

MEMORIES ON MY MIND

The Broken Door

by

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The year is 1967. Fresh on my mind is the voyage back to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) from England on a P&O Liner, accompanied by a baby, my first born, only 29 days old, and a roomful of gadgets and appliances. She and her doting parents were then persona-non-grata in my family. However, when mother saw her first grandchild, a gurgling and cooing infant, maternal instincts surfaced forcing aside the issue of communal difference. We tickled her and the little face broke into a toothless grin. We danced around her; she laughed and the sounds of the baby's laughter overcame opposition. Before Suri was two years old, mother accepted not only her first grandchild but her renegade parents also.

Before I narrate how it came about, I must go back to recall the time when we were cussing each other: mother over loss of her daughter who brushed tar on her face, and I, because they disowned me. To quiet a family crisis, I accompanied Jey to England in fall of 1966 on a stressful journey to have my baby in London. Before taking leave, I met the Governor of the Central Bank of Ceylon, Mr. Rajapathirana. He gave some fatherly advice that, without regard to consequences, went unheeded.

"I was talking to my wife last evening," he said, "about your decision to go to England for the confinement. She thought it unwise and I concur. You have many friends here to help. Why don't you talk to my wife before you do anything so rash?"

I gave him a polite smile I could not stop the events I had set in motion. My apartment was vacated, the furniture sold, and the airplane ticket bought. I was also in a cussed frame of mind. Disregarding his and everybody else's sound advice, to England I went, to have my first baby.

Jey was enrolled at University of London for a Master's degree, a course of study funded by a fellowship of United Nations to Ceylon. He spent almost all daytime in the University leaving me alone and later when our baby arrived to also take care of her. He said he had neither the time nor energy after a stressful day at work to lend himself to housework.

I remember those bitter cold days in a small apartment on Marmora Road in Southeast London awaiting, for three long months, the birth of my first child, disquieting because of the lonely experience in winter weather without money to heat the apartment, coping with agitations of inexperienced motherhood, feeling wretched about the stillness of life outside and the fullness of the life growing within.



..the man-made England..”

After the baby was born, I could take it no more. I told Jey, “It’s too much work for me. There is no help to take care of the baby, no help in the kitchen, no help to clean the apartment; no one to talk to and no recourse to anyone in case of an emergency. Anyone seeing me now would think I am your indentured servant.”

“But what can I do?” Jey said agitatedly. “We live far from the University because of rent considerations. We can’t afford anything better with my small stipend. I can’t return home during the day to help you. It takes me at least an hour to travel from Marmora Road to London University and another hour to return. All I can do is to help you with grocery shopping in the evening or on Sunday.”

All of which was true; but he was not a homemaker. Any situation involving housework was craftily avoided. Looking back on our forty-plus years of marriage, he still is as he was then. Jey does not like work, period. In the beginning, I hoped he would change, but the change did not happen. I was on maternity leave for the last trimester of pregnancy and three months thereafter. For nearly five months I lived mostly by myself thinking that I was making sacrifices for the cause of raising a family. I thought of doing something to escape from the shabbiness of our milieu, decorating the living room with a small vase of flowers and hanging a colorful poster. For a few hours I felt good. I had to invent a more enduring recreation to take my mind away from my misery. I was in a city I knew so well. I had the confidence to move about London freely. Even in the last trimester of my pregnancy, in fact the day before water broke and I went into labor, I rode the bus from East Dulwich to Central London, to the Reading Room of British Museum, a routine I had established during vacations from Cambridge University. The year-end examination being an event of the past, I read for pleasure, often reading the diaries kept by an early British colonist, a young teenage man,

perhaps the second or third son of nobility or clergy, sent to find a vocation on a tea estate in the hill country of Ceylon. How to feel sorry for myself upon reading it? The entries in that diary described excruciating hardships endured by a lad much younger than I in a more inhospitable and pathetic environment:

Tea was being planted all over central provinces of Ceylon. Roads to those plantations were then unpaved, traversing between rock and cliff; transportation up those treacherous winding tracks into Nuwara Eliya and beyond were horse drawn carriages. Often, even gravel roads ended at the periphery of a plantation. The young man rode a horse-drawn wagon to his destination, a tea estate somewhere in hill country of Ceylon. Horses galloped or trotted, according to their fatigue and whim, struggling up a steep mountain road often no more than a track amidst that rocky terrain, for many, many days and sometimes far into the night. As the carriage approached his destination, it began to rain. Such a blinding tropical rainstorm he had never before seen. The track also narrowed to a mere trail into the surrounding forests of trees and tall grass. The wagon could take him no further; its wheels were getting bogged down in mud, and the horses' hooves were sinking in. The driver dropped him off by the wayside, dumped his bags beside, said "Farewell" and waved his arm in the general direction when asked to show the way to his destination; that was all; neither man nor dog to be seen and no sign of habitation either. The fearful and hazy wilderness was all his eyesight, blinded by pelting rain, gave of the surroundings. He was scared stiff and frantic in a strange country, abandoned, bewildered, so sadly alone, and having no idea how to proceed. After the wagon had disappeared from sight, a strange sensation of unease in his legs made him look down at his booted feet. He was repulsed by what he saw- creatures he had never before seen were inching up his boots, crawling under his leggings and on to his legs. The rains had brought forth bloodsucking leeches- swarming and feasting on him. His predicament was heartbreaking. Desperate and not knowing what else to do, he squatted precariously on a nearby rock, and began to pull out the vermin as fast as they were hooking on- a completely futile task. Seated on that rock in the blinding rain, he began to weep like a child!

I imagined that his despair converged into a knot of revulsion that constricted his throat like the feeling I had many a time in those days. I read the entry in that young man's diary, over and over again, because it transported me to a time and place where greater loneliness and misery than mine were described. I was beginning another phase of life when I sought solace and counted blessings by stacking my misery index against that of

someone even less fortunate than I. Since then I have tried to live like little Pollyanna looking for something to be glad about even amidst sorrowful circumstances.

It has been so ever since. Those days of dreaming that enterprise would end in triumphant success were gone. My hope that hard work, indefatigable toil, and sleepless nights were all it took to reach a small place at the top had also been swept away by hurricane force events. I had gotten too far out of sync with my parents' generation and far ahead of my own. I had also not foreseen how much resentment a Cambridge education would generate when a woman so fortified worked in a public office.

The memories lodged in my memory are painful to recall. I remember the shabby kitchen in our apartment on Marmora Road in East Dulwich, England. The kitchen and toilet shared space; with a stove for cooking at one end and a claw-footed bathtub at the other. It did not seem so bad when we saw it first because the lid covering the bathtub recently painted white blended well with the other furniture and appliances in the kitchen.



“..the bathtub covered with lid was the kitchen table..”

During the day, the bathtub covered with lid was the kitchen table on which things needed for cooking were placed; later, at dinnertime, it swiftly converted into a dining table at which Jey and I sat to eat our evening meal. An hour later it became the bathtub!

“How appalling to so improvise,” I said brimming with disgust, “Whoever thought of putting the bath in the kitchen?” I asked Jey.

“Don’t think about it; just pretend it isn’t a bathtub,” was his mild and indifferent response; a ten worded, far more than he would usually have said!

“It’s easy for you to say so because you’re gone all day. If you were in my place, I bet you wouldn’t stop complaining either,” I bristled. Our dialogue had passed from the stage of civility to one of rage and despair; I raging and he, not listening.

I looked for the silver lining in that dark cloud and found that he ate anything I set before him without either praise or rejection. It was gradually dawning on me that marriage, in my time, whether in the backward Kingdom of Saudi Arabia or the mighty United States of America, institutionalized a woman’s role as homemaker regardless of how educated or emancipated she was; in my case it was most exasperating because housework was unshared between husband and wife; if he drank the cup of tea I made for him, he gulped it down and left the cup on a table for me to later clear, wash, dry and put away. It was degrading because it came without remuneration or reward and always without acknowledgement or praise. It was a cultural pattern, handed down from one generation to the other, and it had already begun to take shape within my family: I bore children and reared them; if there was no cook, I functioned as the ‘cook woman’, no janitor, then as the ‘char woman,’ no tutor, then as teacher, and so on. I would go out and perform the role of gardener also, if the garden needed care. I, the educated and emancipated woman, performed all those chores and brought home the bacon! Women of my generation played the multi-faceted role of ‘professional’ wife and mother long before society stumbled upon power sharing within homes where husband and wife were both professionals.

My educational background was impressive. Mother hoped I would be more privileged than her, but I was living a menial life in a foreign land with no money to spare; it was my misfortune to be like the servants in her household because I had none to do the work they did. She knew exactly where her kitchen ended and bathroom began. I was lonely, poor; without help or companionship, forced to spend the good part of each day in a makeshift kitchen that was also the bathroom. There was such a lot to do before the conversion from bathroom to dining room, and after dinner such an awful lot to undo the conversion. Even though I doused the setting with turmeric diluted in water and Dettol, both disinfectants, it felt like we were having our meals in the toilet! For someone as finicky as I, how disgusting the improvisation and how I shuddered each time the bathroom was dismantled and converted to the kitchen table for dining purpose. After dinner, pots and pans, plates, cups and saucers and cutlery were quickly washed, wiped and stashed away in a small cupboard, the lid raised and wedged against the bathtub and wall, and the kitchen became the bathroom.

How over-stimulated my sensitive nerves at the sight of those improvised living conditions; eyes filled with tears that expressed anger and self-pity! They stood between Jey and me who I held responsible for our degradation. How frequently I disparaged the pitiful living conditions in Jey's deaf ears! On top of everything, there was no ventilator fan above the range top to expel the smells from cooking. The windows could not be opened during the night or day to air out the kitchen because of the freezing temperature outside. Onions and garlic were fried and curry added within that shuttered space; the smell of cooking was trapped within. We could not afford better lodgings because those of us who came from poor countries like Ceylon saved every penny to take back a car and household appliances to improve living standards upon our return. We could not otherwise afford to replace the ramshackle vehicles we drove or equip homes with labor saving appliances when reliable house hold help could not be found. Our salaries, especially mine, among the highest paid to government employees, were still insufficient to afford those conveniences of life. The banking tradition we inherited from British was designed to facilitate production and movement of commodities, mostly tea, from estates to ships that carried them to western markets; banks rarely, if ever, gave consumer loans in those days. Young students who went abroad to better their professional prospects put up with substandard living to save as much as they could. Their dreams of living it up back home co-existed with pitiful deprivation in the country where they had gone to get a higher education. How challenging those times; how hardworking and thrifty we were!

Etched deeply in mind is another memory- the birth of Suri with only a team of hospital personnel by my side, the pain of first childbirth dulling the feelings of loneliness and abandonment knowing that neither friends nor family were by my side. I could not afford to languish under postpartum depression either! After Suri was born, there was no time to feel sorry for myself. The nurse told me the following day that Jey came at six, four hours after I had delivered, wanting to know whether I was still in labor and surprised to learn that he was the father of a baby girl!

Suri was born at two in the afternoon in mid-December, the coldest time in England when the sun hardly shone. Sometimes, when the mercury plummeted, it snowed. Looking out on a gray sunless morning I took consolation in the thought that nature's despondency matched mine. There is comfort in shared misery. Thinking about a name for her, Jey and I decided on Suriya, the Sanskrit word for sun because our baby was born in winter when the sun did not shine or hardly. Suriya, we figured, would be a suitable

name for either a girl or boy, more appropriate for a boy several Indians told me later. Suriya brought sunshine to our lives.

Very early in the morning for the next three days, just as dawn broke over the eastern horizon, the relief nurse walked through the ward crying out, “Upsie daisies rise and shine!”

It was Christmas season, about nine days before the national holiday.

Laughter and good cheer echoed through the ward. Nurses and attendants following the spirit of the season reconciled duty with its joy. Every day the ward nurse wheeled in a trolley sitting atop of which was a cake with red candles to celebrate a birth that happened daily in the ward. If Suri had been born nine days later, on Christmas day, she would have been gift wrapped in a red welcoming blanket and showered with many more gifts.

Mine was a forceps delivery and my bottom was sore. Suri slumbered in my womb confident that the medical team would pull and her mother would push when the time came. In no way did she assist. I pushed and pushed, but she was in a deep sleep. She was dragged out with forceps screaming and yelling, tearing me up in the process; the imprint of the forceps was visible on her tiny forehead. “Don’t worry; it’ll disappear,” the head nurse said. Still hurting from stitches to repair a torn vagina during childbirth, I eased into the bathroom to soak the bottom in a bathtub of salt water. After that daily ablution, I was allowed into the nursery to pick up my bundle of joy. Babies were breast fed under the supervision of nursing staff who knew from experience that bonding between mother and child was critical to the child’s well being. The first communion was oral, application of a tiny mouth to draw sustenance from unwilling nipples so conditioned by a young mother’s inexperience and anxiety. I still upbraid myself for not heeding the voices of experience of the nursing staff in King’s College Hospital in East Dulwich. When I was not by Suri’s bassinet responding to her cries, I lay in bed staring at the ceiling and awaiting her next summons.

“Let her know you’re in control. If you run in every time she cries, she’ll cry harder and harder to make you go in there more often. Remember, crying is good for their lungs. She’ll develop strong lungs,” the ward nurse repeatedly advised.

Heartless it seemed at the time. I now wished I had heeded the advice given when Suri was only two days old. How much relief and comfort in later years if only I had! I was in that hospital for three days after Suri was born, three days of comfort and shared tribulations: meals provided, medication given at the appointed time, diapers changed when needed, babies fed by formula or breast in timely fashion, nursing assistance available in warm and comfortable surroundings and the genial staff always present to guide,

counsel and support. Those costs were borne by the National Health Service. On the third day after delivery I left the hospital with anxiety written all over my face and registered in my slow tread. They gave me a basket containing the white welcoming blanket, a tiny woolen bonnet, mittens and socks and many jars of orange juice, vitamins and other food items Suri and I would be needing in the following week; and thereafter, a weekly schedule to follow. It directed me to a clinic not too far from where I lived, to replenish supplies and for periodic medical examination: a weekly weigh-in and re-stocking of juice and vitamins for mother and child. In spite of difficulties adjusting to new routines without help, how blessed that Suri, British by birth, was so bountifully served by Britain's National Health Service. I had embarked on a course along which I counted blessings by the baby's spoon.



“..cold winds froze diapers hung out to dry..”

England is heated to no more than thirty-degrees on most winter days. Icy cold winds, blowing all the way from Siberia, froze diapers hung out to dry into sheets of parchment. When the wind-chill factor was worked into the outside temperature, it plummeted to freezing. I used a hot iron to dry a basketful of baby linen, one piece at a time, suffering being drenched in rising steam and despairing over my diminishment, from an officer in the Central Bank of Ceylon to an indefatigable Mary Poppins with neither pay nor aerial perambulation ability! The more formula I gave the hungry baby, more diapers to wash and iron dry and more work and drudgery, constantly hastening from one unfinished task to another, all of which wore me out physically and emotionally. There was no one to talk or complain to. When Jey returned each day, I began a prolonged soliloquy. Quite often Jey said

nothing perhaps because he was too tired to respond or had escaped to his domain in Pluto, or preoccupied with his research, or he seldom spoke to me because that was his way. I figured he did not want to know what happened to the baby or me during the time he was away, a thought that sometimes exploded into invective. It soon transpired that it is Jey's manner to talk as little as possible, not in the manner of the wise old owl that lived in an oak, rather, to avoid participation in any verbal exchange. Sometimes, looking in his direction, I found him snoozing after the big evening meal! I felt a great emptiness in my heart and often in the stomach because I had not eaten a decent meal the whole day, only snacking. I moved quickly through the many chores hoping to read a book or watch a program on television, but kept returning to the same mandatory tasks I had done only moments before. The loneliness surrounding me compounded the agony of child caring without help. In a way I achieved something as unforgettable as childbirth-getting used to worrisome loneliness. I was living such a solitary life that I came to accept loneliness as a perfect way of life. But I was afraid of the worry of caring for a baby.

What I remember best is the weekly bus ride to the clinic. I recall it in sharp but chilling detail. Planning the trip wore me out even before the journey began. Soon after Jey left in the morning, I finished washing up breakfast dishes, made formula, filled two bottles, wrapped one in a warm towel and put the other in the fridge; then, in more haste, tidied up the small bedroom and kitchen. Many things had to be done to ensure a smooth stress-free ride; tasks sprouted like weeds in early spring. I packed the nappy bag with few things making sure there was room to bring back supplies of medicine, juice and vitamins the clinic dispensed. A small handbag contained paper work, including the booklet in which the nurse entered height, weight measurements and other information after a medical examination.. I put the coin purse with bus fare in the pocket of the outer coat to easily access when the time came to pay bus fare. I took care to put on woolen pants, a light woolen overcoat and boots with sufficient traction to drudge through sludge-covered sidewalks. Above all, Suri was warmly attired and well padded with layer upon layer of woolen shawl and several layers of woolen bonnets on the little head to ensure safe landing lest I tripped and fell on the slippery sidewalk. The thought frightened me exceedingly. There was also an umbrella to carry just in case it rained or snowed. Slightly built, only five feet and two inches tall, weighing one hundred and fifteen pounds at the time, I carried a weight I could hardly bear for the next two hours or so and a heavier load was anticipated on return! Lips pressed tightly in stubborn determination, head held high, feet planted firmly on the ground, and

holding on to the hope that nothing was beyond my accomplishment if only I persisted, I set forth. I thought of Werle in **The Wild Duck**:

“There are people in this world who dive to the bottom the moment they’re winged and never come up again.”

Not me! I was not a quitter! The Hindus had the right idea when they conceptualized their god with many hands. An extra hand I needed to hold on the banister. I climbed carefully down the stairway from my second floor apartment to the ground floor, the baby shucked away in the groove of the left arm and elbow, the nappy bag, hand bag and everything else in the right hand; no hand for the banister. Keeping a careful foothold on each step, I came down to the dark hallway smelling of Indian cuisine; and rushed out through the front door to get a breath of fresh air.

The distance from the house to the bus halt is perhaps a hundred yards, but the load I bore made it seem like a hundred miles! The morning was cold and wet; the wind blew with fitful force. My coat soaked up moisture from the condensation. I tightened my grip around Suri to shield her from the penetrating cold. Drizzling rain or condensing fog, difficult to know which it really was, obstructed my vision. I saw nothing beyond a couple of buildings on each side; a near-blinding haze rested upon everything. I took every step with caution on the endless avenue flanked by brownstones, rising about three stories above the sidewalk, each looking exactly like the one on either side, shoulder to shoulder, all the way to its intersection with the main road. Above the rooftops, the bare branches of trees fragmented the gray skies. What an ugly little suburb it was! I recalled D.H Lawrence’s essay on **Nottingham**,

“The real tragedy of England, as I see it, is the tragedy of ugliness. The country is so lovely: the man-made England is so vile.”

Along Marmora Road I walked in careful step, took a right on the high road, proceeded to the bus halt, waited for the bus to arrive, and when it did on schedule, there was not an empty seat for Suri and me. To board the bus, I deposited the nappy bag on the topmost step and climbed in, picked up the bag and looked around at those seated and at the baby. There was always a Good Samaritan who offered his seat into which I sank with relief



“..an endless avenue flanked by brownstones..”

the trip so far had been without incident. It was a kindly act, a man or woman getting up to offer me a seat; it happened each and every time; and it was only when I got off the bus, the driver taking care to drop me off as close as he possibly could to the clinic, that thinking about the kindness from all those strangers, made me shed the tears that I was holding back all morning, bending my head low so that no one would see. Life was just like the landscape of those winter mornings along Marmora Road. Like those gray skies over London, there was no beauty in my life; my youth I had left behind; I had forfeited my happiness by my actions. The future was unraveling in the darkest possible way, and I dreaded its daily arrival. There were few illusions that the best years of life lay ahead. I was caught in the matrimonial vise.

The way back home was with lighter heart knowing that soon I would be within the security of my home. I was also feeling blessed to be so well served with baby food, orange juice and vitamins by the National Health Service. As soon as I was dropped off at almost the top of Marmora Road, I started to hum and sing, feeling energized beyond my own credulity.

I like to go a-wandering until the day I die.

I like to go a-wandering under the deep blue sky.

Tra la lee, tra la laa

Tra la lee, tra la la la la la la la la la

Lee tra la la, la la la la la la.

Enthusiasm overcame the discomfort of tired legs. I sang the energizing refrain just as I did in those days after a weary day in library I climbed the steps to Sanghamitta Hall at the Peradeniya University in Sri Lanka. I was gliding, sailing, levitating; with springs in the soles of my shoes and a song in my heart. I walked again between walls of brown houses to 32 Marmora Road. Little Suri slept soundly in my arms:

Of the other experiences, none unhappier than the need to feed shillings into the gas meter to heat the apartment for twenty-four hours. Gas costs were higher in London than in Cambridge. We three were living on a small student stipend intended for one. It was a time of deepest suffering that I had known so far in my young life. We withdrew money from our small savings account to pay the mounting heating bills. Even when the fire was lighted only the immediate surroundings were heated; yet the air in the whole room became dry as dust. Containers of water were placed in nooks and corners to improve humidity within. But nothing seemed to work; so I reduced the hours of shilling bought heat, and Suri got a cold. Her restless cries in the night awakened Jey. In addition to coping with the sick baby's needs, I also had to cope with Jey's discomfort. He wondered aloud how he could possibly work during the day when he got no sleep at night. I continued to work fearfully and indefatigably for the baby's comfort and Jey's peace of mind, I thought sadly of growing up in my parents' home served by a retinue of servants.

