

# *MEMORIES ON MY MIND*

## Marriage



*by*  
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## Marriage

My father and mother married in 1928, when he was a ripe thirty-three and she, not so unripe herself, at twenty-eight. Their wedding photograph, in a mahogany frame, hung on the wall of the living room in our home in Kandy. The elegant groom is wearing a three-pieced suit, a tie, slightly raised above the knot by a pin, and brown and tan oxford shoes, fashionable at the time. Conforming to the fashion of the day, the legs of the pants are narrow and cuffed, terminating well above ground, almost at the ankle. The bride's embroidered white sheer saree, with beaded floral border, touches the floor except where one small satin shoe peeks; hands are joined together over a bouquet of flowers; and black hair partially concealed beneath a veil that fits like a frilly bonnet on her head. Colonial occupation introduced many alien customs; wearing a veil even when not married in church is one of many. Looking at the photograph I often wondered why mother waited so long, till twenty eight, to get married, for she might have married early, being an attractive woman, perhaps rather pretty and pleasant to look at than beautiful. In those days, girls married early, sometimes shortly after they reached puberty.

My maternal grandfather owned several rubber plantations in Kukul Korale, and gemming lands in Kalawana, Ratnapura. A large dowry was affordable and could have been given in marriage. The circumstances surrounding mother's pre-marital years are shrouded in secrecy. They were not proper conversation pieces between mother and daughter. I knew for a fact that in those days mother could have hurt herself badly had she fallen in love and wished to get married to a man she chose, unless he was a Buddhist, Goigama (caste) and Sinhalese of equal social standing. Marriages were constructed on the bedrock of caste, race, religion, wealth, social standing and compatibility of horoscopes; important considerations that were sure to eliminate love and romance. Marriages were usually arranged by a match - maker. My parents' marriage could not have taken place had the ubiquitous marriage broker not intervened.

Mother was from a family of impeccable social and high economic standing. To friends and extended family it might have seemed that a large dowry would be given to each of the girls of whom there were four, especially mother, the oldest of nine children. They were so spaced that the youngest, Menike, was still being breast-fed at the time of mother's marriage, prior to which she was the surrogate mother to several brothers and sisters whom my grandmother periodically delivered, but for whose rearing and nurturing she

showed little inclination or ability. By the time mother turned twenty-eight, two of her brothers and a sister were of marriageable age. None could marry, however, until the eldest was given away.

Alarmed by the prospect of an aging spinster in the family and younger siblings' inability to marry on her account grandmother decide to approach grandfather. Those of you who did not know my maternal grandfather must be told what a character he was. Within his house he assumed a menacing manner. His children were also frightened of him, a fear largely propagated by the fact that he was seldom at home; and in the brief time he spent with them, he was indifferent to their presence, ignoring them as if they belonged to someone else with whom he had a grudge. Whenever he summoned or spoke to his children which he seldom did, his voice was harsh, threatening and confrontational. His face often bore a stern expression; the most prominent appurtenance on it was the well-groomed gray mustache that curled upward and appeared to rise over the cheek toward the big bold eyes when he was provoked or agitated. He groomed it often and painstakingly: before he set foot outside the house, upon entering another's, after he ate his meals, before receiving guests, and when he was about to make a big decision. Looking back, I think it was the mustache that the family feared most. They despised the picture that hung on the wall outside his bedroom showing a series of snapshots of his face, all focused on this mustache from every conceivable angle. The people of Panapitiya respected him as a man of wealth and influence; his money spoke because he knew how and where to spend it to get the most leverage, clout, and honor. He had acquired his wealth partly from the large dowry of his wife, an only child, partly by his initiative and enterprise and partly by uncommon cunning and guile. Grandmother and grandfather seldom spoke to each other. When circumstances demanded and the need to communicate arose, she was mortified; she did so in the most deferential voice she could summon, and softly too, so no one else could overhear what she had to tell him. However, he barked his response loudly that it was not a confidential conversation any more. The atmosphere often became so tense and disagreeable that grandmother faltered and fumbled and made a fool of herself provoking him to ridicule, and she to vigorously chewing the betel she always had in her mouth before slinking away under some pretext. But the shouts and insults would follow her until she left the house and escaped to the cinnamon grove at the bottom of the plantation. The children, hearing the thunder of his continued rage, wondered why she made it a practice to annoy him instead of leaving him well alone, because they knew that it was easier to start a quarrel with him than end it. He often broke her spirits with his violent

verbal attacks, insults and taunts. It seemed to them that a temporary insanity had overcome their mother making her unaware of the calamity that she was about to create by igniting his incendiary temper and complicating her otherwise peaceful and happy life.

