-class Sri Lankans.

A sports fan like us, Jonny rigged the screen to the MI6 satellite and got live feeds of cricket, football, rugby and tennis. Taking advantage of unspent budgets and absent high commissioners, he equipped the room with soundproofing, a well-stocked bar and plush sofas.

Jonny always invited me and Ari over to the High Commission to watch live games and let us booze and shout abuse at the large screen.

And in 1985, Ari and I do both in abundance. We also play silly games. Like the Seamless Paki, a contest of who could construct the longest sequence of overlapping Pakistani cricketers' names. At the time of writing, Ari is reigning champ for 'Saqlain Mushtaq Mohammad Wasim Akram Raza'.

Today's bet has to do with our favourite commentator, Graham Snow. The only one who has nice things to say about Sri Lanka.

'I'm with ya, Aree mate. Benaud's a tosser,' says Jonny. Jonny's accent is a mixture of Geordie and Punjabi, two very similar dialects spoken by two very dissimilar people. On screen, with Australia 262-1 off 37 overs, Richie Benaud does not respond.

Black and white photographs adorn the lime walls. Lord Mountbatten, Sir Oliver Goonatilleke, Queen Elizabeth, Sir Richard Attenborough, the current High Commissioner. The air conditioner is set to just right.

'I say wicket this over,' says Ari. 'Loser serves drinks.'

The *Island* editor had insisted I hand in my match report by midnight. I make a mental note to depart early. And then Mathew bowls a perfect googly.

Anticipating the off break, Dean Jones dances down the pitch, his sunglasses glinting. The ball pitches on middle and leg and cuts sharply into the gloves of keeper Amal Silva, who whips off the bails. Jones out for 99.

'What did I tell you?' squeals Ari. 'OK. Jonny, for calling the great Richie a tosser. Gin for me, arrack for Wije and make yourself something nice.'

Ari turns his thinning head of hair towards me. 'I say, who is this fellow?'

'Pradeep Mathew. Our latest partner for DS.'

The veteran leg spinner D.S. de Silva was in his forties when Sri Lanka gained test status. The 1985 series was his swansong. It would be ten years before Sri Lanka had a regular wicket-taking spinner in the side. In the decade in between, we experimented with seventeen different ones.

When Mathew removes Allan Border's leg stump with what can only be described as a slow, reverse-swinging yorker, the three of us scream. The ball, curling in the air from off to leg and snaking under Border's bat, causes Richie Benaud to launch into uncharacteristic hyperbole.

'That'sh one of the mosht amazing deliveries I've sheen.'

Inside the soundproof cinema room there is the din of three men cheering lustily. A change in commentary: Benaud is replaced by Bill Lawry and former England captain Graham Snow.

I cast the first stone. 'For this session, three.'

Jonny chuckles. 'You must be barmy. If this spinner takes another wicket, he'll do at least seven.'

Ari has a notepad ready. 'OK, gentlemen. Round 4. How many times will Graham Snow say 'these little Sri Lankans'? Wije three? Jonny seven? I'll say five. Starting now.'

'Morning, Graham. Morning, all,' says Bill Lawry.

We wait with bated breath.

'Morning, Bill,' says Graham.

'Interesting passage of play here. Can Australia make it to 300?'

'I tell you what. These little Shree Lankans are finally putting up a fight.'

We clink our glasses and growl.

'And it's all thanks to this young man, Mathew. He's bowled a blinder.'

David Boon misjudges the flight of a wayward chinaman and spoons a catch to Madugalle. Australia 277-5. We gape at the screen.

'Another one! That's his third. Look at these figures. First spell, nothing to write home about. But this spell. 3 overs. 3 for 4.'

'Well, not being unkind, Graham, but till the last hour, this Sri Lankan team has been nothing to write home about. Comprehensively beaten in seven matches.

Ari takes a swig of his scotch and then winces, realising Jonny has forgotten the ice and the soda.

'Blow it out your arse, Bill,' sneers Jonny. 'How boring was he? Worse than bloody Boycott.'