There were few days of joy and redemption, but far between. Christine Abbott, Secretary of Newnham College, Cambridge, sent a precious package for Suri. Seeing it, I became less despondent than I had been in a long time because of the recollection of her friendship. She thought kindly of me nearly four years later to send a package containing a woolen cardigan, socks and mittens for Suri. They were tiny and ever so pretty; the baby wore them as often as possible to the clinic and to Selvas. I wanted her to wear them out before we went back to Ceylon. Geraldine Godsil, a friend from Newnham days traveled all the way from Birmingham. She brought me a huge bouquet of flowers and a box of chocolates to brighten up my life. Geraldine, with whom I have since lost contact, will never know how bright it became that otherwise dismal day.

No account of Marmora Road days would be complete without reference to the Selvas: husband, wife, a former nurse, and their six children. The Selvas lived three doors away. Mrs Selva was a busy woman. Her daily chores were endless: feeding and caring for six children -one ill with some kind of palsy, getting the older children ready for school, ensuring their homework was done, house cleaning, grocery shopping, cooking for her large family, keeping them warmly dressed in winter and also going to work. So many mandatory chores carved out a daily life committing her to indefatigable toil. Even so, mindful of the trials they had been through as immigrants, the Selvas did whatever they could to lighten my burden and brighten my life. Mr. and Mrs. Selva were the only visitors I had in hospital when Suri was born.

“If you think things have turned out to be horribly bad for you, you ought to have seen how we lived in the beginning. When we emigrated from Ceylon to England, we all lived in a one bed-roomed apartment,” Selva said.

“During the day we ate the meals in the living room and got in each other’s way. In the night our living room was transformed into a laundry room. Clotheslines were strung across from wall to wall, and washing hung out to dry.”

What a hive of activity, it must have been, and what a cacophony of noise such improvised living would have produced! Their misery index was much higher than mine.

Selva played to perfection the indefatigable role of father to six children. I believe his sense of humor helped him cope.

“When we emigrated from Ceylon,” he said, “we came by ship to bring all those things our young family of many children needed, including a big granite slab to grind Indian spices, chili and thunapaha (curry powder). British custom officials were intrigued by it. You know those chaps; they don’t ask questions because they don’t want to be nosey and inquisitive. They probably thought it was a sacrificial altar. I saw the bewilderment on their faces, but I offered no explanation, allowing them to assume that we heathens beheaded chicken, made our offerings and said our daily prayers before it.”

Jey and I visited them sometimes, mostly for the sake of socializing because they were such gracious hosts, and the children, good baby sitters. I continued to complain to the Selvas about our small apartment, the workload, the loneliness or that Suri was dying because the tiny belly button had not healed properly. Mrs. Selva was a nurse in Ceylon and she knew how to care for a baby with a sore belly button! Knowing that Mrs. Selva lived three houses up the road helped to retain my sanity in a trying time of life.

Stashed away in the basement of the Selvas’ home were paraphernalia her six children had used and outgrown. There were boxes filled with useful baby things. Mrs. Selva bestowed on us as many as I was willing to accept: clothes, toys and even baby furniture. Even though she took great pain to explain that she had no more use for those things, I was embarrassed to receive so much and hoped that she would not think that our visits were because of her thoughtful giving. The small living room in our apartment filled up with clothes, toys, books, baby furniture and appliances that Selvarajah family no longer used, but Suri would, as she grew older. The miscellaneous collection grew: a baby walker, stroller, musical toys, soft balls, hard balls; dolls and teddy bears and even a baby crib.

I could not cope with the stress of changing nappies, making baby formula, washing and iron-drying nappies, trudging to the clinic once a week, feeding shillings into a gas meter to keep the apartment warm, hushing Suri's cries in the night so Jey could get sleep, and coping with his despair when he could not. It was time for Suri and I to go back to Sri Lanka. I could not take a flight back to Sri Lanka because I had a planeload of furniture and appliances to transport. The nurses in the weekly post-natal clinic were uncommonly thoughtful and ever so generous.

"You may not have all these vitamins, medicines, special formula and juice in your country. We'll give you a carton to take with you," they said, beaming with the joy of giving.

To take back the many things because of everybody's generosity necessitated a sea voyage. Suri and I sailed on a P&O liner when she was only twenty-nine days old, on a voyage lasting almost three weeks through some very turbulent seas!

Preparing for departure and its exhilaration kept my mind away from the scary adventure that awaited us. At Southampton, we entered a gangway leaving behind Jey and the Selvas who had also come to see us off. I turned around to wave goodbye. I saw, to my utter astonishment tears in Jey's eyes. He was too stoical to allow an outward demonstration of sentiment, either joy or sorrow. I knew he was trying to secure a safe vocation for himself amidst the political events in Ceylon that was demeaning to him and his community. Such tears as those Jey shed when we left are perhaps born of unvoiced despair.

How can I ever forget that voyage of many nightmares! The ship sailed from Southampton to Colombo, a voyage lasting for about three weeks.

"No, babies don't get sea sick," the doctor assured me prior to departure. I watched with a little regret the gray coast of England slowly receding until I saw land no more and the ship was surrounded by water all the way to the horizon. In the beginning the ocean was calm; the cold weather kept many indoors and the decks deserted.



A P & O Liner

We entered the Mediterranean Sea and a swarm of passengers broke out of their cabins to soak in the sun, most chattering in languages that I did not understand. The deck came alive with people parading about, many scantily attired in swimwear lay basking in the sun; a few young women were lying face down on beach towels with bikini tops untied. The sun-soaked deck was also where I spent many days. While Suri slept in the pram, I was sprawled on a deck chair reading a book I had borrowed from the ship's library. A few courtly English-speaking women occasionally stopped to get a better look at Suri and say what a cute baby she was. But I hardly related to anyone on the ship; it was just Suri and I.

Then followed bad weather and there seemed no end to it. The wind was raging and I sat in the cabin listening to its roar. The sea was howling and throwing up huge waves upon which our mighty ship rolled, heaved, tossed and trembled. Columns of water suddenly reared in front and splashed against the port hole, again and again, but our ship plodded on and on toward its chartered destination. Decks and dining rooms emptied; passengers, high on Dramamine, hurried to their cabins. Suri developed diarrhea, a diaper rash, and ran a temperature all in quick succession. Even when cured of these ailments, she cried without pause or for no reason at all it seemed to me, her inexperienced mother. Stormier seas were expected when the ship sailed into the Arabian Sea in a few days. I had to stop Suri from crying, because its high pitch was disturbing the occupants of the cabins next door. When we met outside our cabins one morning, four sour faced women wanted to know why the baby was so restless, even implying that I was doing something wrong. I seethed with indignation and walked away. They were proven right. One night, unable to bear the crying, I summoned the ship's doctor. He examined Suri carefully, and not finding

any indisposition, stuck his little finger in the tiny agonized mouth; she, sucked on it vigorously; he touched her bottom and finding it very wet, said, “It’s a sickness that a clean nappy and a bottle can quickly cure.”

How chastised I was! I changed Suri’s nappy quickly and went to the kitchen to prepare her feed. She fell asleep, wet her nappy and began to cry again, barely giving me time to snatch a little sleep. I saw neither sunrises nor sunsets, nor the shoals of flying fish that rose in the air in rhythmic dance. I had one thought in mind, to disembark when the ship sailed into Colombo harbor with a live baby in my arms. The ships’ laundry room was on the lower deck; it was a complicated excursion to go down there with a baby, a basket of clothes and washing detergents. It had never entered into my mind that there would be a thief among us. Before I returned to iron and fold the clothes I had hung up to dry, someone had stolen them! I stared around me bewildered by the blatant theft in a secluded domain. The thought of someone stealing the beautiful baby dresses expressed itself in indignation. For goodness sake, how could anyone be so hardhearted as to steal a baby’s clothing? It happened again and again, but I was afraid to bring the loss to the attention of the ship’s purser after my humbling encounter with the ship’s doctor. I held my tongue about my loss, but after the third time, I did not give the thief more opportunity to steal my laundry. I was not going to mount guard inside the laundry room, but I was quite ready to iron dry nappies and baby clothing, a technique I had perfected in the apartment on Marmora Road.

The day before we docked in Colombo, I ate three hearty meals not knowing the plight that awaited me in Colombo. No home, no car and no welcoming! The night before we docked in Colombo, sleep eluded me. At pre-dawn, I showered hurriedly, changed Suri’s diaper, put her in leak proof panties even though it was most unsuitable for the tropics, dressed myself in the lightest of clothing and raced to the breakfast room to snatch a breakfast and possibly a few apples. Many passengers were already seated at friendly tables their plates piled high with food, talking excitedly about travel plans. I edged past them to a table at the far end and sat by myself. I sat there without the power to move as if I had suddenly become a cripple. I had so many things on my mind. I tried to understand the soured relationship between my family and me. To complicate matters, a brand new baby was now involved in our relationship. Earlier I was the buffer between my parents and Jey; now I had to include the baby on Jey’s side. What difference would it make, I wondered? Suri, blissfully unaware of her mother’s predicament, slept soundly. Affected perhaps by the imperative of the Circadian rhythm, she had developed a routine of sleeping by day and

staying awake at night. On that day, it suited me just fine because she slept while I packed and emptied my cabin.

The ship was approaching Colombo harbor. The mood of impatience to reach Colombo turned to one of anxiety. I would soon know whether father or anyone else from my family would be out there to welcome Suri and me when we arrived; that mother would not was a foregone conclusion. With Suri wedged securely in my arms, I went out on the promenade deck to scan the coastline of my island that was slowly approaching to meet our ship. The deck was humming with sun-seeking passengers taking photographs of Serendip, the resplendent isle. How I wished little Suri could take in the beauty that I saw out there. The shoreline in the faraway distance was marked with coconut palms fringing the steel-blue sea. A narrow beach of yellow sand united the sea and the palm-studded shore to form a panoramic view of many colors: green, yellow and sapphire blue under the dome of a pale blue sky shaded with streaks of white clouds. Tooting a foghorn to alert those on the shore, the ship slowly inched forward.



“;the ocean surrounding the resplendent isle..”

Pretty soon, the sun was riding high in the sky flooding the land below and casting a golden glow on the faces of the whites who stood on deck watching earnestly the unfolding drama of the ocean liner coming ashore. The decks hummed with impatient tourists; sailors from the ship tugging rope shouted commands to men below; noisy porters, taxi drivers, itinerant traders swarmed the landing and wharf; hundreds of seagulls skimmed the ocean surface and soared wildly across the sky; altogether they wove a traffic pattern of utter confusion. .

I had so many things on my mind to think about, and one, most agitating: what would I do if no one showed up to welcome the baby and me? I watched anxiously hoping most of all, if all went well, for a little delicious welcoming. There I stood, the only passenger as it seemed, who was hesitating on the verge of tears to set foot ashore.

As I came down the gangway of the ship slowly following the trek of other passengers, carrying the baby in one arm and wheeling the small pram in the other, afraid that there will be no one out there to welcome me, my eyes caught a glimpse of the silver haired gentleman, my father, standing in the distance with C by his side. He was waiting as he always did for me, through good and bad times, believing quite like no other on earth, then or since his daughter could do no wrong. His demeanor was subdued, uncharacteristically, supercilious even. There was no laughter, not even a smile on his face. Only for a brief moment did it soften upon seeing the baby for the first time.

It was C who did all the talking; bless her! She asked me whether the baby was ill during the voyage.

What language to use, Sinhalese or English, to communicate the horror of that voyage? Neither C nor father would understand the horror I had just been through. The long sessions of rocking the baby while the sea rocked the boat until I was sick in the stomach; washing cloth diapers and iron-drying them to outwit the thief who stole those that I had washed and hung out to dry in the washroom, mixing formula in just the correct quantity even when my eyelids drooped from sleepless nights; sitting nervously on a deck chair and looking out on the endless sea with the restless baby in the pram by my side, hoping that the soothing wind would lull her to sleep that my coaxing could not. There were no words in either language to communicate what I had been through in the past three weeks.

“Yes,” I replied briefly, “We were both rather ill with diarrhea and diarrhea-induced fever.”

“You are a foolish child, to make this long and dangerous voyage with the baby; it could have been far worse. You have been doing so many foolish things recently. You should have listened to the Governor of the Bank who cautioned you not to go to England for the confinement. If you stayed in Sri Lanka, none of this would have happened. Unnecessarily, you endanger your life and the baby’s,” he said in loud voice, not even caring whether others heard him. I received his rebuke in silence.

How to tell father that I went away to England for the confinement to seek a little dignity both for Suri and me? Far better, I thought, to deliver my baby among strangers than within a family who had become strangers. I was

deeply hurt by mother's reactions and unforgiving nature; I thought that I hurt as much as or even more than mother. Knowing not what to do to make things better, and bewildered by my first pregnancy, I decided, rather foolishly, to teach everyone a lesson. I went among strangers to show those whom I loved dearly that neither did I want their help nor care for them as much as they did not care for me. And now I had turned to them because I had nowhere else to go, hoping for the sake of little Suri that they would forgive and forget.

C said, "I'm glad you went away. He'll talk big but can't move a finger to help you. He's a chicken little. It took me days to persuade mother to allow the two of us to come here today. It was I who did much of the arguing; father was afraid of confrontation. S vanished from the home, as she always does when there's any argument on this subject. She's such a scaredy cat. If it hadn't been for my big mouth, you wouldn't be seeing us here today. Do I get any credit or gratitude? Oh, no! Once you people are reconciled, you'll gang up on me. Now, when things are bad, I am the peacemaker. Two days ago, I persuaded mother to leave the house if she can't avoid making an ugly scene. She went to Panapitiya."

I turned to face father and asked, "Where will Suri and I go?"

I spoke coldly but distinctly. I was tired and impatient. My mouth and nostrils quivered a little. There was no more joy in the meeting. Resentment overpowered the joy I felt minutes before when I spied father and C from the gangway. The only real feeling I had was to get away from all of them and go down a rabbit hole into the obscurity of solitude.

I had been through a lot and foresaw more trials to face in the weeks ahead. No matter, I reflected, I was a mother. I had to shield little Suri from all the bickering, non-acceptance and unwelcome that made me feel like a pariah. No! I would not tolerate any of it. The sun was hot, the heat intolerable, far worse than the cold. I repented having left behind the freezing temperatures; there was no beauty in the country of birth, youth, illusions, hopes and dreams. Earlier, I was ready for every form of compliance and surrender; but having heard C's account of events, I decided not to be put down. Even if tears were pouring down my face, no one would know the difference between tears and the perspiration. Whenever challenged, obdurate sentiments surface to empower the devil in me. I waited for his response. What I needed was a little support and for a fleeting second it even seemed that I had recourse only to Saradha, my friend in the Central Bank who knew I was returning with the baby. She was someone I could always count on for support and advice.

Before father could say anything, I said, my voice heavy with responsibility,

“Don’t you worry, papa; I won’t make it difficult for you and C. Suri and I’ll check into a hotel until we find an apartment. We’ll go looking for an apartment tomorrow. I’ll contact Saradha. She’ll help me to find one in a safe area, one that’s comfortable, affordable and close to the Bank. We’ll go somewhere and have lunch; then you and C can drop me off at a nice hotel and drive back to Kandy. Mother can come back home. Case closed.”

I was continuing to experience fears I had anticipated before the knot was tied in Cambridge. My destiny was unraveling in the most appalling fashion, and father’s business like tone was frightening. Father and his friends warned me but I had not heeded. The moving finger had written and moved on. I had to cope with the outcome and repercussions of an irrevocable event called a forbidden marriage.

The decision to marry Jey happened in an impetuous moment, during the second of the three years at Cambridge University. We were sitting on cushions scattered on the floor of my room at 16 Grange Road, a graduate student residence of Newnham College, eating butter cake I had earlier bought at the bakery on Petty Curie, sipping hot tea I poured out moments before, and discussing the plight of the Tamils in Ceylon. Jey, like most of his community, was quick to take offense at real and imagined injustices perpetrated on them by the ruling majority, the Sinhalese. I was trying to explain to him that Ceylon, nearly two decades after independence, is a democracy in name only; it is still a feudal society. I was holding forth: “We’re all entangled in a web of family ties and connections. It’s nearly impossible to get to the top unless you know someone who’s up there or you’re well-connected,” I argued. “A young Tamil from a wealthy and high-caste family has as much social and political clout and advantage as a Sinhalese similarly endowed. Our society hardly ever selects without some reference to family ties. It happens too often. I recall an interview for a C-Plan scholarship I applied for prior to entering University of Ceylon. A few of us, bright, aspiring young men and women, were invited to the Secretariat for an interview. Mother and I took the express train from Kandy to Colombo and a taxi to the Colombo Secretariat; we got there in the nick of time, breathless and sweating. I was seated in the lobby with the other applicants waiting for my turn. Only one person had been interviewed. Suddenly, the swing door behind us opened and a young girl in a light blue sari breezed in. Without being summoned, she walked right past all who were waiting to be interviewed, pushed open the door to the office where the interviews were taking place and walked right in, leaving behind her the image of power and privilege and many bewildered and astounded people. Mother sought clarification from the peon who acted as the usher. The lady

was the daughter of the Permanent Secretary; there was no doubt in the peon's mind that she would be selected; we were wasting time. And indeed she was! It was a belittling experience and I was stirred to indignation. We were cheated of our time and money. Tamils and Singhalese both suffer from the same discrimination. We're eager for social changes, unlikely to happen in our lifetime because of divisions on the basis of community and religion. Think about it for a moment! Do you or I know who our real enemy is? We stand divided and feudalism thrives. Remember the girl who brushed past me into the room at the Secretariat? I followed her to Cambridge! And a couple years later she followed me to the Central Bank and left us soon after. In the final analysis, if you have the patience to wait, justice prevails."

Jey was not listening because he had a more pressing thought on his mind. Suddenly, he popped the question when I was least expecting it.

"Will you marry me?" said a Tamil to a Sinhalese.

Cambridge was the proverbial ivory tower that sequestered me for three wonderful years from events back home. Young people from many different countries lived, side by side; we ignored our differences and were only aware of things that brought us together; we were all students of Cambridge University, one of the most prestigious of higher learning institutions in the world. Its liberal education gave strength and the courage to discount the opinions of elders of conservative mind. Some who we met in Cambridge did not even know where Ceylon was on the world map, let alone the fact that two communities, who looked so much alike in appearance, did not mix, like oil and water.

Jey too faced the problems I did, but he would not let anyone take away from him the power to decide his welfare and future. He gripped the plate, tipped it in excitement and spilled a chunk of cake on the rug. Knowing how meticulous I was, he tried to pick up crumbs and made a bigger mess of it. If I had been asked to decide at that moment, I might have said, "No!" He told me to think it over and let him know in a week. I was happy to be relieved of an immediate response. As soon as he left, I wrote to Zoe, my best friend, for her advice.

Zoe replied,

"You look like brother and sister. Now if I married a French or German, my parents wouldn't oppose; perhaps they'll be concerned and rightly so. My parents would be delighted even if I told them that I had fallen in love with an Indian and wished to marry him, they might approve grudgingly only because of cultural differences and the problems that might later arise. What is the basis of your conflict? My mother thinks that you two make a great couple; if you need parental blessing, come over to Finland and visit us!"

There was a knock on the door and as if my fate had ordered the intrusion, Faiza entered the room. Faiza, an Egyptian medical doctor, was quite unlike Zoe; she was not sparing in her opinion. I consulted her.

“What did you expect him to do? Date you for a few months and leave for home?” she asked.

“Faiza, you don’t understand,” I replied. “Our people are divided on the basis of caste, creed, community, religion, wealth and so forth. Each group thinks of itself as being superior to the others. There is some social interaction between the two communities; but hardly ever a marriage.”

After a moment’s pause when Faiza appeared to be reflecting on the situation more carefully, she added,

“Your parents might be proven right. There are occasions when we must consult custom and tradition, and marriage is certainly an occasion to do so.”

Faiza had the knack for arguing on both sides of an issue because she liked to be commended for her calm and reasoned judgment; but Faiza liked Jey and the balance of her opinion swung in Jey’s favor

Back home, in Sri Lanka, the two communities were fighting a civil war. Even in the best of times, back in colonial days, there was little social interaction between the two communities. Was inter-marriage the solution to the problem of communal conflict, I wondered. An inner voice warned me that I was likely to be grievously hurt by trying to set precedents. Mother would be traumatized when she found out that I sacrificed my Sinhala, Buddhist, and Goigama heritage. Would a day of remorse arrive when I would look back with regret on my infatuation? I was aware that I would not get even father’s support because he was always blamed for every misfortune in the family. To avoid tangling with mother on that important issue of a daughter’s marriage, he was most likely to go along with whatever she said. There was no way they would agree to a matrimonial alliance between a Tamil boy and me, regardless of his family background and economic circumstances. S would be horrified because the dereliction of duty on that occasion was far more crippling to the family’s honor than my brief flirtation with socialism. In eastern societies, marrying someone outside your own community or outside the caste even within the same community is far worse than not marrying at all. C and S, my older sisters, were still unmarried. If I were to marry a Tamil, their matrimonial chances were bound to diminish. Other fears flooded my terrified mind. Would this alliance force me to flee my country?

Which country would welcome us?

We were married in the fall of 1964. My youthful heart so full of love was split by fear of disapprobation of my elders.