Grandfather held title to many undeveloped lands thickly overgrown by kekilla, a pesky plant that flourishes in tropical rainforests; so plentiful that, behind his back, his family and those subservient called him, 'King of Kekilla'. He spent a great deal of time clearing those lands. They were all aware that he bore, with a stoic forbearance, the danger of adventure in jungles that few others would dare venture into. He defied disease and even death in pushing out into the kekilla jungle to clear the hilly terrain. He was faithful to his purpose of planting more and more rubber; its accomplishment appeared to loom before him day and night. Of his many undertakings, nothing was more impressive than the way he made the small gang of workers he lorded over, dig the land in an orderly fashion, terrace and drain it appropriately, to prevent erosion from the pounding monsoons, so that one row of rubber plants could be planted above the other.



**A Rubber Plantation**

It was no small work to organize the workers, feed, clothe, house and supervise them. Unlike the cultivation of paddy, the gestation period of a rubber plantation runs into many years, and the risks of the enterprise were extraordinary given vagaries in the price of rubber. He also mined for graphite and gemstones.

So busy was he in these several enterprises that he was gone from the home for months at a time, but neither he nor his family seemed to care that he seldom came home to visit them. Whenever he was in their midst, he indicated to his docile wife that he was not to be bothered with family matters, and to his family that they had better beware. He did not want to be saddled with the burdens of family and would not share that responsibility

with his wife. Perhaps because of unshared responsibility of child rearing that only my bungling grandmother oversaw in her casual way, none of the five sons whom he sired grew up to be like him in ability or enterprise; none was as lively in action or behavior; each only wanted to be the sole inheritor of his fortune. Looking back it seems to me, that mother, his eldest daughter, was the most enterprising of his many children and she alone showed the pluck and determination that characterized his long life.

Grandfather spent the time away from the family home in his plantation house in Kukul Korale on the bank of a stream, a tributary of the Kalawana Ela. Because the ancestral home where the family resided was also surrounded by lands he owned and were cultivated by him with paddy, coconut, jak, breadfruit, vegetables, and everything else a family needed to live comfortably, his absence for extended periods of time was tolerated and even enjoyed. They were well provided for and he was not missed. In fact, his return home was dreaded because he was voluble in his criticism of perceived inefficiencies in household management that, he declared, was bringing ruin upon him. They bore in silence the outpouring of criticism knowing that he would be soon gone leaving them to their muddling ways. As I mentioned before, grandfather and grandmother seldom talked to each other and when circumstances decided that they must, she did not converse with grandfather standing face to face; she stood several feet behind him and did not look him in the eye; her gaze was in another direction as if she was addressing a person visible only to her eyes.

So when grandmother confronted him with the huge task of finding a suitable boy for his eldest daughter, she was mortified because expressing such concerns to him was tricky business. Proper timing and protocol were critical in the success of the mission she had timidly undertaken. First, he had to be well fed, a task she had already accomplished. He had feasted on boiled kekulu rice, thora fish in chili sauce, dried fish fried in onion, boiled jak fruit, a cooked salad made of keera leaves that Sri Lankans call mallum, a white curry made of coconut milk and a coconut sambol. His attention was further sidetracked with a story far more compelling than the marriage of his daughter who was aging at home. She said in a deferential voice,

“Aney, what a huge loss that was! We lost a milk cow last week, the black one with the white spots across the back. She was taken in the night. There are cattle thieves on the loose.” Alerted by the horrific news he bolted



“The Way to His Heart...”

upright from the recliner he was lying upon and screamed,  
“Cattle thieves, did you say? If I catch them, I’ll make them eat dung just like I did on the last occasion when we caught that man who stole a newborn calf. What were the servants doing? How about the dogs? You give them too much to eat, far too much! They fall asleep and don’t awake even if the thieves carry them away. When I am not at home, you set no limits. There is absolutely no limit to anything in this household. The servants do as they please; they eat as much as they like; even the dogs, overfed and coddled, go into a drunken stupor. No limit to anything... no limit to anything!”

Upon hearing a familiar voice utter the well-worn phrase, the parrot in the cage sang,

“No limit to anything, no limit to anything.”