'You're talking rot,' I say. 'I saw Lawry stand up to a blitz from Trueman and Statham at Lord's. He was class.'

'You applying for an Aussie visa, WeeGee?' Jonny winks at Ari.

'I have no intention of leaving this miserable isle.'

'Wije. Stop bullshitting, men,' says Ari. 'Bill Lawry was a corpse with pads.'

At that moment, with the score on 290, the corpse bursts to life. 'GOT HIM! What a ball! Young Mathew traps Simon O'Donnell leg before.'

'That was a top spinner,' Graham Snow observes. 'I tell you what. This boy has them all. Chinaman, googly, top spinner and that amazing arm ball that got rid of the Aussie captain.'

Australia end up on 323 for 7. Snow says the phrase seven times during that session and twenty-three times for the whole game. Jonny wins the round, but I win the three bottles. Ari's scoring system is as mystical as the Duckworth-Lewis. I will not even attempt an explanation.

Mathew adds Kepler Wessels to his 5 scalps for 65 runs, but Sri Lanka can only muster a paltry 91, with only two batsmen reaching double figures. It is Sri Lanka's heaviest defeat.

The next day's newspapers lament our dismal batting. None mention Mathew's 5-65. The *Island's* match report would have, had its writer handed in his copy on time.

The Shrink

All credit should go to Ari. While I pour the vodka, he sits with his arm around our host, sharing a cigarette and his secrets to happiness.

'Graham, I have always admired your grit.'

When Ari says it, it doesn't sound like brown-nosing.

'You weren't the most talented, but you were the toughest. The only fellow to stand up to that Lillee and Thompson.'

As I gaze at Colombo's rooftops, from the corner of my eye I spy Graham burying his head in his palms. How drunk is he and why is he discussing his marital problems with two strangers?

'Glenda has left. My boys ignore me. SevenSports may not renew my contract. That's it, I suppose,' he sobs.

'Stop this nonsense, Graham. Don't become a spectacle.' Ari is strict. 'Who are these people downstairs?'

‘The Indians paid for the party.’

‘What Indians?’ I ask.

‘From NSPN. A sponsorship deal for the World Cup.’

I decide to join the group therapy session. ‘See, Mr Snow. NSPN! What is SevenSports? People respect you. Make cricket the centre of your life. And everything will follow.’

Ari glares at me. ‘Wije. Don’t talk crap. Make God and your family the centre. What is cricket?’

‘Good advice,’ I say. ‘Except for two things. His family hate him. And God doesn’t exist.’

White T-shirt Rambo interrupts what could have escalated into World War III. With him is a middle-aged man wearing a tie and a just-been-dragged-out-of-bed expression. ‘Mr Graham. Dr Nalaka is here.’

The man blushes, scratches the back of his head, and then extends a limp wrist. ‘You called for a psychiatrist. I am Dr Nalaka. Sri Jayawardenapura Hospital. I don’t usually do night calls...’

‘You’re the shrink?’ Graham Snow looks at me and Ari. ‘Then who are these jokers?’

I flash my old press pass like a cop with a badge. ‘W.G. Karunasena, *Sportstar* magazine.’

Ari bows. ‘Ari Byrd. Scientist. Statistician.’ He extends his hands like a preacher.

And then the man who had been sobbing just ten minutes earlier bursts into uncontrollable laughter.

Till the Ship Sails

6 balls make an over. 50 overs, or 300 balls, give or take, make a one-day game innings.

In a test match, each team bats twice. An innings ends when ten batsmen are out or when the batting captain declares the innings closed. This is not measured in overs, but in days.

From the dawn of cricket till the late 1930s, when yours truly was still a toddler chasing lizards in Kurunegala, test matches were timeless, played till both sides were bowled out twice. At first, games did not last longer than seventy-two hours, but then, as the sciences of batting and pitch making developed, matches began to stretch to four, five, sometimes six days.

In 1938 a test between South Africa and England went on for nine days and remained unfinished. Pursuing 696, England had to stop their run chase at 654–5 as their ship back to Blighty was ready to leave.

After that, test matches were restricted to five days. Some say they are still too long; I think they are just right.