In January of 1967, I was returning from England with a one-month old baby, unsupported, frightened and alone. The only support I had was the job in the Bank and the regular paycheck to pay bills. I had the courage of the impetuous: act now and think later. I had sold or given away our furniture before leaving for England. I would have to buy furniture for a bedroom and the nursery and also find a reliable nanny to look after the baby while I was at work. Fortunately, I had come back one month before leave expired to take care of the many imperatives and challenges a working mother faced. C was trying to tell me that I was alone because father, my best support, was a stick in the mud.

“Don’t be silly, child,” said father rather harshly. “If you listen to C’s rubbish, you’ll be sorry. She always tries to set one against the other. Your mother has gone to her parents’ home to care for her sick mother. She’ll be gone for a while. I don’t think your mother knows what she’s doing. A part of her wants you to be happy and your child to be safe and the other part is still very angry. Give her some time, child. I think she’ll get over her animosity after a while. She’ll come to realize that she’s the loser when no one else seems to care. These are wounds that time alone will heal.

Meanwhile, we’ll go back home, to Kandy where you can get some rest. Before she left, your mother arranged for Punchie Menika to come and help us. She’ll be staying overnight. She’ll help you to care for the baby. We can drive down later in the week to look for an apartment for you.”

All this was said in a tone that was different from father’s usual manner of addressing me. There was not the usual endearment; it was delivered as if he was addressing a stranger who turned up on his doorstep asking for assistance. But it was also a command uttered in a voice of authority that I remembered from childhood. I knew I could lean on him for a while, until I found other options. My lips quivered, but I was relieved to be dry-eyed. I resolved to fight my battles with courage and not let anyone know how hurt I felt. I knew that I was the cause of mother’s disappearance, but I did not contest the fabrication about going to an ancestral home to care for an ailing mother. Father was trying to mend broken fences, lend me a helping hand and heal wounds that I had inflicted. I could see that he was aching. His eyes did not sparkle as they used to whenever I met him after a long absence. His speech was not peppered with jokes that were so much a part of his exuberant personality. Remote he was, saying nothing except what had to be said. C did all the talking. I knew that mother did not want to greet her first granddaughter and me. She was avoiding the humiliation of welcoming an errant daughter on whom she had showered so much love and blessings, and who, despite her entreaties, married against her wishes. Perhaps father was

more forgiving because he knew how easy it was to marry against parents' wishes in our society because of many taboos of caste, creed, community, and religion, all of which defined our separateness, uniqueness, identity, and aloofness.

Father was there to welcome me because he was not alone in the fight. He would not abandon me no matter how dire the consequences, perhaps remembering his own lonely childhood after a philandering father had abandoned him and his mother. The presence of both father and C meant a lot to me; the sweeter for the sacrifices they both made. It was noble of C, to have ignored mother's argument that the reputation of the family was tarnished, and perhaps C's chances of marriage greatly diminished by my selfish act. I could not even imagine how the two plotted and planned to find a way of welcoming me when I wrote that we were returning to Sri Lanka leaving Jey behind to complete his studies. I would never know the severity of the conflict that raged in the home between two parents both of whom loved me, each in a special way.

In the time I spent in Cambridge, I learned how to vault over hurdles. One devastating day when I was packed and ready to leave for Ceylon, I was informed that my dissertation, two years of painstaking preparation and writing, needed more revision. My scholarship could not be extended, passage out of Cambridge was booked, the room I occupied, vacated, and my clothes and books packed and shipped out. I did not know what to do. I cried until there were no more tears. When crying served no purpose, I committed to the task of reorganization, rewriting and resubmission. I was not a quitter! At the time, it seemed that some evil force was erecting insurmountable hurdles along the track and the finish line was receding away from me like the horizon.

Barely four years later, a new crisis and a new hurdle confronted; the finish line was somewhere over the horizon I stood there looking at the sea without the power to move. The city took on a brighter, still brighter and burning glow of a tropical paradise. The humidity bathed me in perspiration. I got busy clearing baggage and issuing instructions to the two porters assisting us. Several hours passed by. The sun dipped beneath the horizon. Without a gradual transition from day to night, darkness fell like a shroud upon the city. A few streetlights came on at the appointed time, and more lights from buildings as it got darker. It was past our usual dinnertime before we cleared all the baggage, stuffed most into the trunk and mounted some on the roof of the car. Father, the magician, produced a rope and under his vigilant eyes, the two men pulled, tugged, shoved, heaved and tied the pram, stroller and everything else that could not be stuffed into the trunk on the top of the roof.

I stood by silently, watching their activity and softly rocking Suri in my arms. When father was satisfied that everything was securely strapped in place, we set off to Kandy, a distance of only seventy two miles, but more than three hours of driving time because he drove slowly taking care not to put pressure on the load sitting atop the car lest those tethers and knots gave way and the baggage dived down a irretrievable precipice.

When we arrived home, it was well past midnight. We had not eaten lunch. C shouted to Banda.

“Unload the car later! Tell Alice to serve dinner. We’re starving.”

We all sat down to the sumptuous meal swiftly served by Banda and Alice.

Soon after, I went about the many tasks of caring for Suri’s comfort:

mobilizing the nappy bucket and putting the soiled nappies in it, sponging her down in lukewarm water, pinning on a new nappy, putting her in a warm nightdress, readying the Milton bath to immerse the two feeding bottles, and making two bottles of formula, one to be fed soon after the ablutions and the other to store away in the fridge to give in case she woke up in the night.

Punchie Menika watched those proceedings with keen eye. Mother had instructed her to take over and care for the baby as quickly as possible. Alice brought me a cup of chocolate milk, protesting as she had done in days gone by, that I would sleep better. Some things never change, I thought. Because of father’s love, C’s unstinting cooperation, Alice’s enduring service, Punchi Menika’s role of surrogate mother, and the organization mother had set in place before she left home, a sudden feeling of security overcame me.

Everything was again quiet and peaceful, I thought nervously, fearing that those comforts would not last. I began a period of life when I was afraid to enjoy it thinking that the joy would be taken away if I did. You may call me a pessimist because that is who I had become. I slept undisturbed because Alice or Punchie Menika quickly awakened when Suri cried. Their actions added up, day by day, to make me feel welcomed because in unarticulated fashion, they told me that I had sailed back into the harbor of my home.

Within a matter of days, all were eager to administer to the baby’s needs and care for her comfort; they rushed to her side when she uttered even a feeble cry, frequently felt her bottom to see whether she was wet, dangled toys above her crib to keep her amused and happy, and cheered rapturously when the face dimpled into smiles. The formula was prepared, diapers washed, dried and ironed; and I ate rich and wholesome meals four times a day that I had not contributed a mite to make. Punchi Menike, Alice and Banda kept the house ticking away like a well-serviced clock. Banda was the best babysitter that I could have hoped for; the baby was never restless with Banda by her side. She was less than two months old, but already a charmer.

She kept the incorrigible Banda, about whom the mother ceaselessly complained, tethered to her side.

The clock was ticking away. I had to find an apartment in Colombo well before leave expired in three weeks. Father, C and I went down together, leaving Suri in the excellent care of, Alice, Punchi Menika and Banda; Alice and Punchi Menika to satiate a ravenous appetite, change nappies, and bath; and Banda to soothe distraught nerves whenever she cried by rocking her to sleep. Father was in communication with a friend who lived in Havelock Town, a well-to-do suburb of Colombo. He owned a spacious one bedroomed unit that, he thought, would be suitable for me. It was the annex of his large house that he had not rented before. Not only were we bound to be safe, he said, there would also be someone to watch over the nanny while I was at work. It was clear that the arrangement father alone had discussed with his friend was almost a done deal; we were traveling down to Colombo to confirm preliminary arrangements. I was allowing myself to be inveigled into a housing arrangement that I was sure to dislike. We drove early the next morning and about four hours later, went by to see the apartment. I could not have wished for anything better. There was even parking for the car within the parapet wall defining the limits of a spacious garden. The house had all modern amenities that the apartment we occupied on Marmora Road did not. The rent (“I couldn’t ask for more from the daughter of a friend,” the owner said) was well within my budget. Without further search in heat and humidity that neither father, C nor I could endure, we put down a deposit that the owner gently requested, We lunched at the Pagoda, a favorite haunt of father in days gone by, and drove back to Kandy before nightfall.

My problems were not yet over. I had to find a trustworthy nanny who demonstrated competence in childcare. Such a person was hard to find, search though I did far and wide. Neither father nor C knew where to look for a good nanny. It was the kind of job that needed mother’s help. Two days before I went back to work, I asked a peon in the Bank to help in the search. Finally, upon his recommendation, I employed his old mother, illiterate, with failing eyesight, and wobbly on her feet. She could barely pick up the baby!

“She’s in her second childhood,” father protested. “You’re going to be saddled with two children.”

“No other option. I’ll try out the arrangement for a short time and see how it works out,” I replied.

Before setting out to work each morning I gave Suri a bath; the nanny stood by holding the bath towel; I placed Suri in her crib; the nanny gently rocked

her; I made two bottles of formula, the nanny fed her one and I left the other in the fridge. There was an electric kettle with automatic cutoff, but try as I did I could not make her understand the small technological detail about the automatic cutoff. Afraid that she might electrocute herself while trying to pull the plug at the wrong end, I drove back each day at noon, during the lunch break, to boil water, warm the bottle, feed the baby, and change her nappy.

My friend Sarada, seeing me driving back and forth daily in stressful mood, offered to take me home one day. Amidst the chaos of my life and the many things oppressing the mind, I functioned efficiently when the tangled tasks I had to do were done in sequential order. I left office at half past twelve each day, drove through Slave Island and Cinnamon Gardens to Havelock Road, filled the kettle with water, flipped the switch on. In the two minutes it took to boil, took the bottle of formula out of the fridge and placed it in the bowl; when the kettle whistled, pulled out the plug and poured boiling water into the bowl. In those five minutes, made another bottle, placed it in the fridge, filled the flask with hot water and turned my attention to Suri; removed the soiled nappy, washed her and pinned two fresh terry cloths. Finally, before leaving home, checked again to make sure that the kettle was unplugged, hopped into the car and drove back to work; all those chores accomplished in the short time it would have taken to lunch in the cafeteria. All the nanny did was pop the bottle with warm milk in the baby's mouth and hold it there until it was drained. She knew one thing: how to burp the baby! There was hot water in the flask to warm the bottle I left in the fridge.

When an interruption or break occurred in the routine, it threw my mind into disarray.

On the day Sarada drove me, we talked about this and that, all the way from the Bank to the apartment on Havelock Road. I wanted the house to look neat and tidy to the unannounced guest and thought about that too. With one thing and another, all of which disheveled my well-ordered mind, I forgot to check whether the kettle was unplugged before I left the house. I remembered that I did not only when I was back in office and seated at my desk; I panicked! I drove back to Havelock Town as fast as I could, frantic that the nanny, spotting the unplugged kettle, and not knowing it had an automatic cutoff, would unplug it at the wrong end. I feared that I would find her sprawled out on the floor of the apartment, dead or in deep coma. I was nauseous from imagining an exaggerated outcome. I arrived only to find the kettle unplugged in unconscious move that habit engenders. I did not benefit from Sarada's help; so persistent my bad karma! When I told Sarada how it all worked out, she rebuked,

“Why on earth did you do such a stupid thing? I saw you unplug the kettle and wondered why. You would have saved yourself so much anxiety and trouble if you told me before you set off on that wild goose chase.”

Before Jey returned from England, and Suri almost nine months old, mother was wholly reconciled, which meant that she and I were going home every weekend and she more welcomed. Father’s prophecy that mother would get over her prejudices when she realized that no one else seemed to care had come true. On Friday afternoon, before the offices closed and the streets congested, I left the Bank and drove back to Havelock Town to pick up Suri and the nanny. Securing both inside the car as if I was the custodian of two infants instead of one, I drove for three hours to our mountain abode in Kandy. Suri looked forward to the weekly unions just as much as I did. Her excitement showed when we set off on the long three-hour drive every Friday evening. I was pleased to see mother take the best possible care of her first grandchild because Suri, going on one year, was already showing her feminine charms. She had a devoted following in our home up in the hills. They rallied around her yelling,

“Here, Suri, look! Suri, Suri, Suri bada, Suri wallah.”

Suri was jerking her head around, looking in every direction to catch every bit of the excitement and fuss generated by an infant in the household of adults. Suri brought them so much happiness for two days in the week, a baby for company without the responsibility of caring for its well being during the rest of the week. They gathered around the crib or the playpen from the moment she woke up in the morning until she dropped off to sleep at night. The grandparents’ home was filled with fun and laughter. Suri knew that the mountain abode was her home and that was where she wanted to be.

After Jey returned from England, we bought a house in Nawala; it was a nice house with a large garden. Soon thereafter, I was expecting my second child; and my work load did not let up even though I had three servants in the house: Elisa, the new nanny; John, the cook; Martin, the gardener who was formerly employed on a tea estate in the hill country; he came well recommended by its superintendent. I paid him a wage that the estate could not match. Food and wage bills were adding up to a chunk of my salary. Jey appeared to be overwhelmed by problems, real or imagined, in the workplace. The department head at the time wore his Singhalese ethnicity like an armband announcing a popular national cause and supported it with militant pride. It is a fact of life that among the mostly harmless, there are a few who think of themselves as promoters and defenders of a clan, their belligerence thrust out of the surroundings like an active volcano. In the

aftermath of colonialism when the country ought to have come together to build upon the infrastructure the British left behind, a new breed of politicians emerged like worms from the rotted wood, with the same old doctrine of “Divide and Rule”

The Ceylon Government under the leadership of a renegade instituted the **Sinhala Only** policy thereby legitimizing discrimination against educated Tamils. Jey’s salary was frozen at the low-level of entry to the public service. Annual salary increments were denied until he passed a Sinhala qualifying examination. Almost overnight because of the Sinhala Only Act, Jey became an outcast. For a young man without inherited family wealth, his vocation was all he had. So far nothing had come between his effort and performance: first class from the University of Ceylon, Captain of Athletics, University of Ceylon, first in his batch when recruited as Assistant Superintendent of Surveys by the Survey Department, a first from Cambridge in geodesy and surveying, and awarded a United Nations Fellowship to the University of London where he acquired a new expertise, photogrammetry. Then, the **Sinhala Only Act** came along to break the link between effort and accomplishment, and vault lesser to higher status and higher pay. “Sinhala Only” was the single issue on which Bandaranayaka won the elections and brought him and his family electoral victories for over thirty years.

S.W.R.D. Bandaranayaka, an able orator exercised his persuasive speech to promise progress for the Sinhala race that would surpass the glory of ancient kingdoms of Sri Lanka. It was a promise of progress through falsifications. His political message resonated among the Sinhalese. It was insinuated that the country’s economic and social problems were largely due to an inherited disadvantage from colonial times: perpetuation of English as the medium of instruction in schools to which the larger population had no access. This was clearly nonsensical. We were stuck in the groove of economic disadvantage because of our inability to diversify the structure of our economy. Ceylon became a dependent economy, so described because we were principally engaged in primary production; secondary and tertiary happened in Britain. The British left behind such a fine infrastructure that they did not inherit when they invaded and conquered Ceylon. How challenging to have constructed the road and railway line from Colombo to Kandy and from there to Nuwara Eliya with mostly pickaxes and hoes! A quarter century later, we, the inheritors had neither vision nor ability to change the structure of our economy that we volubly denounced as “dependent”. We inherited from the British the civil service mentality to sit behind a desk and shuffle files.

Social injustice in my country was mostly based upon feudal practices, such as electing to high office ineffectual descendents from either Senanayaka or Bandaranayaka clan; neither set high standards either for themselves or their country. They were sometimes dysfunctional children of radala (feudal) families on whom their parents bestowed the “divine right” to rule that they thought they inherited. To obscure and obfuscate the real issues of incompetence, inaptitude, nepotism and corruption, they found two scapegoats: the British and the Tamils.

One issue, **Sinhala Only**, went into automatic drive. The medium of instruction was swiftly changed from English to Sinhala Only, almost overnight, a serious setback to the economic development of Sri Lanka in the global setting of today. In the classroom, I, a teacher at the start of my professional career in the early sixties, was only one chapter ahead of the class in the textbook I used. There were no reference books. The small Official Languages Department was speedily created to translate from English to Sinhala. The reference books used in the universities of Sri Lanka were the few books translated by that Official Languages Department. Meanwhile the Library of Congress and the Reading Room of the British Museum, where millions of books in English were already cramping the shelves, grew because the brains of the world were pouring into their writing. Stricken by the crippling disease described as xenophobic nationalism, we fettered our access to the humongous fund of knowledge available in the English language. We shrugged off the rich legacy of the English language that we had inherited, not realizing that we would eventually become a less erudite people. Our declining erudition was overlooked amidst our growing belligerence toward the Tamil people. Claiming that the country would regain the glory of the lion race, “Ceylon” was wiped off the world map and renamed “Sri Lanka”. We hoped to impress the world. As for impressing the world, how I cringe when news media in the United States cite either Sri Lanka or Somalia to illustrate the case of backward underdevelopment. Had we foreseen the outcome forty years down the road, we may have felt less jubilant at the time those foolish policy changes were made.

One of the strangest episodes in historical and political annals of Sri Lanka is how we have avoided assigning blame to the perpetrators of these political crimes. We have ignored the fact that the policies of the Bandaranayaka clan adversely affected the security of Sri Lanka and took the country to the brink of a civil war. It is high time we examined the costs in terms of outcome of the two generations of rule by that dynasty. Thousands of lives were lost on both sides, property damaged, a costly war was needlessly fought, we

suffered an irreparable loss in productivity, and most grievous of all, is the brain drain of both Tamils and Sinhalese who fled to safer sanctuaries in the west. By legislating **Sinhala Only**, Bandaranayaka fooled the electorate through misrepresentations. Our ethnic differences were highlighted and our collective will manipulated instigating us to react even more fiercely against the Tamils than the lion from which the Sinhalese are supposedly descended. My ancestry is traced back to a North Indian lion, hence Sinhalese, ‘singha’ being the Sanskrit word for lion. There were lions in India in those days and judging by the following narrative, they were physiologically different from those roaming the East African plains today. One abducted a North Indian princess; they co-habited and the princess, not the lion, bore two children, Sinhabahu and Sinhasivali. Sinhabahu desiring to become the king killed his father and married his sister. They bore a son, Vijaya. The story goes that Vijaya was a hoodlum. He and his rowdy friends harassed the peaceful people in Sinhabahu’s kingdom, treating them harshly and arrogantly as a dysfunctional son of royalty would. Sinhabahu was enraged; his attempts to roar and snarl his son to a more decorous way of life were futile. As might be expected from a king directly descended from a lion, his fierce character precipitated a harsh response. None of the sentimental tolerance of an errant child in human fashion as Saddam Hussein or George Bush, Senior! The lion king could take it no longer. He rounded up the son and his rowdy friends, shoved them into a boat and pushed it out to sea. In other words they were banished from his kingdom ostensibly to give relief to his loyal subjects, but I suspect a less altruistic motive. He probably feared the son would one day do to him what he had done to his father. Sinhabahu rid himself of competition. Perhaps he remained the king of the pride to his dying day! Vijaya’s boat drifted along a southerly course and landed on the shores of my resplendent island, Sri Lanka, then inhabited by demons and ruled by a demonic queen, Kuveni. He and his boatload of hoodlums engaged the demons in combat, overpowered and slew many. Vijaya cohabited with Kuveni and became the king of Sri Lanka. Shortly thereafter, he abandoned Kuveni and his children by her to marry a princess from an Indian royal family. It is not clear from the narrative whether she was from the North or South. It hardly matters because, as I see it, my ancestry is beset by many revolting legends as can only be imagined by a perverted mind: bestiality, regicide, abduction, incest, demonic DNA, polygamy, ethnic cleansing, spousal abuse and desertion. I am descended from a clan of reformed hoodlums! Perhaps this perverted legacy has survived among some even after our later conversion to compassionate Buddhism! How else to account

for the atrocities committed by them, even by Buddhist priests, in our resplendent isle since the ascendancy of the Bandaranayaka clan? A heritage that perhaps served the Sinhalese race rather well in historical times supplied the motive for conflict. We were not led toward a new destiny of unity and prosperity; rather, the vainglorious promise to restore the whimsical ancient glory recorded in the reigns of Dutugemunu and Parakrama Bahu. The desire to regain our historical glory was so strong as to make it impossible to view and assess those ancient times realistically; we glorified and even sanctified those monarchies that held man in bondage. To justify



The ruined cities of Sri Lanka

ethnic purges, Sinhalese harked back to ancient cities of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa destroyed by the Cholas and Pandyas from South India. But the Sinhalese kings who reigned were themselves despotic rulers who compelled ancient stonemasons and artists to slave labor. Robert Knox's **An Historical Relation of Ceylon**, written in 1679 and "*one of the most unbiased accounts ever written on Ceylon*", states, "*The despotic power of the monarchy was a monstrous tyranny.*" Upon deeper reflection it appears that we were stirred by the basic instinct of aggression that Sigmund Freud maintains is autonomous in our animal nature. Prejudice based on exaggerated historical glory and greatness of the lion race made us, the

Sinhalese, think that we were even superior to the Indians from whom we are descended.