Delighted to hear the bird endorse his opinion, he said,

“The bird has better sense than you, really!”

He had been alerted! The conversation was getting to be less and less agreeable. Before it plunged into a vituperative soliloquy, and the atmosphere became tenser, she must broach the subject of my mother aging at home. She now needed another kind of transition, a subject stronger and more commanding. He was competitive by nature. He wanted to be richer, better known, and more accomplished than any of his relatives. He wished to be recognized as the leader in the community, the chief patron of the temple, and the guiding star in any group. She said,

“Kalu Mahathun’s sister is getting married. He came last week to offer betel leaves and invite us to the wedding. The bride is five years younger than our Rattie, who is aging at home. Kalu Mahathun is a fair-minded young man. He’s moving out of his ancestral home and giving it to her as part of the dowry. Now that’s a large house that would sell for much. He’s also giving her some of the family heirlooms including most of his deceased mother’s jewelry.”

She did not remind him that Kalu Mahathun had the propensity to exaggerate his wealth, magnify his accomplishments and overstate his status, plunging listeners into various states of despair and feelings of inadequacy. “Our Rettie is older than the bride, did you say? How is this possible?” he wanted to know.

“Our Rettie is older than all her cousins. She is the oldest in this family of nine,” she meekly replied.

“I thought our Loku Mahatun is older than Rettie, and he can’t be more than twenty,” he said. Loku Mahatun is their oldest son.

“Aiyo, no! He isn’t the oldest. Don’t you remember, our first -born was a girl? Beside, Loku Mahatun isn’t twenty; he’s only four years younger than our Rettie. If we wait much longer, she’s likely to become an old maid like Punchie,” she said referring to her sister-in-law who lived with them. “If we don’t get her married soon, she’ll spend her life serving others,” a reference to the sister-in-law’s habit of spending her money and time servicing the family of another of his sisters who lived within walking distance of their house.

Punchie taught in the village school, and lived in the ancestral home that the oldest brother, my grandfather, had inherited from his parents. He was bounded by honor and duty to provide free board and lodging to his unmarried sister; a duty and burden he bore with frequent complaint within her hearing range. The reference to Punchie, and her habit of serving a sister with whom he was not on speaking terms, made him suitably angry. It also served the purpose of drawing a distinction, in his mind, between his two renegade sisters, and Rettie, his hapless daughter. He had accumulated his great wealth through both fair and unfair means. It was common occurrence in large families in those days for the eldest son to inherit the father’s properties and the younger sons, only a dubious vocation. Because he had deprived all his brothers and sisters of their inheritance, none was on talking terms with him. His daughter’s future was of less concern to him than Kalu Mahathun’s sister’s impending wedding because of the large dowry a man of his circumstances was expected to give. He reflected,

“If this marriage can be put off until next year, it must be done. The price of rubber is falling. Women don’t understand such matters. They think that money grows on trees.”

Until this moment, he was savoring the taste of a sumptuous dinner partaken only moments ago. His wife must be silenced and speedily dispatched in order to spend the few hours before bedtime in peace. His mind was also pre-occupied with critical global issues, such as the falling price of rubber, which prevented him from giving any domestic matter his immediate

attention. Family matters were usually put on a back burner to be dealt with at a later date and soon to be forgotten. So, without applying himself seriously to the matter because of dowry considerations, he said, “I’ll attend to the matter in the morning. Really, the parrot is quite right. There’s no limit to anything in this household. Leave me in peace for the moment!”

Grandmother knew that he was too pre-occupied with problems of land development to pay any attention to his daughter’s predicament. She also knew that he would hardly wish to see the hitherto undivided fortune dwindle in the marriages of four daughters he had sired. She gave her personal interpretation to his response, and decided to take the matter into her own hands. Therefore, the following morning, seizing the husband’s summary response to be the cue for doing something immediately, she summoned the village matchmaker and urged him to find a suitable groom. Though the matchmaker had serious doubt regarding the dowry-giving nature of the other parent, he could not disregard the enthusiasm of the lady who issued the summons and assigned the commission. Had his family not, on more than one occasion in the past, partaken of her hospitality and magnanimity? Anticipating future occasions when he might be compelled to seek her assistance, he replied,

“My hamine, I’ll get to work immediately. Before this year is out, our lovely young lady will be married. I give you my word for it. The marriage is as good as done. You’ll have the best son-in-law our dowry can buy.”