These Little Shree Lankans

‘I’ll tell you what I love about you Shree Lankans?’

The shrink has been paid a consultancy fee and sent home while we do his job for him. We help Graham through the first bottle and most of his depression. His wife had caught him with a barmaid in the West Indies and left, leaving a hole in his life that no amount of parties in presidential suites or sponsorship deals could fill.

‘You’re passionate about the game, but you’re also easy-going. The Indians and the Pakis have gone absolutely bananas.’

It is November of 1995. Little do we all know that in less than six months Sri Lanka would also be going bananas. In the preceding year, Sri Lanka had won their first series overseas, humbling Craig Turner’s New Zealanders, and had become the first team to beat Pakistan at home in fifteen years. Later this year they would travel to Australia, where Darrell Hair would no-ball Murali for chucking, setting in motion a chain of events that would climax at a World Cup final in Lahore in March 1996.

‘I read all of your articles,’ says Graham. ‘The *Times* could do with writers like you.’

I hope he means the *Times* of London.

‘England it’s all Cantona and Mansell. No one gives a flying fuck about cricket. But suddenly these little Shree Lankans are capturing the imagination of the world.’

Ari and I chuckle quietly. We decide against telling Graham Snow about our silly game. ‘Sir Richard Hadlee reckons they might grab the Cup. Not sure I’m sure about that...’

‘Graham, please.’ I begin counting down my fingers. ‘Look at our batting. Sanath, Kalu, Guru, Aravinda, Arjuna, Roshan, Hashan...’

‘Flair at the top, maturity in the middle, discipline lower down,’ Ari says with gusto. ‘And our bowling and fielding are much more focused.’

‘For the first time,’ I say, ‘we are real contenders for the Cup.’

‘Hmm. You may well be right,’ says Graham. ‘This fella Mathew. Will he play?’

Ari and I exchange glances. Pradeep Mathew had not played a test since the 1994 Zimbabwe tour. He was a surprise selection for the tour to New Zealand, but did not play a single game. I attempted to contact him when researching the *Sportstar* article, but the Sri Lanka Board

of Control for Cricket, SLBCC, refused to give me his details. He did not play in that year's domestic season. There were murmurings of a serious injury.

'You know that boy holds the record for best bowling in a one-dayer,' says Graham.

'You are mistaken,' says Ari. 'That is Aaqib Javed with 7 for...'

'7 for 37. Right. Mathew got 8 for 17.'

'Impossible,' says Ari.

'Wanna bet?'

'You don't want to bet with me, Mr Graham.'

'Listen,' says the great man. 'There are two reasons I called you here. One is for a business proposition. The other is to show you this...'

He pulls an envelope from his shirt pocket. And right then, the Russian brunette, formerly bra-less, now topless, runs into the garden, chased by Rambo – and Mohinder Binny who is wearing nothing but boxer shorts. Ari and I look on in disbelief. The Russian is rolling on the tiles while Binny tries to hold her down. We are unsure if she is laughing or crying.

'This is not an opium den,' says Ari. 'It's a bloody orgy house.'

We both shrug, clink our glasses and stare at the envelope while Graham Snow yells raw expletives at Rambo.

All-rounders

An all-rounder is a player who can bat and bowl. A genuine all-rounder should be able to make the team on either skill alone. A genuine one is as rare as a punctual Sri Lankan.

There are plenty of bowlers who can bat a bit, and plenty of batsmen who roll their arm over occasionally. Such players are patronisingly described as 'useful'. The New Zealand team once comprised eleven such 'useful' players, prompting the Turbaned Indian Commentator, or TIC, to remark, 'I bet even the sheep in New Zealand can bowl medium pace and bat number 7.'

Nineteen Eighty-seven

The 1987 World Cup was the first to be held outside of Blighty. It was the beginning of the eastward march of cricket's power base. A move that would be completed by the time Sri Lanka held the trophy aloft nine years later.

In '87, the number of overs per innings was reduced from 60 to 50, giving Lady Luck a greater hand in close games. Spin replaced pace