We were made to believe that the two communities, Sinhalese and Tamil, and the two great religions, Buddhism and Hinduism have nothing in common when they are closer to each other than to any others in this small island of diverse ethnicities and multiple religions. Our differences were magnified to destroy the cultural bonds that previously brought us together. The Tamil community was portrayed as the Jews of Sri Lanka and we became increasingly offended by their behavior; they were outsiders, more than the Burghers and Moslems who came much later to our shores. We laughed at the Tamil accent; jeered at their parsimonious ways; resented their hard toil; were jealous of their scholarship; and envied their business acumen. Bandaranayake harnessed those complex feelings and opinions to drive the wedge between the two communities. The Sinhalese were stirred to patriotic exaltation by his oratorical ability. The motivating factor in the Tamil and Sinhalese divide was also the Aryan versus Dravidian myth. The large majority of Sinhalese, who live along the coast, by their color and feature, resemble the South Indian Dravidian rather than the North Indian Aryan. A long, hard look at the mirror would surely show the majority of the low country Sinhalese that many resemble the typical South Indian Dravidian. Sinhalese who live along the western coast are generally dark complexioned with rather coarse features. *J.C Willis in his book entitled, Ceylon, a Handbook for the Resident and Traveler, published in 1907, writes,*

“The Sinhalese form the bulk of the population of Ceylon. They are divided into two sections, the low country Sinhalese, most of who have probably mixed a good deal with other races....”

Many Sinhalese have dark complexions, unlikely if they all came from North India and are of pure Aryan descent. North Indians are central Asian and are lighter complexioned and have sharper features. Indeed, the mother tongue of some Sinhalese who live near the coastal town of Negombo is Tamil. During thousands of years of migration and conquest, mixing between Dravidians and Aryans occurred. There are among the Sinhalese some who by features and complexion show North Indian ancestry, and likewise, some among the Tamils. If we test the DNA of a random sample of Sinhalese and Tamil we may be able to prove conclusively that neither are the Sinhalese a pure Aryan race, nor Tamils, pure Dravidian. The basis of the division into the two communal groups is language: there are the Sinhala speaking Sri Lankans and Tamil speaking Sri Lankans.

I thought that we, the Lion people were the greatest on this earth until I went to Cambridge and later traveled across the great state of Rajasthan in Northwest India, and saw how our Sinhalese heritage though rather impressive paled in comparison to a few elsewhere. Fa Hien, a Chinese traveler who visited ancient Ceylon wrote of a monarchy that ruled without much fanfare: The remains of the dead king were placed in a cart, his long hair trailing behind, nearly touching the ground, and paraded through the streets for all to view before being taken to the cremation site. The maharajahs of Rajasthan lived and died amidst regal splendor; pharaohs were dressed in gold and interred in pyramids. We, the Sinhalese, held ourselves far too high for what we really were. The magnification was to fool the masses into believing that a smoldering ember of our historical glory was still out there waiting to be rekindled by the bhumi putra (Son of the soil) Bandaranayaka, who allied with a clan of immoral Buddhist priests to perpetrate a vast deception on us. He called attention to a political career that certainly would have fizzled had he not driven a wedge between Sinhalese and Tamils hoping thus to gain political advantage and support. The Sinhala Only Act was born of political deception. Such lies are well described by the great essayist, Jonathan Swift,

‘A political lie is sometimes born out of a discarded statesmen’s head, and thence delivered to be nursed and dandled by the rabble. It can sink a mountain to a molehill, and raise a molehill to a mountain and make a patriot of a profligate.’

In 1958, when the first racial conflict broke out I was teaching at Gnanodaya, a school in the coastal town of Kalutara, my first job since graduating from the University of Ceylon. The coastal towns south of Colombo harbored more firebrands than elsewhere in the country and that was where the violence mostly occurred. My mother often said: if you want to adopt a kitten born south of Bentota River on the Southwestern seaboard, do so before its eyes open, a reference to the perceived bad repute of people from that part of the country. Father, fearing for my safety because I was then living not too far north of Bentota River, drove down from Kandy to my rescue.

“Let’s leave this place quickly,” he said. “There’s a curfew from dusk to dawn in these areas. Stories are circulating that the Matara folk are arriving by the busloads. There is bound to be a riot. Let’s get out soon. It takes about four hours to drive to Kandy.”

“Papa, you shouldn’t have risked your life. I’m safe. Why did you come?” I asked.

“Child, you haven’t seen what I saw today. Those thugs seized the priest of the Panadura Hindu temple, doused him in kerosene, set him on fire and threw him into a deep well. To make sure the body stayed within, flaming tires were flung into the well,” he said solemnly.

The utter savagery in the hearts of some people was appalling. I was disgusted by the horror that required all my effort to avoid throwing up. I had always held a peculiar aversion to blood; its sight caused me to faint. The brutality father described was against all my instincts. I was outraged.

“Apoi, Papa, how could they do such a detestable thing?” I cried. “Papa, I hope the cool water in the well soothed him before he drowned. Or was he already dead? Did he die by water or fire?”

“Does it matter child?” father asked.

“No, it probably doesn’t; nothing to redeem an act of such horrific violence. We’ve let the jinni of racial hatred escape from the bottle. How stupid to think that we can restore our ancient glory by including the letter” Sri” in Sinhala script on license plates of motor vehicles. I hope Janaki Devi Sathasivam, Tilaka Arulambalam and all those Tamil friends I met in the Kandy Convent and the University of Ceylon, are safe,” I said.

Father said that Sinhalese thugs were boarding trains and buses and compelling passengers to recite Buddhist scriptures. Assuming that those unable to do so were Tamil, they were either beaten up or summarily executed.

“Papa,” I said, after more reflection, “I think we Buddhists don’t understand the Pali sutras we repeat parrot-like. I certainly don’t know all of it. If we did we would act wisely and show loving kindness and compassion to all living things as the Buddha said we should.”

Mettan Ca Sabbalokasmim

Mannasam Bhavaye Aparimanam

Uddaham Adho Ca Tiriyanj Ca

Asambadham Averam Asapattam -(Karaniyaetta Suttam)

Let thoughts of boundless love encompass the whole world, above, below and across, without obstruction, without hatred and without enmity.

“It isn’t all one-sided, child. Both communities must share blame for this horror. Sinhalese are also fleeing predominantly Tamil areas; rumors of torture, rape and mutilation of our Sinhalese women are widespread. Where will it all end?” he asked and lapsed into silence, a distressful silence all the way to Kandy. Perhaps he was haunted for a long time thereafter by the horrific spectacle he had witnessed.

We drove fast to escape that primeval setting in which brute force had outstripped civility; far away in the distance we saw smoke from smoldering

fires. We felt safe only when we reached the Kadugannawa Pass. Beyond was the heavenly sanctuary toward which we drove in all speed. I was eager to tell our friends and family what father had seen on that fearful day. Earlier, before the Bandaranayaka regime came to power, Tamils and Sinhalese lived side by side without incident. We were a sedentary people until our prejudices about the Tamils in our midst were aroused. The impact of prejudicial legislation soon became clear to all. It made the status of Tamil professionals insecure in the workplace. It affected their livelihood, economic and social standing. Efforts at self-protection produced two outcomes. First, there was the mass exodus of professionally qualified Tamils to English speaking countries; and second, those Tamils who could not flee began a fight to the finish. They were generally the underprivileged segment of the Tamil population who had little to lose; for them there was no incentive to negotiate a peaceful resolution to the conflict. They wanted nothing less than the division of the country into two political entities. The conflict in Sri Lanka was not aroused by the Darwinian struggle for territory or women, or food. However, men like all primates will fight their own species furiously and to death when a group adopts the stance of “critical reaction” described by H. Hedigar. I believe that it was the stance adopted by the Tamil terrorists and their leaders. It is a violent form of fighting because a somewhat cohesive group perceiving threat or even the appearance of threat from the outside thinks it is cornered and has nowhere to flee. Those in the group will turn around to face the pursuing enemy and fight to the finish the most brutal and ferocious battles causing loss of life to themselves and their enemy. According to Hedigar there are four requisites for this “critical reaction” to prevail among all primates, man or beast: one, the group must experience or perceive threat from the outside; two, it must be united against a common enemy; three, it must be led by a charismatic and inspiring figure; four, many people in the group must be inspired by the same emotion and excitement. In the case of Sri Lanka, oil was poured on flames by third parties operating from offshore who had vested interest in the outcome. The Tamils in Sri Lanka received tacit support for their conflict from the Tamil community in South India. The conflict had transcended national boundaries. The Sri Lankan Tamils received such support from Tamils who fled to Britain, Canada, India, Australia and the United States. They financed the Tamil Tigers. The movement was supplied by the steady flow of both money and ammunition from overseas. Looking back it even seems to me that some politicians are driven by mad passion toward an inscrutable and horrific destiny. Bandaranayaka was gunned down by none other than an unholy acolyte of the head priest of the mafia-like clan to

whom he was bound for political gain. During the unraveling of the conspiracy at the trial, it was widely rumored that a powerful woman minister in the Bandaranayaka Cabinet was the mistress of the head priest! The head priest and the minister, were both arrested and imprisoned for master minding the whole plot that ended in Bandaranayake's assassination. Upon his assassination, we elected his wife, formerly a housewife with perhaps only a high school education to the highest office in the country. Our wounds are self-inflicted. We were on a suicidal course. We observed an unfortunate national tendency, a collective lunacy if you will, to ignore the diabolical legacy that we inherited from Bandaranayaka clan. When international lending agencies fearing that the country was going broke because of free rice rations advised the government against that kind of largesse, people protested. Sirimavo's rhetorical response was music to their ears,

"Free ration will continue even if I have to go to the moon to harvest grain." How she glowed in moonshine! From her the reins of power passed to a daughter, a smarter and more astute politician than either parent. But she too was unable to force the jinni of racial discord back into the bottle. Family-based political dynasties more powerful than constitutional monarchies are elected through the democratic process based on universal franchise! Seeing the mess that political dynasties bring upon countries, we should craft legislation to outlaw them.

Our family experienced first hand how it feels to be stigmatized because of ethnic differences. The problems faced by the Tamil community of Ceylon entered our predominantly Sinhalese home where my older daughter, two-plus at the time, uttered her first complete sentence in neither Sinhala nor Tamil:

"Amma Bamma," she yelled expressively when I fell down a flight of steps! Jey's mind was stiffening against the government. The harder it set the more restless he became. I was afraid. The fear that held me back from uttering an unequivocal "Yes" when Jey proposed to me in 1964 was coming back. I feared that I might be forced to leave my country, father, mother and everyone else who were so dear to me. I Tried to reason with him, make him understand that his experience was not unique.

"One soon gets used to that sort of thing, the discrimination, I mean. Our society is divided on the basis of caste, creed community, class and religion. If it isn't one, it is the other. As long as there are inferior and insecure people in our midst, there'll be jealousy and discrimination. No matter where you go, it'll surface sooner or later. The more accomplished and qualified you are, the more discrimination you'll face. Better get used to it," I said

“Never,” Jey said.

“Jey” I pleaded. “We’ll have to flee from one country to another and from one place to another looking for a better job, a better pay, a better life and a better future. Here, I belong to the majority community. I am a Buddhist and a Goigama. Sometimes the doors that are shut for you may open for me. Remember what father said, ‘If you’re a minority in the country of birth, you’ll be a minority no matter where you go.’”

The fatherly advice has haunted our lives. We have no recourse now knowing that our lives are imperiled by differences in ethnicity and color no matter where we go in the West. People do horrific things to each other even in the name of religion. I despair over our collective lunacy when one side prays to an Almighty God and another to Allah the Great when one is pitted against the other in battlefields of Afghanistan; one, urging God to safeguard its soldiers and the other to Allah to do the same.

It appeared to Jey that there was nothing to grab hold of, none out there to listen to his complaints about what it means to be a minority and how it feels to be so savagely treated. It stirred despair and desperation- depths of feeling not easily provoked in Jey. The democratic process was being undermined by legislation that put a minority at a disadvantage so that the majority would benefit.

Perhaps because of my Sinhalese ethnicity, I represented all that was wrong with majority rule. I paid the price for his persecution. My life was unsecured by those events. With each passing day, he became more distanced from his family. As I said before, I realized, much to my discomfiture and annoyance that Jey was living, most of the time, in a world that was as uninhabited, silent, and distant from Earth as the planet Pluto. It was his escape from the reality that impinged adversely upon his comfort or convenience. He said almost nothing, saw the same amount of nothing, did nothing, and heard very little of what was going on around him. It even seemed to me that he would make no move to escape even if a raging forest fire driven by relentless Santa Ana-like winds was spreading dangerously close to his domain because in his mind he lived over there on Pluto, far away from harm’s way. He would drop frozen into a chair or whatever was lying around, which became his usual reaction, calamity or no calamity. He probably wondered why him? I criticized him for not having the courage to face up to the prejudice, not studying hard for the Sinhalese examination to show them that he was not a quitter. But he argued that when he cleared one hurdle, on that occasion the qualifying Sinhala examination, another even more insurmountable was sure to be set up. He was from a high-class Tamil family; he was accomplished and presentable. In marriage, he might have

had the pick of eligible young Tamil girls. He, however, opted to marry a Sinhalese. But the Sinhalese community had turned on him. He was a pariah among them. As time passed, because of our differences and the polarization of the two communities, he became a stranger in the workplace, in our community and in Sri Lanka, and most troubling of all, within our home. There was nothing to prevent his flight out of Ceylon. I noticed he was with us in form only; in spirit he was far away; in London, Cambridge, Canada, Australia, or the United States of America. He was ready to bale out of Ceylon to any country that wanted him. Every day brought him closer to departure to spend the rest of his life in some foreign land because the protection a country must provide a native son had been peeled away, layer by layer, by immoral legislation that empowered many insecure, weak and less able Sinhalese, subordinating him to them. He was barely thirty-one at the time. The predicament of the Tamils began to affect me personally. Jey, brought up in the orthodox Hindu tradition, where all power, excellence and greatness is vested in men, suffered hugely because of the Sinhala Only Act. He wanted to be on par with me. Jey went back to England again for further study. But the more he qualified abroad, the less recognized in Sri Lanka because of Sinhala Only. How unsupported and lonely I felt. Jey and I were both government employees and only one of us was entitled to receive allowances, paid to the one with the higher salary because they were calculated as a percentage of the base salary. His salary was frozen because of Sinhala Only. I was paid the allowances thereby increasing the difference between his salary and mine. Was Jey taking out his frustrations on me, a Sinhalese? Did I represent all that was despicable and revolting, restrictive and confining? Because of the many inconsiderate things we, as husband and wife, did to each other, the glamour of marriage was wearing out in our home. Instead of understanding his frustrations and his hopelessness, I shouted in fury and indignation. He uttered no compliments for everything I did right, but was quick to fault when something went wrong. Because I was juggling so many things, one was likely to slip out of my quivering grip. In the eighth month of pregnancy, I felt its immense burden compounded by those of managing a home: ensuring that it was well supplied, resolving the conflicts that frequently erupted among three servants, looking after the emotional well being of the rapidly growing twenty-two month old Suri, working in the Bank from eight in the morning till five each day, and then driving to Vidyodaya University to teach in the evenings. I was living with a Jey who had become a stranger to me. I did not realize then how hurt he was about the political events in our country. It was his country; they were all his people; he did not think of himself as someone from a minority group. His

closest friends were mostly Sinhalese. The legislation was discriminatory because his colleagues were not adversely affected by its passage. He was being denied equal access not because of anything he did, but for who he was by accident of birth, something he was powerless to change. He was angry and frustrated by his predicament.

I was overwhelmed by anxiety; I could not keep up the performance. The effort to excel in everything I did was costing too much, my sanity for instance. I yelled like a mad woman at times. Father, who visited us often, seeing me in despair and pain, came to my rescue once again. He did so with great joy and alacrity because mother schemed with him to make it happen. They found the most satisfactory solution to my problem of not being able to cope.

“Child, why are you running around like a mad woman? Why don’t you send Suriya with me to Kandy and take care of yourself? After the baby’s born and you’ve had time to settle down, I’ll bring her back. She’ll be better off with us than with your servants. Those servants look after themselves very well. Yesterday I was lying down on the sofa in the outer room. I heard the gate by the front door rattle. Looking out of the window I saw a man standing outside the gate. John came out of the house with a gunny bag half-full and another, a smaller bag. He handed them over the wall to that man. They spoke to each other briefly. I didn’t hear what was said because of my hearing problem. Perhaps they’re the provisions you buy for the upkeep of this household. Who knows?”

“Papa, do I have your permission to question John in your presence?” I asked.

“No, child, if you make a row over this, you’ll have to dismiss John. Find a replacement before you do so,” he advised.

“Papa, I buy a bushel of rice each time. It’s soon gone. The servants tell me that our two Alsations eat a lot of rice and meat. However, both dogs look scrawny and emaciated as if they’re being starved. When I questioned Martin, he said they both had worms. I took them to the Vet.

“No worms,” the Vet said, “feed them well and they’ll put on weight.”

I was embarrassed because the Vet and Jey were in College together.

Father replied, “Child, how do you expect your poor servants whose families live a hand to mouth existence, to feed your dogs with as much rice and meat as they can eat, when their families are subsisting on one meal a day. Your servants don’t think they’re stealing from you. It’s more important to feed their families than your dogs; that’s how they see things.”

“These are the contradictions in our poor society. We need servants in our homes. We give them employment and a decent wage, food and shelter. But

they're perhaps the only breadwinners in their families. Their wages home are not enough to pay for food, clothing and shelter for families that are often extended to include a couple of generations and poor relatives as well. I suppose they steal to survive."

"Don't talk rubbish, child!" he shouted. "Punchie Menika is poor; she has a large family to support. But she doesn't steal. How easy it would be for her to steal from us because she goes home every evening. Our dog's well fed. We have no problems. Your servants are thieves. They'll never happy no matter however much you give. They'll always steal from you. Your mother says that your three servants are lucky. They work so little, you pay them so much, and feed them well; if they also steal from you, you'll end up like them someday."

"Papa, why can't Martin and Elsa tell me? Surely, they see what John is doing?"

"Child, perhaps they do but are afraid to snitch. John looks like a steamroller; you better beware of John! "

Those words, for some reason alerted me. Pondering over father's warning, fear took the place of agony. Cautioned by what he said about John, I wanted to keep my eyes open, and look over my shoulder all the time.

Suri, then twenty-two months old, was glad to go with grandpa because her home was less exciting than grandpa's. While father and I were talking about the pros and cons of the proposed arrangement, Suri disappeared into her room and returned with a bag of toys and other paraphernalia she could not leave home without. She could barely drag that duffle bag across the floor; but she was packed and ready to go

I put on a joyful face to show father that I had not noticed her eagerness.

"Suri", I exclaimed, "Sweetie how intelligent you are! I'm so proud of you. I'll call you everyday when I come home from office. You'll have lots of fun with them."

She put the bag down and clapped her hands.

There was some doubt in my mind about the wisdom of letting father take little Suri with him, but there was none in her little mind. Her alacrity to leave a home where the parents are gone most of the day and her only companions are paid employees was understandable; however, that a child only twenty-two months old comprehended which home maximized her physical and emotional well being demonstrated that a great deal was going on within that young brain. Embarrassed by Suri's eagerness to desert us and by so doing casting a vote of no confidence in our parenting, I said rather meekly,

"I hope she doesn't cry at bedtime wanting me to rock her to sleep."

Father responded,

“Don’t you worry, child. Banda can’t wait for her to come. He’ll rock her all night if that’s what she wants.”

“Papa, you think of everything,” was all I managed to say.

I wisely decided not to utter another word for fear of risking more thoughtless comparisons. Jey was not too happy at the arrangement because he did not wish to empower his in-laws.

“Your father’s arrangement makes everything more complicated for us,” Jey said. “Not as complicated as it is when I do everything by myself,” I rebutted and stared meanly at him.

He did not say another word. I wondered what was going on in his mind.

It appeared to me that so far as he was concerned, Suri should stay because it did not inconvenience him the least. However, he had no voice in the matter because he had forfeited his role as the father by the show of indifference ever since his return. He walked about the house as if he had left his spirit in a far away country; he was distanced from the everyday tasks that concerned the household and us. He was already firing off applications to go overseas again. It was Suri’s happiness that I was thinking about. I knew that Suri would be well looked after by the grandparents and two aunts. It was difficult for me to compete with the sum total of love and attention that they would give. It would be selfish on my part to deprive Suri of that joy; so off she went with the grandpa. Jey and I followed in our car because so much was being transferred from one house to another, much more than I had brought back from England when Suri was only about a month old. How things had changed since then! At that time, I wished for a wee bit of help; that someone dear to me would occasionally carry Suri, feed her, change diapers and help with the many chores that I did alone. Two years later I am relieved of the responsibility of caring for Suri, leaving me to concentrate on my new pregnancy and career. Should I not have felt elated? Then why did I feel so sad?