While all this was happening in my mother’s village, twenty-six miles away in Colombo, Sri Lanka’s capital city, my father, in his thirties and priding himself as a confirmed bachelor, found that his circle of friends was dwindling. The deserters were marrying for one reason or another, but more than any other, for the dowry; land, houses and money the wives brought with them. His impecunious friends, who, before marriage, could not come up with the money to buy a theater ticket during their weekend exploits, were buying cars, houses and businesses; the show of affluence was ample proof of good marriages they had contracted. True, my father’s lifestyle as a bachelor was comfortable; he entertained lavishly, and was happy in the company of the few friends who were still unmarried. His efforts and talents were spent in the pursuit of fun. He had neither known nor experienced the rigors of life. Like most men of the middle class in those days, he enslaved others. He lived in a well-furnished house, employed a house-boy to dust and sweep and a cook to prepare his meals. The job at the Maradana railway station as an assistant to the station -master treated him to a life of relative ease. Comfortable as it may have seemed to an observer, the job was ill



paying and one that, he thought, was far below his status. He wished to join the ranks of the landed gentry! It wasn't long before his sights became fixed on marriage. Marry he must, not because of a desire to have a family, but for the sake of a dowry, a source of wealth unlinked to hard work and earning power! He began to see eye to eye with his father, my paternal grandfather, who urged marriage for other reasons; to save a prodigal son from the moral stupor brought on by his reckless ways. My father was ripe for a matchmaker who, unluckily for him, happened to be the same man my maternal grandmother had commissioned.

Having prepared the ground for the prospective bride's mother to blithely tread upon, the matchmaker sped away to the big city to perform the more difficult part of the task he had undertaken. My father ordered a big dowry, cash, jewelry, land and houses. My maternal grandfather had them all, except the will to part with any even if the eldest of his four unwanted daughters, aging at home and in danger of becoming an old maid, went with the dowry. The matchmaker faced a daunting task: one wanted a marriage with a large dowry; and the other with a very small one. Like most matchmakers, he was a match for both and equal to the challenge. He poured out to my maternal grandfather everything concerning his prospective son-in-law; his rare virtues, unmatched talents and unimpeachable character. He described several instances of his generosity, purity of mind and even his business acumen; few true and most not true. To the young man, my father, who was going a-courting, he gave a flattering account of the girl:

"Mahathmaya, " he crowed, "this girl is very beautiful; there's none to equal her beauty in that district. She was brought up with utmost care. She's skilled in stitching, embroidery, cooking, housekeeping and other crafts that are necessary for the homemaker. Her father has so many plantations in Kukul Korale that he's widely known in those parts as the "King of Kukul Korale," a spin on kekilla. "This attests to the power he wields out there. Her good looks and wealth, however, have not got into her head. She is modest, unassuming, obedient and gentle. She has a sweet nature and excellent housekeeping skills. You must consider yourself lucky and most fortunate that I've been able to find such a fine young lady of impeccable upbringing." My guileless father listened impatiently. Duly impressed by the description of the young girl, and even more, by her family's wealth, and unfamiliar with the ways of matchmakers, he convinced himself that this man was acting in his interest and that he was as honest as he was voluble. He knew not the ways of all matchmakers: their ability to make a plain girl look divine in the eyes of a suitor, an aging spinster shed unwanted years, and a

marriage for a luckless bridegroom based upon a dowry that is here today and gone tomorrow.

After a quiet talk with the matchmaker, my sly and cunning grandfather relented. Mother was given in marriage with some cash and jewelry. Most alluring of the dowry was the boxful of deeds to properties whose location only god and my grandfather knew. My grandfather, cunning and ruthless, ripened as it were from exposure to the evil ways of unbridled adventurism, bore no resemblance to the amiable and easy-going young man, my father, who became his first son-in-law. Father, believing that he was on the verge of becoming a member of the landed gentry, just like his wealthy father-in-law, was ecstatic. Although he suffered himself to be married to a village damsel who had to be taught the elegant ways of city life, endowed with some common sense, he felt that he could not have done better in marriage. He married for the sake of dowry and he had done well for himself. What could have been more gratifying to a young man than a diamond wedding ring, a wife adorned with jewelry of gold and gem stones from his father-in-law's gemming mines, and a bundle of deeds to property and lands, mostly bare and a few cultivated with rubber and coconut? It was a windfall that, he thought, guaranteed a life of ease and pleasure that he supposed the landed gentry led. He could, at last, escape from the boredom of his job where all he did was supervise the movement of trains between stations to ensure their safe departure and arrival. His new wealth made him very happy but not for long.