When we arrived in Kandy, the rush of attention overwhelmed Suri; she would not leave my side and clung to my dress as if she wanted to be attached to me forever. She would not go near grandpa. Her eyes filled up with tears. Not too long ago, I suffered from the slight of perceived desertion because her eagerness to go with grandpa; barely four hours later I was coaxing Suri to give them a chance:

“There’s Archie; there’s Banda; look over there! It’s Alice. They all love you, sweetie,” It did not take long, however, for the little Suri to transfer allegiance from her mother to the grandparents, aunts and their servants Enticed by the toys, candy and the many carrots they dangled before her

dazzled eyes, slowly Suri left my side. No one took further notice of me. They were saying things to excite her, and she was smiling, chirping and performing in ways that were endearing to adults. So many adults rallied around her, not only those of the family, but also some neighbors who came over to see a free performance. Encouraged by all the attention she was receiving, Suri ran about the house grabbing this or that and chattering like a monkey. When bedtime came, I did not have to lift a finger. She was washed, dressed and tucked into bed without my assistance. Tired from the many activities during the day, she dropped off to sleep without the fuss she usually made. The sum total of the affection and attention she received from so many dotting relatives far exceeded the little I offered. I had little time and opportunity to demonstrate my compelled as I was into the conflicting role of breadwinner. So alluring the many attractions, that when it was time for Jey and I to leave for Colombo two days later, Suri was nowhere to be found. She was visiting a neighbor's house in C's company. When she was brought back to kiss us goodbye, she watched us with her large brown tearless eyes. She was wearing a new dress I had not seen before, stitched by Deepa, our seamstress. It was a pretty dress made of a fabric with red rosebud design, delicately smocked yoke and puffed sleeves. On her hair on was bright red silk bow. She could not fathom what was going on. While everyone else was laughing or talking loudly, my face was agonized by the parting. I was leaving her for the first time. I knew that she was among those who loved her as much as I did. But never before had she gone to sleep at night without my kiss upon her little forehead. She did not quite comprehend the meaning of the parting, but there was not even a bit of disquiet on the face. We waved goodbye and blew flying kisses. Father asked us to drive safely and come back soon. As the car rounded the bend, I turned around to make a final wave to the dear daughter I was leaving behind for the first time in her life. Little Suri, in C's arms, was staring at the car. Perhaps she was thinking that her mother and father were going to work as we did every morning. How disheveled our lives were in those days! My family had so many stories to tell of the bonding that grew stronger between them and Suri day by day.

S said,

“She recognizes the sound of father's car driving up the hill.”

Father said,

“She crawls on all fours to the back door to await my entry because she knows that I come that way and never empty-handed.”

Mother said,

“Yes, there is always a small bag of candy for her. She knows at what time he returns. When the big black clock on the wall strikes twelve, she is all excited and astir. She accompanies the striking clock by banging a drumstick on the side of the playpen, yelling to be taken out. When we take her out of the playpen, she frees herself and races to the door on all fours.”

C said, “She’s so little and yet so smart.”

I hoped that her smartness would endure even when no carrots were dangled before her eyes.

Banda said, “She wants me to rock her to sleep; and Hamu wants me to rock her cradle even at night; I can’t get any sleep.”

Alice said, “That’s all you ever do; eat and sleep. I’ll rock the cradle if you can’t.”

S said, “He won’t like that because he eats most of the candy in Suri’s bag while pretending to be rocking the cradle.”

Munju was born a month later at the McCarthy Nursing Home. Father’s disappointment was easy to read on his face. He was not joyous as he might have been had I delivered a boy. I had given birth to another girl. He said, “It’s our destiny to have only girls. I have three and you have two.”

I did not want a third, be it a boy or girl. Even two were a challenge and wore me down. I saw how tough it had been for father and mother. C, now well into the thirties, was still living with them. The responsibilities of parenting never cease. Father and mother were even helping to raise Suri. Like them, I was in it for the long haul. To make more money and make ends meet because Jey’s salary after the Sinhala Only Act was a pittance, I drove to Vidyodaya University after office hours to teach a course to first year students; I graded examinations for the Education Department sometimes well into the night. Even so, we borrowed three thousand rupees from Jey’s friend, Sarvendran, to take care of an emergency and we were scrambling around to find the money to pay him back three months later!

I was caught in a matrimonial vise. It was the feeling of unshared responsibility for a growing family that became a despairing feature in my life when I was not quite thirty three and it continues to this day. Memories so vivid of the good times we had in Cambridge returned to tease me.

Yearning for bygone days overcame me: eating rich vegetarian curries in an Indian restaurant on Hill Street; strolling hand-in-hand along the Backs admiring the architectural splendor of the Kings College; walking along winding footpaths through open fields to the Orchard of many fruit trees, some laden with apples to drink scalding hot tea and eat scones dripping with butter; they were promises of a blissful marriage to a soul-mate. I neither considered nor cared whether our relationship was born of a moment

of upheaval, a guy tripping over the curb trying to control a ramshackle bike with no brakes and an agitated young woman looking behind to see whether she was about to be run over. I thought our tumultuous encounter would stay on the magical course it took in the beginning. If only I could resurrect those delightful first moments of agitation and reconciliation! Like dreams that cease to be upon awakening, they were all gone forever. It broke my heart though to see Jey so unhappy, and so I reasoned:

“There’s no reason for you to mourn and groan everyday. Why don’t you take a greater interest in the home and the children to keep your mind occupied? I asked.

But housework did not rank high in our society’s collective estimation; it certainly was not suitable work for a man. I was overwhelmed by responsibilities that made more demand on me than him.

Vallipuram, Jey’s retainer in the Survey Department who was from his village in Jaffna and knew him since childhood once said,

“When there’s food they come, when there’s work they run away.”

I think Vallipuram gave me that important piece of information to make me understand Jey better. Nature and nurture of males, especially in an orthodox Hindu family, distanced them from domestic responsibility. Within a home, the mother was the homemaker. I observed that Jey was a person of such simplicity to be almost incapable of trouble if left severely alone. Jey was like father, a peaceful man but thoroughly incompetent in affairs concerning household management. It was futile to even hope that he would mend his ways. Despairing of correcting his ways, I resolved to enjoy his company when he was around. He minded his own business, needed very little attention, ate anything set before him and did not mind the usurpation of power in family business. I became the unchallenged Chief Executive Officer of our home whether he was present or not. The silver lining I saw in our opportunistic relationship was the absence of any challenge to my authority. I made the decisions and ensured that they were implemented at any cost. There was seldom any argument or contradiction or conflict; because there were no protracted struggle between us, I reached the family’s lofty goals without obstacles and much quicker. Even so, his absence from home for a long period of time was a serious handicap. I was seriously disadvantaged because it is the nature of Sri Lankan society in which I then lived to try to take advantage of the weaker sex. When he was away, the neighbor parked his car on my driveway blocking the entry to my garage; servants long accustomed to male dominion, rarely did as they were bid. It was becoming harder for Jey to live in Ceylon because he had not yet passed the Sinhala examination that he frequently described as “stupid”

because no one outside our itty-bitty island spoke it. He declared that it was far better for the Sinhalese to study Tamil because many more people in the world spoke it. “Tamil is even spoken in Singapore. Street signs are in three languages: English, Chinese and Tamil,” he declared. “What use is Sinhala to anyone when it isn’t spoken in any other country? I’d rather study Hindi,” he argued defiantly.

I tried to be understanding and explore the circumstances that made him so mad.

“You’re absolutely right,” I said. “No democratic government has the moral authority to legislate against a group of people; the Sinhala Only Act, such a wanton piece of legislation, undermines the cultural heritage of the Tamils in Sri Lanka.”

Jey said,

“When you’re born in a poor country, it’s like being born to a poor family. To realize your potential, you must get out.”

“Yes,” I replied, “It’s the lack of opportunity that is driving so many away from our country. Many more Sinhalese than Tamils are now leaving Ceylon! But I don’t want to travel nomad-like seeking fresh pastures for our flock of four.”

“Why stay in this inhospitable place where our experience is discounted and our success isn’t shared. I’m treated like a pariah. To succeed or make something of my career, I must go away,” he countered.

I replied with growing impatience,

“But remember what father said. ‘Jey, if you’re a minority in the country of your birth, you’ll be a minority no matter where you go; and A.S. said, ‘I can’t understand you both. You build a nice nest here, then abandon it and fly away.’ Here, at least I belong to the majority community; over there, both are damned. Over here our lineage is pure. We’re the educated and privileged elite. Our lives are unsecured the least among those who resemble us most.”

“You don’t feel the communal hate that I do. I hear distant shouts of ‘kill’! I have seen angry mobs and deadly riots. We must get out before it’s too late, I am thinking of the children. The support they now get is from your parents; they’ll be soon gone. Our children will be isolated. They’re neither Tamil nor Sinhalese,” he replied with a faraway look in his eyes and he muttered something about leaving right away if the opportunity arose.

“They’re of Indian descent like everyone else,” I contested nervously.

One day while driving along Galle Road in Kollupitiya, he made a RIGHT turn into the compound of the United States Embassy. Those were days of unchallenged access and kind reception because there were no terrorists then

and few were fleeing our resplendent isle. The First Secretary, I believe it was, gave him a speedy interview.

“Why do you want to leave this beautiful country?” he asked. He was black. “I am a Tamil,” Jey replied.

A war was being fought in South East Asia, in Vietnam, where the terrain was rank with thick equatorial vegetation. Jey had an uncommon expertise in aerial photogrammetry. There were few so qualified at the time. Perhaps they needed him to read photographs taken from the air to improve the precision of aerial attack! A few days later a letter arrived from the Embassy. He was asked to bring one hundred and fifty rupees. We were then struggling to make ends meet because Jey’s salary was frozen at the level of a pittance!

“Why would the greatest superpower in the world want money from you?” I asked.

“It’s a good sign,” he said. “It shows they are interested in my application.” So he paid up. Within a month, the visa was issued! Looking back, it was the best investment Jey ever made! For so little, one hundred and fifty rupees only, he opened a vista of opportunity, not for him or me, but for our two daughters. Even at the time, one hundred and fifty rupees was not a large sum of money, but at the exchange rate prevailing today, it translates into one dollar and fifty cents!

Jey passed that ‘stupid’ Sinhala examination by the time he emigrated and how ironical that he quit job, country and heritage soon after that painstaking qualification! For what purpose I wished to know.

‘You should have emigrated before studying for that exam and spending so much money on tuition that we can ill-afford,’ I argued.

He explained that he was departing with dignity!

I recall meeting Dr. Gamini Corea who headed the Planning Department. Upon hearing that Jey was on the verge of leaving the country and that I would be following a year later, he tried to dissuade. The Central Bank was about to lose an investment. It was Dr. Corea who wrote to Cambridge on my behalf for a place at Newnham College. I was much beholden to him. Dr. Corea felt sure, like so many other sensible Ceylonese, that the political events driving so many educated people out of the country were short-lived. He thought we were all going to soon awaken from a bad dream relieved to know that the reign of the Bandaranayakes’ was over. Who would have thought that our unenlightened electorate would elect an uneducated housewife to the highest political office in the country upon the husband’s demise? I communicated Dr. Corea’s reaction to Jey, hoping that his

authority, decency and grace would make Jey change his mind even at that late hour.

“Dr. Corea said he’d like to meet up with you to talk things over. Why don’t you give him a chance? Why are you determined to emigrate at this critical time when my life is already topsy-turvy?” I asked.

He said that he read the writing on the wall clearly; the hateful writing that spelled “doom” for anyone born Tamil. He said that his career was at a standstill. He liked his colleagues very much: Sammy Herath, M.P. Salgado, S.Ponnambalam, Neil Seneviratna, T. Somasekeram, Ranjit Amarasekera, Gamini Wijepura, G.K. Amaratunga, and the list went on.

The Sinhala Only Act drove Jey out of my resplendent isle! He emigrated when Munji was not yet one, leaving us behind to follow a year later. Upon reflection, the Sinhala Only Act drove even those Tamils like Jey, who were least bothered about their ethnicity, and among the most qualified, out of Sri Lanka.

Until the Sinhala Only Act came along, Jey was surrounded by the certitude of support from family, friends, the workplace and his country. Suddenly, he and his family were transformed to refugee status. It all happened, as I had feared it would before we tied the knot in Cambridge. Wherever we went, we lived in the shadows yearning for recognition or were forced to flee from one place to another. I expressed my frustration and hopeless mood in verse:

Fleeing like a hare

Driven by the scare

Of hounds in hot pursuit

Closing in.

Fleeing plunderers, pillagers, raiders, crusaders,

And other furies a-chasing

A decade later we were still fleeing; I added more lines to my poem..

The east wind surges;

“Return to us!” it urges.

Eyes dim, throat constricts.

A return, fear restricts.

Wanton scenes on the horizon

Drive constrictors to oblivion.

Eager eyes scan then for sanctuary:

Badlands, wetlands, or estuary;

A natural habitat to live

A life,

Without fear and strife.

One evening as the setting sun

*Lengthened shadows on the ground,
Stumbled upon a wayside town,
Eloquent in its dying glow;
A place that seemed secure.
But how in that fading light to know for sure
Those who came before
Would put us to flight no more.
In the dark, I hear a fearsome bark.
Fleeing like a hare
Panicked by the scare
Of hounds in hot pursuit,
Fleeing into the darkness
Searching....*

At the time of parting, the emotion it summoned in me was resentment and despair; he left me when our young family needed him most. We, father, C, S, the girls and I, went to the airport to wave goodbye. When he got up to leave us, the reality struck me hard. He had submitted his resignation as Chief Photogrammetrist and Assistant Superintendent of Surveys- the culminating point of Jey's professional career in Sri Lanka. My friends and relatives often told me that someday Jey would become the Surveyor General of Sri Lanka; but it was not destined to be-that august title was not in his stars. He was taking the first steps toward an inscrutable destiny that the girls and I would soon have to share. I thought that he had so much to look forward to in Sri Lanka, but he was leaving it all behind for little- to become a lecturer/research associate at Ohio State University. He left us behind in the waiting area and went through a door to another, pausing briefly to look behind. It struck me like a lightning bolt at that moment; the depressing conclusion swept over me like the Mahaveli in flood that his decision was irrevocable. He was leaving his country and we would have to follow. I wondered which emotion was dominant on his mind at the moment he boarded the plane, hope or anxiety. My thoughts were also full of the trip the girls and I would soon have to make a year later, leaving my own fragile family behind. And so we parted, Jey to open up a career for the second time in his young life in a distant land that we had only read about, and I, to continue in mine knowing that it too would soon end. Perhaps he saw the troubled look on my face, but he felt justified in going because he saw something I did not see, a satisfactory outcome in a foreign land and only a dead end in his own. But I was bewildered and felt deserted. I thought his life was full of fun, youthful diversions and sport, while mine was tethered to a harness. Three months later, he sent a teddy bear for Suri on her

birthday. He remembered! But his periodic absences for extended periods of time were our family's dilemma. Neither child saw much of their father in her infancy nor when they were growing up. It seemed to me that he was following a personal calling that neither our children nor I shared. But there is no doubt in my mind that he loved his two children and was doing what he thought was best for them.

I was alone, but I made the decisions; I hired and fired the servants, I bought the groceries; I anticipated the tiniest wishes of my two daughters; I decided what each should wear, what they would eat and where they would go. I resolved conflicts among the servants, paid their wages and looked after their well being also. I was energized, and I was daring. During the week, I went to work at the Central Bank of Ceylon leaving the children with the servants; but I was restless thinking about them. I told myself, over and over again, how thankful I should be. The Bank was the perfect workplace for working mother like me; there was no tension, no pressure and no oppression. The work was doable and the pay, excellent. The Bank job gave me spare time to care for my infants, to see to their needs and respond to their call; it answered to my yearning for a prestigious job with little work. However, I was challenged by the many roles I had to juggle in the limited time outside the workplace. In my mind, I knew that I was blessed to be where I was. I could reconcile it easily with the pressures brought on by motherhood; I was a single parent most of the time; my work within the home was unrelenting, challenging and with many high hurdles to overcome.

My tenure at the Central Bank spanned a decade and every year within was spent on self-improvement. In the three years prior to Cambridge, all I ever did was write short segments for the Monthly Bulletin. The Monthly Bulletin picked up mostly the random factor in the movement of financial variables like the money supply and bank deposits; I could do it without breaking into a sweat. Even after three years of postgraduate study at Cambridge, there was not a whole lot to do. There were so many qualified personnel in our Department and not much work to go around. We, Elaine Gunawardena, Rasaputram, Karandawela, Thayanithy and I socialized a great deal during office hours. Elaine and I shared a cubicle and the men were in there entertaining each other with a repertoire of jokes. Rasaputram was the funniest; his situational comedy kept all of us mightily entertained. I needed the break from the unshared duties of household management. Even though I was driven to indefatigable toil and responsibility within the home, I could not wait to return home.

“She is coming!” the wind roared as my car sped along the driveway leading to our house.

“She is coming,” shivered the trees; and crows foraging in the culvert scattered in every direction.

“She’s coming,” cried Martin who could not run fast enough to open the gate leading to the garage at the end of the garden. He hurriedly looked around inside to see that everything was in order because he did not want to push the lady over the edge. At this time of day, because of heat and so much sweat, she was easily provoked.

“Mom’s coming!” whispered Elisa to the children and Suri danced up and down the hallway joyfully. Seeing her perform, Munji resting in Elisa’s spacious arms broke into a toothless, dimpled smile. My day in the office had been like all other days with so little to do and so much time to observe a woman’s place in it. I could not stand the new peon assigned to our division. How he infuriated me! I asked him to bring me the typewriter from another division.

“I am a peon,” he announced, “that’s a laborer’s job. Send for one!”

I was thrown off balance by his response. He would not dare use that tone of voice when he spoke to male officers. When they gave an order, he was most deferential, responding to commands with alacrity reserved for males. I resented his type because he flouted my authority openly. With me, he wanted to be chatty, but I was unwilling to engage. His duties, he reminded me, are to shuffle around things, mostly files. Yet, he took hours to deliver any I gave him. He spent his day idly, with alternate visitations to the cafeteria and the town even during office hours.

There were so many such occasions that prompted the recall of Cambridge experiences. One day, Professor E.A.G Robinson and I were waiting for the elevator. When it came, he held the door open for me to enter, got in after, chatted about the weather and things like that, until we reached the top floor where I got off; and only when the door closed behind and he had not exited, did I realize that he had gone out of his way to serve me! In Ceylon, the clerks signed in before eight every morning. Minutes before eight, they were crowded round the elevators waiting impatiently to reach their floor and beat a deadline, the blue pencil line drawn across the page on the hour to identify those who were tardy. Sometimes, when the Governor of the Bank showed up at the same time, no one else was allowed inside the elevator to ride along with him. We all waited, in feudal subservience, while the elevator deposited him on the governor’s floor, and came down to pick up the smaller people. We were still weighted down by feudal observances.

I joined the Central Bank in 1960, a youthful twenty four year old, unmarried woman. After the whirlwind at the Bank of Ceylon, my former workplace, the work assigned to me at the Central Bank of Ceylon was a breeze. My immediate boss, J.B.Kelegama was the division head of banking. Under his direction and supervision, I wrote the segment for the Monthly Bulletin; that periodic assignment was perhaps all I did. I observed the movements in financial variables during the month and changed the words in the paragraph describing events in the previous month, accordingly. Sometimes I would tack on a sentence of my own for greater flourish. Because there was so little to do, I decided that it was a time for self-improvement, to embark on the journey to realize my dream of academic glory. I made use of the plentiful time on my hands to read every decent book on Money and Banking and every article in periodicals on those subjects. To remain focused on intellectual and academic work, I visited the library often, as much as I would have done had I been working for another degree, but without the horror of an examination at year's end. My ambition was so great that I spent a great deal of time in the library. The many hours I spent in that library brought hope to my heart that I had a chance, a very good chance, of being sent abroad for further study. In that well-stock and efficiently managed library, I met and made a friend, Manil De Silva, the librarian. She had a degree in library science from the prestigious Columbia University in New York City. My relationship with Manil became even closer when Elaine, her close friend, passed away. Many decades later, I thought of her when I heard that the Bank had been bombed and those in that library suffered the most casualties. She was spared because she retired several years ago, the servant who answered her telephone informed me. The years at the Central Bank, only a decade to be exact, went by fast because within it were three years I spent in Cambridge studying for the doctorate degree. But I was so grateful to the Central Bank for having redeemed me from the toil at the Bank of Ceylon.

Decades later, in 1992, when I visited Sri Lanka, I took the elevator to the top floor of the impressive tower that was the Head Office of the Bank of Ceylon to meet my friend, Rohini Nanyakkara, who was one of two women officers recruited for the first time by the Bank of Ceylon; I was the other. She was prestigiously ensconced in a revolving mahogany chair and surrounded by more mahogany elegance in a sprawling office over-looking the ocean. She was the General Manager of the Bank of Ceylon- the CEO! She most certainly deserved to be so rewarded for the indefatigable toil and perseverance that brought her to that august place. She is a role model for professional women everywhere.

In the ten years at the Central Bank of Ceylon, I did very little official work. The Economic Research Department was the intellectual hub of the Bank in my time. It was where all the bulletins got written, the annual reports were compiled and government economic policy was researched, especially, matters concerning fiscal and financial policy. Its structure was centrifugal, its functions, strongly focused on macroeconomics. Power and responsibility moved away from the Director of Economic Research to the heads of divisions. The governor established communication with one or few officers within the Economic Research Department and the limited work got done in that two-way flow. The Department got into high gear only when Sri Lanka's debtors and regulators, the International Bank of Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) came ashore for annual briefings and accounting purpose, to tell us what to do and what not to. The heads of divisions participated in direct face-to-face "consultation" with members of the visiting team. I was too junior prior to Cambridge to participate in any; and so few of post-Cambridge days in my career at the Bank to do so after I returned. Ten years later when I left the Bank, I left as I had entered; with only a doctorate from Cambridge minus the professional power it could have bestowed on me. I languished while there because there were too many qualified officers above me, so little to do and so many of us to do it. However, those years at the Central Bank, are memorable and joyful to recall because I was in the company of supportive and cordial senior colleagues: J.B Kelegama, Neville Karunatilaka, Warnasena Rasaputram, P.B. Karandawela, Thayanithy, Vernon Aluvihara, Saradha Nathaniel, Elaine Gunawardena, Mirani Perera, Manil De Silva, Uswattearatchi, A.S. Jayawardena, Nimal Sandaratna, and the list goes on—all working in divisions either within the Economic Research Department or nearby.