In the beginning, my mother too was overwhelmed by her new surroundings. It was quite a shock; the new comforts and discomforts bewildered her inexperienced mind and required a great deal of getting used to. The house was not lit by kerosene lamps as her former house was. She flipped switches on the walls and the rooms were flooded with bright yellow light. One moment she had a view of her new life that seemed to be orderly and improved, while moments later it appeared disorderly and inconvenient. She missed the parental home: the spacious house, the large plantation and the fields. Space was limited in her new home. It was a small house with a small back garden in a busy commercial area of Maradana. There were only three bedrooms in her new home and all three were small and stuffy. During the day when the sun was high in the heavens and the interior of the house was too hot to bear, a ceiling fan rotated continuously in the living room; she sought out a spot under it, laid out a mat and slept. Even after the sun had set, it was still hot and muggy. Memories she constantly recalled were of the mounds of coconut, jak and bread fruit in the backyard of the parental home; and the huge cauldrons of rice they daily cooked to feed those who worked

in the fields. Provisions like rice were measured by the bushel and stored in the attic until the next harvest. Sugar, they did not often need because the kitul palms, so plentiful in Kukul Korale, supplied them with jaggery to sweeten the tea, and treacle they used for making sweets. The memory of the fragrances from the trees that used to surround her was tear-jerking: the cashew, mango, banana, or guava. She missed, most of all, the king coconut she drank almost every day and the tender white meat she scooped out and ate after bathing in the cool clear water of the pond at the bottom of the plantation.



**Thambili (King Coconut)**

But the new home was well decorated with furniture that my father said he had bought from a shop called Chelmsford. The furniture was carefully covered with white cloth until guests arrived and then swiftly whisked away, folded and stored in a cupboard until they departed. She had precious little to do around the house, except issue instructions that initially she did reluctantly. She did not even need to plan the meals. The cook knew the menu for each day. The house-boy polished the tables and chairs to a gleam. She had to get used to eating at the same table as my father. In her parental home, her father ate his meals by himself while her mother stood in the doorway seeing to it that he did not want for anything. It was her mother's duty to see that the dishes were refilled expeditiously if he wanted more, and promptly remove those that were empty. She saw so many products in her new home that she had never seen in her life before marriage: Mansion Polish for floor and furniture; Brasso for shining the brass artifacts of which there were so many placed in strategic places; chamois leather dusters to lift the dust and dirt off furniture without scratching the polished and varnished surface; lovely red velvet cushions on the chairs that nobody sat upon;

damask drapes that festooned from the windows; and a large flowered rug on the floor of the sitting room that nobody stepped on. There were plenty of beautiful flatware and crockery: complete sets to entertain a company of six or even more, which he did every Sunday. The only birds she saw in the small back garden were crows. There were no magpies, parrots, orioles or the gorgeous birds of paradise she often saw sailing between the lofty trees



**Siyuru Hora (Bird of Paradise)**

of her parental home; no birds chattering and twittering in the bushes. She missed drawing water from the deep well that they did not need to boil before drinking unlike the tap-borne in her new home that was boiled and filtered. However, she did not miss the outhouses located a distance away from the wells of her former house to avoid contamination with drinking water; in rainy weather it was a nuisance to walk so far. In her new home, the lavatories were almost attached to the house. Now, she did not have to run out to the barn to milk the cows early in the morning; milk was delivered to the house even before the sun was up. She suspected that the milk had been diluted with water because it did not taste as good as the milk she used to drink. The noises that broke the silence of her former surroundings were no more: lowing of cattle in the barn, chatter of monkeys in the trees and chirping of the quarrelsome magpies. Now, all she heard were tooting of horns, sound of brakes crashing as a vehicle came to a halt on the street, cries of babies and dogs and of peddlers noisily hawking their produce to bring out housewives cloistered inside their homes. Outside, on the street, their house stood in the company of many others that looked almost alike. A low parapet wall separated it from people and vehicles that hurried by. In the first week she spent a great deal of time standing by a window watching the flow of human and vehicular traffic, very few carts, mostly buses and cars. It was unlike anything she had seen before in her sheltered