My colleagues presented a variety of character from the staid to effervescent, but all were cordial. I shared a cubicle with Elaine Gunawardena. Who would have foreboded during those close social and professional encounters characterized by so much humor, hilarity and extravagant talk that Elaine would not be among us five years later? She passed away when she was only thirty-nine, in the prime of her beautiful life. There are few incidents in our youth that make us understand the perennial truth, "*Anicchawatta Sakara*" - *all living things are transitory*. Elaine's death was a moment of awakening; of deep and abiding contemplation and comprehension of Buddha's message. More than anything else that had happened so far in my young life, it startled me into understanding how fragile life was. I was suddenly made aware of my own

frailty and how tremulous was the thing called “Prana’ that flowed in and out of my lungs. Within the Economic Research Department the two I remember best are Rasa, who later became the Governor and there after, the Sri Lanka’s Ambassador to Washington, D.C., and Karande, his close friend. Because of that early association, a close lifetime friendship sprang between Rasa’s family and mine. There is much sadness in reaching out to the past I left behind because several who I best remember are no longer among the living: Rasa, Karande, Thayaniy, Kelegama and Elaine among them. Rasa and Karande joked a great deal, mostly at the expense of each other; both knew how to make a comic strip of the most trivial event. Elaine and I were drawn to them because of their wit and good humor and also because we were young, filled with euphoria, enthusiasm, and with a certain aura about us that announced to them that we were eager for tax-free entertainment. Some dismissed Rasa and Karande’s behavior as buffoonery, but we, Elaine and I, were entertained. How boring would the Department have been without Rasa and Karande to stir things up and enliven it? Both knew how to rejoice in the company of others, men or women, and we were appreciative of those daily encounters and performances. The effect they had on us was as if we were caught, by contagion, in their infectious humor; we laughed so much whenever they were around.

“I feel I am of them-

I will not deny them-

For how can I deny myself?” Walt Whitman

It was also easy for us to associate with those two because both were married and therefore unlikely to arouse talk among observers. Rasa was quick-witted and uncommonly genial. His face glowed from intended mischief; sparkling eyes gave the impression that he was always ready for a belly-filling laugh. No matter how light and trivial his behavior, and even cranky it sometimes seemed, his company was enlivening. Karande was his partner in mischief. Neither Elaine nor I liked the solitude of the cubicle in which we were encased, nor did we tolerate well the boredom brought on by the little work we were assigned to do. Rasa and Karande often visited the cubicle we shared; one sitting in a chair and the other on the edge of Elaine’s table. Each said things about the other or someone else, the ostensible purpose being to bring on laughs. We tried in vain to remain serious, but seldom succeeded. Elaine was innocent to the point of being naïve. She believed everything anyone said. She showed the world her tendency to take almost everything at face value, and be skeptical of nothing. If you believed what either Rasa or Karande said, you became the victim of their pranks. I found laughter, or should I say concealed mirth, in their pranks and Elaine’s

gullibility. Realizing that the idea of skepticism would not occur naturally to her, they spun stories that provoked serious responses from Elaine.

I so remember well Karande's accounts of Rasa's adventures. Rasa headed the Statistics Division in our Department. In that capacity, he often met with government statisticians in the Department of Statistics that was dominated by Tamils at the time and even headed by one, who Rasa often met. I do not believe that the incident really happened but who can tell whether it was fact or fiction? Karande had the proclivity to make light of Rasa's last name because it ended with "m", common among Tamils and seldom among Sinhalese. Rasa wore his Sinhalese ethnicity on his short-sleeve; Karande, of Kandyan ancestry, could afford to make light of Rasa's claims to pure Sinhalese lineage. Karande said, the head of the Department of Statistics whispered in Rasa's ear during one of their frequent encounters, "Rasa, we Tamils must stick together; support each other and not let them climb over us,"

Elaine said, "Rasa, what did you tell him?"

And it was Karande who responded,

"Rasa shook his head knowingly and said: 'Most certainly we must; I will make sure that no one climbs over me and you do the same'."

Elaine said, "Rasa, no one can climb over you. We all know that. You don't speak a word of Tamil. If he spoke to you in Tamil, how would you have pulled that one off?"

"I drifted away before he had time to switch," Rasa said with a twinkle in his eye.

More hilarious was Karande's story about Rasa and his flashy new car. Rasa had recently returned from the United States; the most exciting thing he brought back was not the doctorate degree he obtained at Wisconsin, but rather, an ostentatious automobile, two-toned in yellow and black, with wings, fins and things, conspicuous being a white painted metal plate hitched to the rear that screamed in bold red letters, "LEFT HAND DRIVE". Until that time, I had no knowledge that Americans drove cars on the wrong side of the street! I believe that Rasa's car was the only one in the whole of Ceylon so described. What an attention getter that was! He drove the beauty taking great care not to let another driver come too close. Now, Saradha, my dear friend in the Bank, drove a beat-up Hillman, such as you might only find in a junkyard. She drove fast and fiercely, without care or caution, perhaps because she had nothing to lose. The expression on her face and the appearance of her car implied a warning,

"Take care! You come close at your own peril."

Karande said,

“I was driving along Galle Road and saw Rasa weaving between lanes of traffic, the desperate look on his face announcing that he was trying to make a quick getaway. I looked around for the cause and saw Saradha in breathless pursuit behind the wheel of her ramshackle car weaving behind Rasa’s.”

Rasa countered, “She has nothing to lose, you know.”

Later in the day, when I met Saradha at lunch, I told her Karande’s story. She said,

“Yes, that’s true. But I was following Rasa because he was clearing the way so well. Following him all the way to the Bank, I made it on time.”

Thayanithy was reserved and not given to saying much, especially in the presence of women. Occasionally, he would follow Karande and Rasa to our cubicle. Then the spotlight would focus on him. The best remembered is the event Rasa described:

“Thayanithy was riding the underground in London carrying a sitar in a elongated and globular case designed for the purpose. Its appearance intrigued the Englishmen amidst whom he was seated, but most were too polite to inquire. One summed up courage to ask,

“Is that a football?”

“No,” muttered Thayanithy and lapsed into a forbidding silence.

Rasa said, “Now, if it was Karande, he would have taken the sitar out of the case and performed to the trapped audience.”

Elaine was in a class by herself- beautiful, elegant, poised and able to attract secret admirers, even though she was married. Realizing that the idea of skepticism would not occur naturally to Elaine, they played many pranks on her. When Karande and Rasa walked into our cubicle, Elaine was often talking on the phone, answering a call that they had initiated. Elaine was astir and uncommonly voluble, “Who did you say you are? Speak louder please; I can barely hear you. No, I don’t think I know anyone by that name. Where did he say I met him? England?” A long pause followed and then she said,

“No, I don’t think that’s possible. I don’t have the time,” and hung up abruptly looking agitated while Rasa and Karande waited for her attention and clarification.

Was she so gullible, I wondered? Perhaps not, because she picked up her writing tablet and exhibited total indifference to their presence.

The Bank had sent Elaine to Oxford for postgraduate study and she returned without fulfilling that mission. It was uncharitably whispered that she partied too heavily. For a while I thought so too, because my impressions of people in those youthful years were sometimes filtered through the opinion of

others. I shared the office with her and I observed that even though she appeared to be of healthy and robust constitution on the outside, she was ill; an illness that often compelled her to rest the head on the desk to overcome pain or the discomfort of lethargy that sometimes overpowered her senses, she explained to me. A pale aura hung about her; the languid walk and posture was not an affectation, but a characteristic brought on by fatigue. She told me that she had low blood pressure, its symptom being that she tired easily. Post graduate study in universities like Oxford and Cambridge is strenuous. Even though Elaine was intelligent, head and shoulders above some of us, she could not have kept up the rigorous routine such study entailed. The academic challenge was rough and oftentimes overwhelming, even for someone in the best of health, as I was in those Cambridge years. Two years later when my turn came to go to Cambridge, I was deeply apprehensive because of Elaine's failure. Barely two years after I returned from Cambridge, Elaine passed away; we were jolted into communal mourning.

In my time women officers were uncommon. We were closely watched, monitored and scrutinized, and none was likely to be involved professionally, in a one-on-one encounter with any male who sat in high places. Uneasy about consorting with young women officers, a misgiving that was not readily acknowledged but nevertheless real, the governor or a department head summoned mostly young male officers for frequent consultation. There was bound to be gossip if the Governor summoned a young woman officer instead of say, Carl Jeyarajah, day after endless day. Carl often worked well into the night in the Governor's company when a visiting team from either the IMF or IBRD set imperatives. In my time there was no woman officer in a high place within the Bank who might have summoned me to assign work or for consultation. For me, the typical day in the office was uneventful; those above were unwilling to vest authority in me and those below, especially men, challenged whatever little I had. However, at that time, when I was only thirty-three years old, I did not grieve over the non-fulfillment of ambitions. I was a working mother who had more important things on my mind, such as caring for two toddlers. On the way home from the Bank, I stopped at the Elephant House, as I often did, to buy a quart of vanilla ice cream, the children's favorite. The ice cream lay in a brown paper bag. I called out to Martin, "You can close the door and gate later. Here, take this ice cream and give it to John. Tell him to put in the freezer immediately. It's beginning to melt. How hot it is!"

Grabbing an attaché case from the back seat, I opened the door on the driver's side, got out and shut it with a big bang. My movements were brisk and driven by the thought that I had been away from the children since seven that morning. The front door leading to a flight of steps at the other end of the garden opened at that very moment; Suri, not yet four years old came out skipping to greet me. Elisa followed in measured tread, carrying Munju, the other excitable bundle of one-plus. At the sight of the two children, my mood, mellowed quickly. Dropping the attaché case on the ground, I picked up Suri, and went into the house. Cradling the baby in one arm, Elisa bent down to pick up the attaché case and followed. I set Suri down and poured a cup of tea from the tea service on the dining table that John had so efficiently provided. How lucky I was, I thought, to have three servants who took excellent care of the house and the children as if I was present to give them orders. Everything seemed to be in place; in impeccably ordered fashioned.

“Thing for me?” asked Suri.

“Yes,” I replied in eager voice, “lots and lots of vanilla ice cream.”

“You can't have ice cream until you eat dinner,” said Elisa in a whisper.

Stamping her feet on the floor, Suri cried, “Want ice cream now!”

“Let them have early dinner,” I said to control the damage unwittingly caused.

Half hour late the two were still sitting, each in a high chair, at the small dining table specially set up for them in the pantry, busy feeding the contents on their plates to so many invisible things. There was ample evidence of their generosity everywhere- scattered on the floor, smeared on their bibs, and all over their little faces. Food was everywhere, in every place you looked, except where it ought to be.

“No ice cream if you don't eat every thing on your plate,” Elisa whispered to Suri for the umpteenth time. Suri, knowing it was only an idle threat, stirred the mashed food on the plate into swirling pool with the tiny fork in her hand. Suri knew that the less she ate now, the more ice cream later. I did not have the heart to put her to bed on an empty stomach.

“Better fill it up with ice cream,” I told Elisa who thought that I was spoiling the child.

Dinner dragged on amidst threats and praise, until dessert was served; then a surprising appetite surfaced. Spoon after spoon of the delicious vanilla ice cream went into the little mouths with neat precision, not a bit wasted. The two hours to dinner dragged on- first in the pantry participating in the children's dinner; later, in their bedroom giving them baths and putting them to sleep. I counted the procedure in ten long steps. They were undressed and

coaxed into the bathroom; I went in first firmly holding Suri by her reluctant hand; Elisa followed with Munji; the sorrowful duo was placed in the tub filled with lukewarm water; Munji brought her pudgy fists on the water, spraying Elisa and me; the sound of splashing water drowned my screams of “No!” My discomfiture did not escape Suri’s attention; she splashed with even greater glee; tired of splashing, grabbing began; Munji reached out for a floating toy, the sister seized it; to distract Munji’s attention Elisa floated the rubber duck around the tub; little pudgy hands reached out, but before they could close over the new domain, a bigger hand laid claim; next, Munji cried as if she was severely hurt; I reached out for the wand and began to blow bubbles taking great care to draw attention to the bubbles and not to the wand; but Suri did not see any bubbles, she wanted the wand. “Let mummy blow the bubbles,” said Elisa softly. Suri grabbed it and had no intention of letting it go. I was overwhelmed with their bawling and bickering.

“Don’t you think it is time to bring them out, Elisa?” I inquired. The children were enjoying themselves so much that when Elisa said, “It’s time to come out and dry,” they howled in unison.

Their night clothes were put on. Elisa, with a small comb and brush, slowly revolved around each giving little curls to their soft and shining hair. In “no nonsense” tone of voice Elisa ordered them to lie down and shut their eyes with promise of more fun and play tomorrow. Miraculously, they both dropped off to sleep faster than I had thought they would.

I tried to conceal my irritation because the children were awake so late in the evening and in perpetual motion. Though yearning to be with them through the long day at work, I was edgy when they were awake and incorrigible. There was something comforting about the sleeping children. They both looked lovely; proper thoughts I rarely had when they were awake and in perpetual motion. In sleep they looked angelic; the recently washed faces so clean, fresh and sweet smelling; their bodies motionless except for the perceptible rise and fall of their little chests. I had the chance to relax.

I was short-changed by the grocer, handyman, gardener, chauffeur, cook, peon, and others with whom I had to deal because I was woman. I had little time for myself. I had not been to the movies or dined out in months, and rarely visited a friend and even then not without the entourage of two children and their nanny. How lucky men were and how much unfairness and bias there was against professional women! Within the home men rarely provide intellectual companionship; they seek the comfort of trouble free home, good food and sexual favor. Perhaps father was right. He once cautioned me.

“Child, you’re too qualified. You’re a professional woman. Your mother’s a housewife. She can manage because she’s at home. I don’t help her and Jey is just like me. You’ll be forced to burn the candle at both ends, in the office and in the home. Ceylonese men, brought up like gods by their doting mothers, will neither give you the respect you deserve nor share with you the responsibilities of raising a family. Tamils boys are far worse than the Singhalese; they’re unlikely to offer you a chair, open doors for you, carry your bag, or pay heed to your comfort. These same men are often transformed when they marry uneducated women; our men are more responsive to the needs of the uneducated than the educated wife. There’s some jealousy, child.”

It was well past eight when I left their bedroom and headed in the direction of the dining room where the table had been set for one. On a white tablemat, I saw the white plate with a blue border, a matching soup bowl, glass of water and a set of cutlery. A pitcher of water sat on a large tray. A vase of colorful croton leaves was reflected on the shining black tabletop. The floor of the dining room, like the rest of the house was paved with black tile. At one end was a china cabinet containing the blue and white china I had been collecting for a long time: ginger jars, plates, vases, and cups and saucers. The plates had a design of blue willow trees alongside an unseen stream, spanned by a blue wooden bridge. A boat ferried blue and white kimono-clad ladies each carrying a tiny blue parasol. Swirling blue dragons were hand-painted on the white porcelain cups and saucers. On the ginger jars, also hand-painted, were bluebirds transfixed in flight between blue cherry trees. Across the room, on the opposite wall were four large blue and white plates in a willow design. How well they all blended together, the black, the blue and the white, I thought. While waiting for dinner to be served by John, I imagined myself amidst an idyllic setting of cherry blossoms and blue birds. Suddenly, a strange and inexplicable mood of anxiety that always foreboded a crisis came over me. Nearly every time I felt this way, something terrible happened in the home or office.

The sun had set more than an hour ago, but the intense heat of the day still lingered and the humidity was unbearable. There was not even a faint breeze outside to stir a leaf on a tree. Overcome by heat, even neighborhood dogs that barked all day and night were dumbfounded,

“Whirr, whirr,” groaned the ceiling fan overhead. Far from improving my comfort level, it was like the droning of a mosquito in my ears. Drops of perspiration dribbled down under my armpits. I looked with distaste at the piping hot minestrone soup and the buttered rolls that John, set down on the table, culinary delights in cooler times. Steam rose from the bowl like a

genie from a bottle. I sipped a spoonful of the red viscous stuff slowly and John stood behind my chair, like a vicious cobra, with its hood spread out, ready to strike at any moment. He could not have chosen a worse time to tell me the bad news.

“Madam,” he hissed, “the kitchen door leading out to the garden is broken. It is lying on the kitchen floor.”

Anxiety turned to fear that held me speechless in the chair only for a moment. I whirled the chair round to face him and looked straight in his eyes. I was gripping the serviette in my hand to control the temper surging within.

“Broken, did you say?” I shouted, volume turned up by terror I could not account for. I felt that there was more to his story than he was willing to tell in the first gasp. Taking a deep breath to get more wind into me in yoga fashion, I continued in the same loud tone of voice,

“It’s a brand new door, installed when the house was re-modeled six months ago. It’s made of solid wood unlike those of veneer we used in the bedrooms. Who broke it?”

John looked about him, to the right and left, to avoid eye contact with me. He was silent for a moment as if trying to either exaggerate or modify the information he had already given. Then, perhaps enlivened by the anger he had unleashed in me, in a voice that boomed like a volcano come alive, he repeated,

“The door is broken. It’s lying on the ground,”\

“I heard you. Don’t repeat yourself. I asked you to tell me who broke it? Answer me! I want to know who broke that door. I insist on knowing who did it? Who among you is so careless and destructive? What’s the matter with you all? Do you mean to tell me that you don’t know and didn’t bother to find out who broke that door before you came to me?” I cried out with an expression of extreme disgust.

I could not restrain myself from shouting in his face. I thought it was the only way to tackle the arrogance I detected in his manner. I was not going to let that old fool tease me because I was a woman; I wanted him to know that I was not a weakling. I wanted him to see the ugly side of me that he had not seen before. I paid him good wages for the little work he did. Was it stupidity or just plain male bravado that made him risk losing a good life under my roof?

“You are paying these servants ridiculous wages considering how little they do for you and how much for themselves. I should retire from my job and get into your employ,” was father’s facetious comment.

There were two other servants in the household: Martin the gardener and Elisa, the nanny. Of the three, I liked John the least perhaps because of what father's warning. Before he joined our household, he had been a cook in a popular restaurant in the city. When I expressed surprise that he was giving up a well paying job to join my employ, he said, "I have too much work there and bad hours. I am looking for a job with a lighter workload. I can't work late hours at my age.

His age, fifty-five years, was the main factor in his selection from a number of people, mostly men, who applied for the job of cook when I ran an advertisement in the local newspaper. John, an old man seemed like the ideal choice for a household headed by a young woman living alone with two small children. I was beginning to have second thoughts because, among other irritating habits, John had a way of sneaking up on me. A strange feeling of being constantly watched by someone possessed me. Like an unseen ghost, John was always there, concealed somewhere, materializing with a glass of water to drink or a snack to eat, a pair of scissors, a pencil or any innocuous thing I needed. The alternation of helpfulness and insolent patronage made me a little wary. So nervous was I of his ubiquitous presence that I now undressed in the bathroom behind a locked door. He probably wanted to be helpful, coming readily to the aid of a damsel in distress, but there was something about him that aroused my suspicion. I felt no satisfaction that he was willing to assist me when there was no one else, and a lot of help I always needed as a working mother. Still, with some men you never feel comfortable!

When John told me the door was broken, I was afraid; fear was mixed with irritability caused by the unrelenting heat and humidity of a tropical night. My heart began to beat violently- bang, bang, bang! I suspected intimidation and was furious at being so challenged. His uppity and insolent attitude irritated me. There was a certain something in his look that repelled and terrified me. I fixed a most furious stare focusing my eyes keenly upon his ghastly face to see whether I could, by so doing, detect his purpose; his face bothered me. There was something I did not like about it. The yellow electric light cast a circle from above; the jaundiced-faced man who stood before me looked repulsive. He had small but piercing eyes beneath bushy eyebrows. A deep scar under his left eye and another just below the hairline made him look like a man with a violent past. Why had I not noticed them before? His upper torso was bent slightly forward like a tiger ready to close in on a kill. Though I knew not what, I felt that he had done or was about to do something terrible and I flinched under his stare. I was petrified. When you are scared, you invite more harassment.

“Don’t be afraid,” I told myself; “don’t let him scare you.”

I rested a hand on the end of the table to steady. I recovered and was ready to take him on. I broke the spell of confusion and fear he had cast over me with brisk action. Pushing the plate with a half-eaten bowl of soup, my hand swooped upon a spoon and sent it hurtling across the table, to the floor beyond, like father did when he was extremely provoked. I banged my fist on the table just like father did when he was very angry.

When John saw the fury I unleashed at short notice, and how my face contorted in fierce rage, it was his turn to flinch. He turned away from me perhaps to ponder his next move. His manner changed abruptly to conform to expected protocol perhaps out of consideration for the job he could lose. He transformed from overbearing bully to humble servant.

"You see, hamu," he whined, shifting his bulk from one leg to another and clasping and unclasping his hands at his waist, his head inclining to a side in supplication,

“This morning I knocked on that door, but Elisa wouldn’t open it. Elisa does that every morning to cause trouble. How can I fix hamu’s breakfast in time, when she doesn’t open the door to let me in?” John shared the servants’ room located outside the main house with Martin. Elisa slept in the children’s bedroom. I recalled an incident that happened few days ago. Early in the morning, when I was about to step under the shower, the doorbell rang, again and again.

“Who might it be?” I wondered as I stepped out of the bathroom, hurriedly wore my dressing gown and rushed to get the door. John was standing on the front doorstep protesting loudly that he could not get inside to make my breakfast because the backdoor was locked and bolted and that Elisa did it on purpose to get him in trouble. I called out to Elisa who was in the bathroom with the children. The sound of a gushing faucet and the cries of the children drowned my summons.

Recalling that incident, I said,

“I don’t think Elisa does it on purpose. She’s with the children. She can’t hear you over the din in there. I don’t think she wants to cause you problems.”

I did not know all the details. I had yet to hear Elisa’s version of what happened, but I had heard enough to convince me that there was plenty amiss in my home; relationships between the servants were sliding down a slippery slope.

John responded,

“Hamu, don’t lose your temper. It isn’t my fault. This morning she did not open the door, again. I knocked on the door several times; then I pushed it

but it wouldn't budge because she had latched it. I summoned Martin and we pushed together. We pushed to dislodge the latch that could have been easily repaired, but we did more damage than we thought we would. It's lying on the kitchen floor."

Unable to regain my composure, overcome as I was with two disabilities, an aching head and the broken door, I asked,

"Don't lie to me! Don't talk to me about your pious intentions. You and Martin wanted to break that door and create a problem for me. If your intentions were good, why didn't you tell me about the broken door before I left for office this morning? Why wait until nightfall to tell me? Don't you know that the stores are closed at this time? How do you suppose I am going to find a carpenter to fix the door in the night?"

Suddenly it dawned on me! Perhaps he did not want to have the door fixed. My home was "open" to the outside world through the dark night. From the recesses in my terror-filled head, I pulled out hellish scenarios.

"I am within striking distance of a fatal disaster. Tonight a gang of robber will invade my home to rob it and murder my children and me. Why didn't Elisa tell me about the broken door before I left for office in the morning? Is she a collaborator? Was she afraid of being blamed for the incident?"

Though annoyed with Elisa and even suspecting that she might be an accessory, I was unwilling to summon her and take her on because my most precious belongings were in her charge.

I had observed that John and Elisa were sparring frequently. A few days ago when I was seated in the verandah watching the children play in the garden with Elisa, John sneaked up on me,

"Hamu," he said, "Elisa is lazy and uncaring. She is too well paid for the little work she does. Even though I am not paid as much, I serve you and the children better than she does."

While looking over his shoulder to ensure that Elisa was not within hearing range, he continued, "The children are neglected. She does not wash them or feed them well when you're gone. See how thin little Suri hamu is! Elisa doesn't wash their clothes. They run around the house in their diapers. I told her, 'Martin is a young man. You shouldn't let those girls run around naked.' She said that I am a dirty old man to get thoughts like that in my head! The children are so little. It's too hot for clothes. She asked Martin and me to stay outside!"

I responded,

"If Elisa doesn't want you and Martin inside the house when I am not here, perhaps you should stay outside, in your room, the garden or the garage. The children look well cared for. The clothes are regularly washed and neatly

stacked on the dresser each day. If what you say is true, what does Elisa do all day?"

John replied,

"I wash and iron the clothes and look after the children. She passes the hours reading the newspapers in the morning, watching out for the mailman at noon, and sleeping for at least two hours in the afternoon after she puts the children to sleep."

I did not respond. The story that John told me, if true, was most disturbing. How could Elisa let John wash our clothes, even my underwear, and look after the children? I must compel an explanation from Elisa. I called home to ask mother and father for their advice. They both said that it would be wise to monitor the situation closely before any confrontation because it wasn't easy to find a good nanny; someone as kind, thoughtful and loving as Elisa appeared to be. They both liked Elisa and distrusted John. Either appearance was deceiving or John was lying. I wondered what I should do. Should I fire Elisa? But parental advice forbade me to carry out such intention.

My friends told me,

"Elisa is an absolute treasure! You are so lucky to have found her. A caring nanny is difficult to find these days. She is just like a mother to those two children."

While John was making those wild accusations about Elisa, out there in the garden, Munji was in Elisa's arms, and Suri ran round Elisa chanting.

"Hava..ava...chi..chi..chi hava,"

Elisa was revolving like a carousel to the tune of Suri's song.

Was John lying? Either he was stupid or a wicked troublemaker. Did he want Elisa fired? Was it a case of unrequited love? I had no answers and no time to make inquiries and find out the meaning or cause of the feud between the cook and nanny. For some reason, obscure to me, John and Elisa were feuding. After hearing what John said, I was uneasy about leaving the children in Elisa's care. When father heard the story, he said "Don't talk rubbish, child! That girl is safe. She'll defend your children like a mother if they face any danger. But be careful of those two men servants. Don't let them come inside the house when you're away. I've got this nasty cold and your mother thinks I should not go down to Colombo and infect the children. She's right. It'll be more work for you, if the children fall ill. I'll be there as soon as I feel better."

At the time John was interviewed for the job of cook in my household, he told me that he was married, had a grownup daughter and four grandchildren, all living with his wife in a village barely fifty miles from Colombo. On the last Saturday of each month, as soon as he received his

wages that I gave with scrupulous punctuality, he went home to the village to spend the weekend with his family. His behavior so far gave the impression of a devoted and faithful family man.

For reason obscure to me, John and Elisa did not appear to get along. Perhaps, it is as John had described. Elisa heard John knocking on the door, but she did not open it. John, afraid that Elisa would later complain that he had overslept, pushed the door much harder than he should have. If his intentions were honorable, why did he not have the door fixed or tell me about it earlier in the day? And why did Elisa not tell me about the broken door? What was the import of the irrational behavior of my employees? My head was dazed from fear and suspicion, and not knowing whom to trust. There was no time to spend interrogating Elisa, who by her manner made it clear that she had no wish to be put through a cross examination as if she was guilty of a crime. A new crisis confronted me; its resolution could not await investigation and analysis. If either John or Elisa wanted to undermine my authority, I must show they had not succeeded. I was alone but not helpless. I was the man in my house, strong, energetic, resolute, decisive and able to handle any crisis that might arise, morning, noon or night. I clenched my teeth in determination. I must repair the door immediately!

In times of disaster I am composed. Composure gave courage, energy and determination to get the job done or summon help if I could not do it. I stood up resolutely and threw my shoulders back in a gesture of bravado. My small chest expanded to take in a deep breath of air. I called out to Martin to bring the toolbox from the garage. John, looked at me incredulously and said,

“You are not going to repair that door, are you? It can’t be done, hamu. I didn’t tell you that it is off its hinges. Martin and I will take good care of the house. Don’t worry. You just leave it to us. We’ll have it repaired or replaced tomorrow.

“I’ll have that door standing as it did before this morning even if it takes me the whole night to do it,” was my blunt reply and boast.

I had put myself on the spot. For all my practical experience, and I had plenty under father’s tutelage, a handyman of sorts, I had not hung a door before. A feeling of pride possessed me. I must do something to show off to the two men who were challenging my authority, perhaps even testing my vulnerability.

If I failed to repair the door and have it hung, I would be ridiculed not only by them, but also their friends in the neighborhood. In my eagerness to show how I could perform like a man, I had unleashed the potential for ridicule.

Nevertheless, I got down to repairing the door, fall though I might in the process to ridicule. I strode into the kitchen to determine the extent of the damage. Fortunately, contrary to what John had told me, Elisa had not locked the door; she had secured it with latch only; the latch was off the frame but still attached to the door. It was in far better shape than John had led me to believe. Martin put down on the kitchen table, and I examined the tools in there. There was a tool for every need. Father ensured that the box contained every tool anyone would possibly need for light carpentry. There were nails, a hammer, screwdrivers, spanners, pliers and even a chisel. Not wanting to work under the solicitous directions of either John or Martin, I sent them away and settled down to repair the door with only Elisa's help. "Can't fix the latch back in the same position; it must be shifted to a new position," I told Elisa.

"Yes," was Elisa's cold response and then she kept her silence.

I squatted on the cool cement floor. Slowly, new holes were drilled in the not so resilient wood and the latch placed in the space to ensure they matched.

"You are tired, madam. You should get John to fix the door. He broke it, didn't he?" said Elisa angrily. "I can fix it myself," I countered in resolute voice. To show Elisa that I was not tired or incapable of handling the job, I removed three sets of hinges in one sweep. There was a little damage to the existing grooves in the doorframe; I decided to take a chance and place the hinges in the same positions. I rubbed the bar of kitchen soap into the holes in the wood as I had seen father do.



The Tool Box

“The wood must be scraped clean, measurements taken to ensure the hinges fit and the wood lightly chiseled to

deepen the old grooves,” I said trying to sound like a professional.

“Yes,” Elisa replied as before without much enthusiasm. Explaining the procedure to Elisa inspired me even though apathy and indifference were all she displayed. When a woman tries to do jobs that are customarily done by men, she inspires no confidence even in other women. With a hammer and chisel I cut deeper into the existing grooves to make the hinges sit more securely. The house seemed to rock from the blows I was dealing. Over and over again, first vertically and then horizontally and at an angle, I brought the hammer down on the chisel, savoring each blow as if I was dealing each to my enemy. It felt so good to release some of my pent up fury, like music to my ears. I was in an empowering rage. My fury spilled into the little dents that were appearing in the groove with each blow from the hammer. Wood chips were flying in every direction. Faster and faster, harder and harder, I hammered away until the groove was deep enough to hold the hinge in a firm and fitting embrace.

“I am striking terror into the hearts of all my enemies, whoever and wherever they are,” I announced to Elisa.

Elisa barely smiled.

I shook my head rather angrily not knowing what to make of her reaction. The woman is infuriating, I thought. Because of women like her, men got away with murder. Or was Elisa’s strategy more successful than mine? Neither by word nor deed did she show anyone, man or woman, how she felt. She gave her oppressors no satisfaction of conquest or accomplishment even when she was in their midst. What would be the object of conquest when the conqueror derived no pleasure from watching the pain inflicted upon the victim, not a trace of emotion on the face, only indifference? We lifted the heavy door and held it securely against the frame; placed the hinges in the grooves, moving them about until we felt that the door was securely set within the frame; then each hinge was screwed in, Elisa and I taking turns to screw in the long nails. We went through the job with utmost dexterity. When the last screw was in place and its head flushed with the metal hinge, the door stood, as good as it had before that morning. Next, the latch was fitted to the doorframe. Elisa appeared to have gathered more enthusiasm as the work progressed. A pity, I thought, there were no more doors to hang.

“I feel like an army colonel whose battalion had just repulsed a vicious enemy attack,” I boasted to Elisa.

“Yes,” Elisa said thoughtfully, “I didn’t think we could do it.”

“I felt sure we could do it together. Don’t you feel proud and self-sufficient? Don’t you feel good to do those things that we all think women can’t do?” I asked.

“Very good,” said Elisa, and that was all she said.

Wholly at a loss to account for Elisa’s sour demeanor and deeming eccentricity, I rose to take her leave. I knew I had to keep a ceaseless lookout to ensure the security of my family. Without broadcasting victory, Elisa closed the door, locked and latched it. I examined it thoroughly and secured the latch in fastidious fashion. I added to these precautions a heavy wooden table, rendering it almost impossible to push open from the outside without breaking it down with noise loud enough to arouse anyone from the deepest slumber, or perhaps even to bring the neighbors to our rescue. I offered prayers to all the gods for any divine help we may have received; and in case they did not work during the graveyard shift, I slept in the study that night within easy reach of the phone.

Next morning, flushed with a huge feeling of victory, pleased with my firm handling of my employees and the triumphant resolution of a crisis, I decided to be forgiving. I made no reference to the events of the night before. I unwisely resolved to let events take their course. I did not wish to make a production of the event because I did not expect it to be the precursor to more drama. No questions were asked and no explanations were voluntarily given by anyone. Everybody appeared to be afflicted by an attack of amnesia as though no memory of the previous day’s events appeared to have survived a night’s slumber. Outwardly, I showed no concern, but deep down in my mind some sediment of distrust and suspicion accumulated, overlaid by a fear that foreboded evil.

The day after the incident our habitat was consumed by torrential rain that lasted for several days. Perhaps because of it, I felt fear when danger is sensed but its character and course are unknown. The most disturbing thought on my mind was that a calamity would swoop down on us during a night of wind, thunder, lightening and pelting rain. I heard the wind whipping the trees and the commotion produced by falling and flying debris. I trembled as if I was out there exposed to those elements.

Several times during the night, I woke up, thought of the broken door and wandered restlessly through the house making certain that every door and window was locked. On some nights I lay awake waiting though I knew not for what; and so I passed several uneventful nights, held captive by the unknown. Just as I was beginning to feel relaxed because the rain ceased and the night was lit up with half moon, the nightmare I was expecting happened.

I was aroused from a deep sleep by a sonic boom. The doors and windows rattled from the protracted and reverberating impact of some large object crash-landing on the roof, followed by a burst of similar sounds. Only for a moment I lay frozen in bed not knowing what was going on. “The roof is about to cave in; a tree has fallen on the roof,” I thought as I jumped out of bed and groped my way into the hallway, my heart pounding from fear for the children’s safety. Before I reached the door to their bedroom, Elisa came out of the room saying, with neither excitement nor astonishment as if that horrifying event was a frequent occurrence,

“Someone is throwing stones on the roof.”

Dragging Elisa along, I ran through the door yelling,

“Get the children! Get the children!”

As we each grabbed a child, the roof began to shake more violently; doors and windows rattled and vibrations from the shakes were felt throughout the house. I stood dazed and shivering.

“Summon the police, hamu!” Elisa said in frenzy so uncharacteristic of her usual demeanor.

Summon the police? How could I? I was poised on the brink of uncertainty and even shame. I did not want a single soul out there to know anything about the event. It was a trait I had inherited from mother. We kept our secrets even from relatives for fear of gossip, distortion and ridicule. The thought of summoning the police in the dead of night was disquieting idea to me. It would, most certainly, embarrass me. I was just beginning to feel empowered by my ability to function well without help while Jey was away. I was ready to take on the whole world if pushed to it. I was unwilling to show friends and family that a woman was not equal to the task of managing a home alone. I was also unwilling to risk being ridiculed by the police for summoning them to my assistance without knowing for sure the cause of the emergency.

I explained to Elisa,

“I can’t summon the police. It isn’t as if someone is being murdered or raped. What if the sounds are from branches falling on the roof? There are some dead limbs in overhanging trees. I meant to have them cut. I should have taken care of the problem sooner.”

“No,” said Elisa quite emphatically, “those are stones. Someone is throwing stones on the roof. And where are John and Martin?”

How could she be so certain I pondered? How could she distinguish between the noise of a branch or a stone falling on a roof unless she knew for certain? There was something strange, nay, sinister in her certainty. Was she expecting the attack? Where were John and Martin? Were they not aroused

from sleep by sounds so deafening, and by those bone-rattling vibrations? A terrible thought occurred to me that Elisa might be in league with the perpetrator of this outrageous act. The three servants like so many people I daily met, were teasing me and challenging my authority. My suspicion gained support from the incident of the broken door. The strangeness of Elisa's behavior during the affair of the broken door was perplexing. Neither John nor Elisa had brought it to my attention until it was too late to summon a carpenter. It seemed that my servants were all guilty of these extravagant acts designed to terrify me. Was she in collusion with the perpetrator? Why had she not told me about the broken door before I left for office that morning? How were the two incidents connected? Were they perpetrated by the same set of people? I figured that it would be futile to call the police. Belatedly, an officer would arrive, by which time the intruder will be miles away from the scene of crime. He would survey the vicinity and go back to report that he saw and heard nothing; perhaps even assert that the story was a figment of imagination of two hysterical women who lived alone. I was afraid to call father because he would worry needlessly. He might decide to drive down immediately and insist on taking the children back to Kandy. Yes! He was sure to take the children away from me because they were most at risk. He would most certainly say that Jey should not be taking off so frequently, leaving me behind alone and unprotected. I was afraid he would lose respect for my ability to organize, manage, supervise and control. I wanted to show mother and father that I could manage that home without Jey. I did not want to be seen as a hysterical and vulnerable woman afraid of my shadow. The little power that I wielded over my domain, I did not want to relinquish. There was no discounting the fact that I was an obdurate woman unwilling to bow to or seek help from anyone.

Carrying two sleeping children in our arms, we walked into the hallway in search of the cause of terror that suddenly descended upon our home that night. Not knowing what else to do, I flooded the house with lights and turned on the porch light. Then, treading as lightly as possible, I went to a window secured by iron bars that looked out into the garden and opened it. Opening my eyes their widest, I peered into the garden, faintly illumined by the porch light and a little moonlight. It was a melancholy sight. The house stood in the middle of a large rectangular shaped garden, protected on three sides by a wall. On the fourth side, along the driveway to the garage, a fence of barbed wire camouflaged by trailing bougainvillea vines and thick bushes of croton secured the house. Within the garden there were several trees obscuring the view in every direction. It looked like a tangled wood; a perfect site for criminal activity or mischief. I could not see far beyond the

immediate surrounding. Whoever entered the garden must have scaled the gate, the point of easiest entry, and was keeping behind the drapery of trees and bushes to avoid being seen. I looked cautiously around focusing my eyes on those spots where the perpetrator might be hiding. As far as I could see in the luminous spaces, not even a shadow of a living thing was out there. All I saw was darkness except where the porch light shone and where moonlight filtered through the overhead canopy; in those places I saw nothing alive and nothing that moved. When we bought the house, we fancied ourselves taking possession of a charming house surrounded by greenery. In less eventful times, every precaution had been taken to ensure that even if we were murdered within, it was a strictly private affair, far from the prying eyes of neighbors. Fearing such an incident, I shut the window and walked away toward the point of closest communication with the servants' room. I called out loudly to both John and Martin, but neither responded.

It was two in the morning. There was an intruder in the garden throwing stones on the roof. While I was in a turbulent state of mind, Elisa had gathered her cool demeanor. But what could be her reason for frightening me? I could not reconcile my suspicions with the good sense I generally observed in Elisa. Regarding them as thoughts wantonly brought into a troubled mind, I let them go.

"Tick, tock," warned the old wall clock. A cricket cried in another part of the house.

Since the porch light was turned on, stones had ceased to fall. I, carrying Munju in my arms and Elisa carrying Suri walked past each other, up and down the hallway, first in one direction and then in another, hushing the children back to sleep. Tiring of pacing back and forth and realizing that it accomplished nothing, I said,

"No use lying awake in nervous expectancy and torturing ourselves into a state of hysteria. I need to get some sleep before daybreak or I'll be unfit to go to office," my face affecting courage that my tremulous voice belied.

Elisa went back to the children' bedroom and I followed close behind.

Gently, ever so gently, I laid down Munju in her cot, pushed it gently away from the center toward the inner wall of the room, surrounding her with two pillows I pulled out of a storage chest. We pushed Suri's bed alongside.

While Elisa kept vigil by them, I went back to the dining room, poured a glass of water from the decanter, and while sipping from it, paced back and forth hoping thus to get a clearer idea what had just happened and searching for a quick solution to the problem it presented. Instead, I remained in a state of extreme anxiety brought on by the fear of the unknown. I imagined being surrounded by hateful people who had woven a web around me. Like a fly

caught in it, I was struggling but unable to free myself. The mystery was beyond my understanding and resolution. Too tired to keep up the fearful vigil, I went into the study, turned off the light, dropped on the couch and dozed off.

I woke up startled to the sound of the gate creaking; I grabbed the cushion without thinking. Abandoning it quickly, I picked up the hammer I had placed by the side of the couch. I pulled myself up to a sitting posture to catch the shadow, which was all I could see through the opaline glass. I did not stir a limb and sat motionless less than a foot from the monster. For a moment I had an ill-defined feeling of having a bad dream. It was soon dispelled by the movement of the shadow outside the window that I could faintly see in the moonlight. I was close to swooning from fear. I got down from the couch and crouched closer to the window for a better look, and saw the unmistakable charcoal form of someone out there in the garden. The hooting of a night owl seized my ears. The charcoal form began to move, and I heard the sound of footsteps. It walked up to the window. I watched the window fearfully and made out the figure of a large man standing just outside it. What if he broke the windowpane? I was trembling. Tightening the hold on the hammer, I got ready to strike anyone who broke the windowpane and tried to enter. The awesome shadow stretched and then slouched. I fancied the silhouette to be a hideous monster with the face of a devil complete with horns and fanged teeth. It was outside the shuttered window, a few feet away; only a pane of glass and fancy iron bars separated me from it. Save for the rustle of the bush outside the window, the house was surrounded by an eerie silence; even the lone owl, that had been hooting intermittently, was scared into silence. All was still within as well, except for the relentless ticking of the wall clock that filled my ears. And then came from the apparition outside a sound between a stifled whistle and a hushed order. I could not understand what it meant. Was the pervert trying to alert someone within the house, Elisa, for example, or was he jeering me? I stood there wondering what I should do. Emotion turned from fear to anger that the sanctity of my household was being violated and I was powerless to stop whoever was harassing me. I had to do something. Feelings of frustration and disgust awakened a lame idea. I summoned enough courage to call out in loudest voice I could muster, “Elisa, did you phone the police? I hear footsteps outside; there is someone standing outside this window. Call again and tell them to hurry before he gets away.”