life. There was one major difference in her new life that she did not like. Whereas in her parents' home the food supply came to the kitchen from farms and fields they owned, brought in by villagers who always stayed to help prepare the daily meals, she now had to send the house boy to the market to buy groceries they needed: rice, meat, fish, vegetables and condiments. Sometimes the fish monger, baker, grocer came to the front door trafficking their merchandise in boxes they carried on their heads or wheeling it in small carts that they pushed along. Whereas earlier she had eaten more fish and vegetables, now she was eating more meat, less fish and fewer vegetables. Most annoying was the habit of keeping the doors locked or barred during the day. The house was not well ventilated unlike her former home. Windows were seldom opened especially those that fronted the street. Hardly a breeze entered the house. Whereas in her former home doors and windows were wide open from dawn to dusk, here in the city, only those windows that were protected by metal grill or wooden bars were open during the day. She was cautioned that thieves were on the loose and would not hesitate to rob a house in broad daylight.

“Don't open the door to let a stranger inside the house even if you think someone is being murdered on the doorstep. You'll end up being murdered,” father told her.

Windows were also kept closed to keep out clouds of dust that rose every time a cart or vehicle passed by on the street outside.

Not more than a month after my parents' marriage, even before my mother had got used to the ways of her new life and over the trepidation from so many new and unfamiliar sights and encounters, grandfather visited her and his new son-in-law. He was well received by the newly weds mostly because of his display of generosity. He came, like Santa Claus, with a bounty of presents: bags of rice and coconut; a roll of fabric for the dear daughter who liked to sew, two pots of curd, slabs of kitul jaggery and a large jar of kitul honey to eat it with. He also brought along a dish of fresh seer fish curry that the cook had specially prepared for mother according to her favorite recipe.



The curry was in a beautiful white porcelain casserole dish with a brown floral arrangement on the lid and the sides. Mother was overwhelmed; affection for the father, which never amounted to much in the last twenty-eight years of her life, suddenly elevated like the mercury in the thermometer. The booty he bore and the distance of twenty-six miles now separating them played a significant role in the elevation of sentiment. She began to talk well of him, and even to idealize him. She spoke of him to the neighbors and servants as an exceptional being who was incredibly generous and pious, and a dutiful father who cared deeply about the welfare of his children. My father tolerated the glorification of his father-in-law because he saw great potential in encouraging many such future visits.

During the day father went to work leaving a gullible daughter with a scheming and manipulative father. Who knows what ploys he used to fool her! On the fourth day, when father returned home from work, the grand schemer was gone, taking with him father's ambition of becoming a member of the landed gentry. Upon hearing the news of the old man's early departure, father, in a good deal of concern, inquired into the reasons.

"Why did he leave so suddenly?" he wished to know. "Was it something I said or did that annoyed him to this early departure?"

"Oh no!" mother replied, "Father isn't the kind of man to get easily offended. He's not the type who acts rashly."

"Then why? Didn't he like the meals you served? Did you take good care of him, and provide everything to see that he was comfortable in this house?" he insisted on knowing.

"I most certainly did; there was nothing to complain about," she answered.

"He said that the price of rubber is falling, and before it fell further, he must sell the rubber in his factory or he'll be ruined. He also had to leave because of some other urgent business that needed to be taken care of."

His sudden departure was forgotten amidst the enjoyment of the food he left behind. His intentions seemed so generous. Everyone, including the servants, remembered his generosity with affection bordering upon reverence. My father reckoned that if mother could get his father-in-law to visit them more often, his future would be secured. With the boxful of deeds, money in the bank, and a pantry of provisions replenished periodically, he could live like a lord. A life of mostly play and little work was finally beginning to pay off! But his exultation was short-lived for, unknown to him; he had been parted from his wealth and his hopes of becoming landed gentry someday dashed into smithereens. Never again in his life did he come so close to the threshold of wealth as in the first month of marriage. Several months into the marriage, after a trying day in office, father came home

looking fatigued and quite irritated with what he described as his ‘worthless job’. He seemed more tormented than usual by the failure of his life so far and the lack of fulfillment of his ambition. He announced that the time had come to quit his job and begin the carefree life of his father-in-law.

Although she had heard him so declare several times before, mother had hoped that time would moderate his mad proposal and impulse. She was alarmed for she knew that he did not have what it takes to belong to the landed gentry of hardworking entrepreneurs in those days of poor travel, bad roads and the inaccessible sun-baked and rain-drenched lands to which he held title.