There was response from Elisa even though the question was not for her ears. She came running to the room and banged on the ornamental iron bars

with the hammer she grabbed from my hand. It served the purpose. The bush rustled from sudden activity; footsteps stirred; the ghoulish figure ducked behind a bush, then rushed past to crouch behind the croton fence and made its escape. We heard him running away. I was more disquieted by that apparition outside the window than the rocks thrown on the roof. I awoke the following morning to sounds of children's chatter within and chirping of the birds outside. With awakening came recollection of the night's horror. The danger that had settled over my home lifted slowly, like a fog, as daylight appeared. And when I saw the children smiling in the familiar gesture of welcoming, I became my brave self again, if only so that I could do whatever it took to secure them. Nothing unusual appeared to be happening within the house. I heard the clatter of pots and pans from a distant part of the house. John was preparing breakfast. The aroma of strong coffee spread through the room. I omitted the morning shower, dressed hurriedly, spoke to Elisa about the incident, advised her to be watchful, keep the front and backdoors locked all day and not let anyone, even Martin or John, in the house. I promised to call home every hour. I was going to give John and Martin money to buy lunch at the tea boutique in Koswatta Junction. I walked into the dining room. Through the open windows, daylight was streaming in. At seven in the morning, it already felt like mid-afternoon. It promised to be another sweltering day.

John came in to set the table carrying the toast rack and the butter dish. His hateful presence irritated me; I could not summon enough courage to look him in the face because I was nervous. I was unwilling to face John.

Walking up to the vase of flowers on the windowsill, I re-arranged it. Observing that it needed water, I picked up the pitcher from the table, poured much of its contents into the vase. I then poured a cup of steaming hot coffee from the pot John had placed on the tray and sipped it. John waited by the door leading to the kitchen, as he did every morning, to see whether the coffee was strong enough. With feigned casualness, I asked John whether he had heard any commotion during the night. It transpired that neither John nor Martin was in their room.

"Martin went to the movies, and I went to Panchikawatte to visit an old friend," John explained. "Stones, did you say?" he asked looking most solicitous and bewildered. For a moment he stood lordling over me; then he strode off to investigate. I watched him leave with brisk movement of his cumbrous body. I would have liked to follow him to see the damage, but was unwilling to show him that I was concerned, and preferred to rely on Elisa's account that no damage had been done.

“Only a few stones are lying around. Somebody is trying to annoy the hamu thinking that you are vulnerable because mahatmaya is away,” she said.

John returned to report that several stones were on the roof and many more around the house. The most disturbing thought was the exaggerated account he gave me.

“A very large stone, possibly the one that awoke hamu, is still lying on the roof, directly above the children’s bedroom,” he said. “It’s very dangerous, hamu; if that stone had cracked the tiles, pierced the ceiling and fallen into the room, it would have hurt the children.”

He was very solicitous. He did not want me to worry. He would take care of whoever was responsible for such criminal activity. He would lie awake all night from now on and catch the scoundrel.

“Did the hamu summon the police?” he asked.

“You know how the police work; they don’t respond even in an emergency,”

I replied, “I am not afraid of any stone-throwing hooligan. Let the coward know that I am not easily frightened.”

“Leave it to me. Let him strike again and we’ll see what happens! I’ll show him who John is. Don’t fear hamu. I’ll be hiding in my room. When he strikes, I’ll nab him and break every bone in his body,” John promised. John strode back to the kitchen. Left alone, I began to think. His words were consoling and he sounded sincere, but I was bothered by a nagging distrust of the two male servants. I was beginning to think that the nightly intruder was too close to me for comfort. I must find out who he was, before he struck again and did more harm. I was even beginning to think that I was not capable of running the home when Jey was away. Even though I was the better organizer, manager and worker, I was experiencing insubordination that Jey never did. My authority was undermined and patience tested to the utmost. To maintain my status and authority, keep my reputation untarnished and command the respect of subordinates I had many hurdles to clear; when I cleared one, another, much higher, was erected; and if I tripped, my authority was further undermined. Within the home, Jey was able to assert his authority over the servants by a motion of hand, a nod of his head or even by silence. When he was at home, there was no drama; the household functioned as well as a Swiss watch. Therefore, he could not understand how so many bad things happened during my watch. Mother was bound to say that I was soft on the servants and did not know how to keep them in their place.

She was sure to ask,

“How can you assert your authority when you betray your weaknesses in so many ways? Don’t you think your communist ideas undermine your authority?”

Instead of driving straight to office, I went to the Police Station to meet a friend who was an inspector of police. Never before had I been inside a police station; I was uncomfortable in my mission.

“Hello, what brings you here so early in the morning?” he asked extending his hand in greetings. He was a tall man in the prime of life, forty at most. The khaki uniform that inspectors wore, he modeled to perfection.

“I need your help,” I replied feebly.

“If you’re in trouble, you’ve come to the right place. What can I do for you? Someone told me, I forget who it was, that your husband is abroad and you’re living alone with the two children. They were impressed by the way you managed the household and also did a man-size job in the office.”

His words lightened my heart. However, I could not suppress a shudder as I began to tell him my rambling story. He listened, without interruption, to the account of the broken door and the rock-throwing incident. I told him that the two events might not be linked; however, I wanted him to know lest there was a link. The part of my narrative that excited most alarm in him was about the intruder walking up to the window of my home office. The concern on his face diffused any diffidence or embarrassment I had in the beginning, enabling me to assume, midway through the narrative a trust in him.

“You’ll catch the perpetrators, won’t you?” I asked.

He replied after a few moments of reflection,

“Relax and go about your work as though nothing has happened. Don’t tell anyone at home that you came to see me. We’ll mount surveillance around your house between midnight and dawn each day for the next week or so.”

“You’ll catch the perpetrators, won’t you?” I asked him for the second time hoping thus to make him say more to ease my mind.

“Let’s examine the situation. As I said before this man’s a night prowler. He isn’t a regular burglar. Burglars operate stealthily. They don’t draw attention to themselves with loud noise. A burglar won’t throw stones on a roof to alert sleeping inhabitants and then go away. They’ll break and enter stealthily. My guess is that this man is intent on harassing a household that he thinks is defenseless. If it’s that manservant of yours, perhaps he wants to gain your confidence with promises of his protection, make you relax your watch under his care and then take advantage of you in some way. Very likely, the intruder is a neighbor or insider. What preceded it, I mean the incident of the broken door, or what followed, the rock-throwing incident,

suggests an insider. If the two incidents are linked, then it must be an insider. I can't predict what might follow because there might be an escalation of harassment. Who can tell what the next act will be? You said that the gate is chained and padlocked at night. We need a key to the gate to enter your garden. We'll nab him! I am sure of that."

I was dubious, but after some thought and knowing that there was no other way to fight the menace, I allowed myself to be persuaded and handed him the key. I looked down at the clenched fists on my lap, relaxed those fingers because of the hope he was stirring in me. I could not share his optimism completely. Observing the worry and the rueful expression I still had on my face, he quickly added,

"I assure you that we'll get the man in the next day or so. He's a coward trying to bully a defenseless woman. Having failed so far, he's very likely to return to the scene of the crime. Each act of cowardice foreshadows more of the same. You may have to replace the roof, but we'll catch our man. It's a coward who strikes the home of a woman living alone."

"I don't live alone; there are three servants. I hope those stones don't come crashing on our heads next time," I said ever so softly.

"If that happens, we'll get him for attempted murder," he promised.

"I may not be alive to see him brought to trial," I said in a voice that trailed off into whisper as if it was coming from the threshold of a death foretold.

"You worry too much," he said trying to restore my calm. "Remember, that these men are cowards. Their bark is far worse than their bite."

I knew that there was neither peace nor security for me as long as the intruder was at large. If he was stalled in one act, surely he will design another even more destructive. He had to be stopped and put out of circulation, soon! I must place my family at risk to give the nightly intruder the chance to strike again, unafraid of consequences because of the assurance from my friend that no harm would come to us. The police will be watching over our secluded home. I rose slowly from the chair and left the haven to re-enter my house of horror.

The next few days were uneventful. Elisa thought that the nightly intruder had left the vicinity and was unlikely to return. Then, one evening, I drove Elisa and children to the beach. I sat on a rock and traced a figure on the sand with a stick to show Suri a sandman. It was a stick figure with a huge hat on the head and large boots on its feet. She grabbed the stick from my hand and obliterated it in a jiffy. She wanted to go down to the sea, she shouted.

Elisa, her gray skirt tucked high above her knees afraid the salt water would spoil her dress, strolled off with the children to wade in the water. Suri, clad

in a red swimsuit, rushed forward to meet a wave from which she retreated in mock-fear and delight. Elisa dipped Munju's feet in the shallow water. Her face, aglow in the golden rays of the setting sun, spread out in toothless laughter. They wandered farther and farther away until I could no longer hear Suri's baby voice above the soft sound of the waves. I was too tired to follow. There was a breeze but so gentle that it neither disheveled hair or clothing. My eyes fastened upon the delights of the scenery. The sky was lit up in shades of gold, yellow, brown and orange by the fire of the setting sun. Long shafts of bright light spread outward across the rippling water, producing a kaleidoscope of sparkling colors that shimmered, disappeared and re-appeared in varying design; gone before my wonder-filled eyes could take in shape or form. The sea was calm; the waves were thinly crested with white foam, spread out like fans edged in ruffled silver lace, and broke weakly upon the wet sand. Even the sound of the surf was dull and above it I heard gulls squawking and crows cawing. Closer to where I sat, the dry sand shone and glittered like diamonds set in twenty-two carat gold.



“..the fire of the setting sun..”

While gazing upon the ever-moving sea, I reflected upon my plight and wondered what I should do about it? I did not want to ask help from friends or family because doing so might cast aspersions on a women's ability to manage a household. In the Bank I was a nonentity; in my home I must show my power and executive might. I thought I was bearing the banner for all of women kind!

Behind me lay the railroad that linked suburbs to the city center. At that moment a commuter train whizzed past carrying a load of office workers, packed like sardines in a can, to their suburban homes, its shrill whistle blasting terror into the hearts of those who might otherwise wander onto its

deadly path. It flew past with deafening sound and incredible speed as if to make up for time lost at stations because of unexplained delays. I clapped my hands over the ears to shut out the noise and watched it receding until it became a dot in the distance and then disappeared from sight.

All was well out there. I was far from my home looking upon a landscape that was serenely beautiful. The sun, a huge red orb tinted with gold, moved steadily toward the horizon. Colors of the sea and sky began to change to dull blue, purple and black.

Gulls diving in the shallow sea for something entangled in a floating island of seaweed looked like crows. Way beyond, catamarans dotted the landscape in dainty black silhouettes. I was lost in wonder at the brilliant evening by the sea, even forgetting the reality of my existence because the soothing breeze was revealing a message linked to a perennial happiness,

'Om Mani Padme Hum'.

Peel the petals of delusion from the lotus of life to reveal the gem of Nirvana. 'OM' is the sound of eternity that is Nirvana."

"This is the eternal truth; nothing else matters. Lodge it in your mind and recall it in your despair. The glories of this world are but illusory and so is this beautiful moment."

I heard the sound of OM in the murmur of the waves. I heard nothing but "Om" as if all other sounds were brought together in it, full, deep, resonant and yet gentle, and most of all, consoling. I closed my eyes and turned my gaze inwards, surrendering myself completely to splendor of the chant,

'Om'. I felt no fear, no harassment; I was at peace with the world. I was back in Cambridge in the company of all my Indian friends.



"..A commuter train whizzed by.."

The roar of another train became louder and louder in my ears. As it shot past behind me, it jerked me awake. I could not summon thoughts loud enough to drown that deafening noise. The fast rhythm of the moving train echoed the drumbeat of my fearful heart. The salt spray touched my face and I sniffed the air to catch smells of spices that lured sea-faring adventurers of yore to my resplendent island, but the smell of the sea, an acrid, fishy smell assailed my nose. Suddenly, my mind became full of events that troubled me. Try as I did to avoid re-visitation, I heard the sound of falling rocks. The plentiful rocks around me reminded me of those that landed on my roof. It awakened the fury I felt as I lay within my home powerless to stop whoever was destroying its sanctity. I gave my mind to fury.

The day was rapidly fading; dusk was already settling in. It was getting too dark to see and too late to stay longer on the beach. I got up slowly and walked toward Elisa and the children to urge them prepare for a quick departure. Before we reached the safety of the car, the sun had vanished beneath the waiting sea; only a little diffused light remained to guide us out of there. If only I could, I would have driven out of the city toward the sanctuary of my home in the hills never to return to Colombo again. I could not because of the imperatives of my job. I drove back, afraid of what might happen tonight, tomorrow or the day after. The parapet wall bordering the house on the side of the road came to view.

I approached the driveway and my heart raced in fear; a sickening feeling surged in my stomach. I had a fear, nay an intuition, that something terrible was awaiting me in that



“.. the sun had vanished beneath the waiting sea..”

house. It was terrorizing to even look upon the house presenting a ghostly appearance on the outside and possibly harboring a dangerous intruder

within. I gripped the steering and steadied the foot on the accelerator. Martin came running toward the gate to open it. I knew John would be in the kitchen waiting to serve dinner. Parking the car in the garage, I hurried over to help Suri out while Elisa was undoing Munju's car seat. Because it was already past the children's dinner hour, we walked swiftly across the garden toward the house. Before we reached the front porch, I heard the incessant ring of the telephone. My nervous fingers searched for the house keys in the bag while my agitated mind counted the rings. I hoped that whoever was calling would not hang up before I reached the phone. Finally, I located the keys in the bottom of the bag, opened the door, ran to the study and picked up the phone. The caller was my friend, Kamala.

"I was about to hang up thinking that you had not returned from your outing," she said.

"We just returned from the beach and were outside the front door when the phone rang. I was fumbling in my bag for the keys and couldn't get the door opened sooner," I explained.

"You sound breathless," Kamala said. "Keep your voice down and show no anxiety or fear when you hear what I have to tell you, especially if that man servant of yours is within hearing distance. I don't want to scare you, but I think you must be alerted because you live alone with your children. Of course, you can always count on our help at any time, morning, noon or night."

Nothing that had happened so far could compare in terror to what I heard.

"Before my father retired a year ago," Kamala said, "the prison department used to send rehabilitated prisoners to work in our garden. Two years ago, they sent an elderly man

who'd been prison for some crime that father wasn't ready to talk about.

However, he cautioned us to stay away from the garden. How diligent that man was! Our garden never looked better. Every rose bush was carefully pruned and the lawn neatly mowed, not a blade of grass out of place. This evening while you were away, I came there because the children wanted to play with Suri. My chauffeur sounded the horn when we noticed that the gate was padlocked. A man came from the back of your house and shouted out that hamu had gone to the beach with the children and was unlikely to return until late in the evening. I don't think he saw me because I was seated in the back seat, hidden from his view by a tree. I saw his face for a brief second and recognized him as our former gardener and rehabilitated prisoner." My first reaction, though it might not so appear to anyone following this narrative closely, was perhaps it was a case of mistaken identity. But very quickly it all fell in place. Those incidents previously

experienced were characteristic of a lunatic or a criminal. The situation was more frightening than I had previously thought that some male bully was trying to give me a hard time thinking that I, a woman, lived alone. I had not foreseen that I was harboring a criminal under my roof. I was thankful that no harm had come to us so far; but I had to do something soon to rid myself of the menace. I would call father tomorrow and ask him to come down immediately; but something had to be done tonight. My heart was racing again and my hands were clammy from sweat; legs, drained of all strength, could barely support me. I was trembling like a leaf caught in a wind gust. I thought that I was going to faint. I heard Kamala say, "Don't be afraid! Why don't you and the children come over and spend the night here? You must get rid of him. My father will be home soon; he'll know what to do. Are you afraid?"

I paused a while to reflect. Meanwhile, my silence was an answer to her question. It contained the difficulty of my situation. I heard Suri's little baby voice and looked in the direction of my two little girls. I made up my mind. "I couldn't do that; the children are very tired. They haven't had dinner. They must be put to bed soon because they're already rather droopy."

I did not want Kamala to think I was afraid. I did not want my two girls to grow up in the terrible world in which I lived. I was in an energized mood to fight the discrimination that women faced. I must do whatever little I could to make John and others who thought like him realize that women will not be harassed. I had struggled so hard to get to where I was. I would not let a pathetic creature like John, a petty criminal intimidate me. I did not understand why the stupid man persisted in perverse behavior. Was incarceration in a Ceylon jail not punitive enough that he returned to criminal conduct? I might endanger my life and my children's also, but rather foolishly, I thought it was far better to die fighting those cowards than live completely powerless amidst them. I thought that I must remain in the house to entice the nightly intruder to strike again. The police had set a trap for him and I was the bait. I must stay in the house to lead him on to be caught soon in the act. I wanted to decommission a criminal on the loose. He must be put behind bars. If I told Kamala that I wanted him caught in the act; to achieve my purpose was willing to be used as bait, she would most certainly think that I was insane and try to dissuade me. She might even drive over and so doing create a scene. If I betrayed, by the smallest act that he was suspected, and if he were indeed the nightly intruder as the plentiful circumstantial evidence indicated, he would not strike. He was unlikely to attack an empty house. I wanted him to move swiftly. I had to stay within the house to lead him on; I must entice him, and had faith in my friend in the

police department to nab and put him behind bars where he belonged. My problem needed a long-term solution. If he were fired, he would return under the stealth of darkness and continue to harass me. He knew not only the vicinity well, but also the layout of my house. And tomorrow I would call home and ask father to come down immediately.

I thanked Kamala for the precious warning, assured her that I would be careful that night, and find some excuse for terminating John's employment on the very next day. I was pale with fear and hardly ate the dinner John served. I resolved to stay awake that night.

"I have loads of examination papers to grade," I told Elisa. "I'll have to stay awake tonight and grade them. They're due early next week. Prepare a pot of tea and put it in the flask for me," I told Elisa to heighten the impression I created in her mind that I was indeed forcing myself to stay awake.

I turned off all the lights except the one in the study, lay down on the couch and picked up one paper from the stack by the couch and tried to concentrate on grading. But my head sank heavily on my chest. I poured out a large mug of tea, gulped it down quickly, and fortified by it started to grade again. But my mind kept wandering to the crime John had committed. What could it have possibly been to make Kamala's father caution his family to keep away from him? What was John's offense? How serious was it? In the deepening night, lying there, frozen on the couch, with pen and exam paper in hand, I kept my dreadful vigil. Hours ticked by slowly; silence of the tropical night was only broken by a frightened cry, strong at first but gradually becoming feeble and melancholic, perhaps a bird attacked in its nest by a polecat. As the night deepened, I heard the sounds of awful darkness and none arousing more fear than the intermittent hooting of an owl. Then the chorus of cicadas from high up in the branches of the mango tree took over. Taking the cue from a baton of an unseen conductor, their chorus of shrill sound rose briskly to a terrifying crescendo and then slowly faded away into a diminuendo of an eerie silence. Again and yet again, they performed and broadcast a strident alarm to a captive audience. From within the house, crickets played a duet with the ticking clock.

Was the night prowler about to strike again? What would be his modus operandi this time? Would he conjure a more deadly attack on my home? Were the police out there to nab him? If he did not strike soon enough, would the police become impatient and go away? My eyes were traveling aimlessly about the windows to catch the sight of every moving shadow. My mind was cluttered with so many questions and too many observations that I barely heard the first strike. I thought it was the sound of a mango falling on the ground. But then, doors and windows shivered alerting me to a fresh

round of terror. Elisa sauntered out of the children's bedroom as if it was a daily occurrence to which she had become accustomed. Dragging her by the arm, I rushed back inside to rescue the children. More stones fell. The sound of the raining stones was so loud that it seemed to come from a shower of meteorites.

"Damn the police!" I said, my voice quivering from the anger at unfulfilled expectations. "I thought those idiots were guarding my home."

Even as I cursed, I heard a scuffle and a stern voice ordering someone to lie down and not move. I held my breath and listened to the commotion outside. More blurred commands followed, and then a loud strike, perhaps from a baton followed by a muffled cry. Without much effort of imagination, I realized that the police had nabbed their man. The noisy activity was followed by an order to, "get up!" The sound of steps leading away from the house followed; a motor revved up and then the vehicle drove away. A soothing silence descended upon the house. Even the cicadas ceased their nightly performance. Elisa wondered why the commotion died so suddenly. "Did hamu call the police?" she wanted to know.

I smiled broadly.

"I thought you would," was all she had to say.

Even though I had not slept at all that night, I could not even if I tried. Elisa and I could have gone on the whole night talking about the incident. We both looked haggard, I especially, from worry and many sleepless nights, but were both exuberant in speech. How voluble Elisa was when she realized her enemy was now behind bars. Several cups of strong black tea stirred us to fearless speech. We stayed awake and engaged each other in long explanation of events leading up to the finale, based upon observations, speculation and conjecture. Elisa's mouth opened wide when she heard what Kamala had told me earlier that night. How fanciful were the horrors created by our excitable minds! From the horror of a nightmare I had the pleasure of awakening to the reality of it ceasing to exist; but the experience turned my life into a disordered state from which I could not escape into blissful forgetting.

Many hours later, early next morning, the police called to tell that they had nabbed the nightly intruder.

"Strange though it might seem to you," the officer who called said, "He is none other than your cook, John."

John, the kowtowing servant with the sickly smile on his horrific face who often inclined his head in deference when he spoke; John, the dutiful valet, who washed our clothes, and sneaked up on me with a cup of tea or a glass of juice; John, the convict, who had done something that Kamala's father did

not wish to talk about. I did not share Elisa's relief that her archenemy was behind bars because a new horror had just registered on my mind. A new anxiety oppressed me: of what might have happened if, relying upon John's assurance of custodial protection, I had not repaired the broken door that night?