She had been to her father’s plantations in Kukul Korale. She remembered well her experience four years ago when she had taken part in the daring journey to his house in Kukul Korale in the company of five siblings. After reaching Matugama, a small town then, they had climbed into an open cart to continue their journey because there was no bus service beyond Matugama and no paved road either. Beyond Matugama there was a still smaller town called Morapitiya; hardly a town because houses and huts were not assembled together; each family tended to live in splendid isolation, as far away from the other as possible. They had tumbled along a gravel road with dense forests on either side. She was stricken with terror when the carter got down to extricate the wheels stuck in the ground softened from the heavy rains that had fallen the previous day. He and three other men had pushed the cart with their hands, their tough heads and the full weight of their bodies; they even dug out the mud beneath the wheels with bare hands; the cart was heavy because she and two of her siblings had refused to get down; beneath the wet grass, blood-thirsty leeches swarmed. After the carter climbed back inside, he had to rub his feet with soap to be rid of the leeches that had swiftly hooked on. The intoxication of adventure wore off completely when they came to a stream swollen from recent rains; there was no bridge spanning the stream over which the cart could tumble across. Where the waters ran low, two trunks of coconut palms had been placed, side by side, over which she and her siblings had crossed holding each others hands and their breath as well lest they toppled into the rushing water below. The four men who were escorting them drove the cart across the stream where it was clear of rock to the other side so that they could continue the journey. The cart moved along careening from side to side, tipping and tilting in one direction and then in the other. She shut her eyes to avoid seeing the fearful scenery around and the rough gravel path beneath until they reached the hut of one of the men where they were served sweet toddy. Knowing first hand what that part of the country was really like,

mother understood the dangers that my father would face; he had no idea of the risks his proposed adventure implied; that excursions into pioneering territory of quagmires inhabited by crocodile and snakes for the purpose of land development was fraught with dangers of confronting the leopards, python, the wild boar, and rivers swollen after the monsoon rain, their banks teeming with blood drawing leeches. She knew that her father led a life that exposed him to every kind of risk. He was rugged and fearless. Except for stepping down on a railway line in front of a stalled train, my father had never known danger. He was a consumer, not a producer; a dreamer, not an achiever; a follower, not a leader. To an impartial observer, it may have even seemed that it was the danger he would be exposed to that was foremost in her thoughts. She said that he was crazy to entertain such ideas even for a moment, and pleaded with him not to give up a job with pension benefit. “What would become of me and a family we might someday have if you should die? Without a pension, we would all be destitute. How would you possibly think of trading a regular monthly income for a pie in the sky?” Father, however, could neither understand nor share the concerns of his wife. She was unable to restrain a burst of tears. But the more she argued and wept, the more adamant he became, for he was pledged by nature to a life of ease, which he thought the landed gentry led, and he was determined to lead such a life. Land ownership and its cultivation, he thought, would give him wealth that hitherto he had only dreamed about. Inspired and fortified by ownership of lands described by the many deeds he now owned, he felt compelled to disregard her feelings on the subject. He told her that he intended to submit his resignation on the following day. Perhaps, if she had gone along with his plans, he might have stopped to think of possible repercussions in a worst- case scenario, but she had not yet learned the art of reverse psychology used so successfully in later years of marriage. Father, after those roistering arguments with mother, strode off to his office to evaluate his prospects. He opened the box in which he stored the coveted deeds, and his eyes popped out of his head! Only three deeds were there in the box; the first describing a two and half acre lot planted with rubber in the village of Morapitiya; the second, a twenty acre gemming land in another forlorn village of Kalawana; and the third relating to five acres in a god-forsaken place called Dunhena somewhere in the wild country of Kukul Korale. The other deeds, ten in all, given by the father as part of the mother’s dowry had disappeared- vanished into thin air! Search as he did in his desk, the deeds were nowhere to be found. He thought that his home had been burglarized and the deeds taken by robbers. In a good deal of alarm, he summoned mother. The summons was heightened to a hysterical outburst by



the thought that his wife, contrary to his repeated instructions, had rearranged his desk and misplaced the priceless documents. The reluctant wife came slowly to his side.

“Oh those deeds.” was her calm response, “I signed on the dotted line and gave them back to father.”

When he heard the fateful words, how contemptible, all of a sudden, she appeared to him; and how the odious old man fell in his esteem! Losing both his temper and head from fury connected to the frustration of ambition, failure in the workplace, and lack of worldly success, he shouted, “It is impossible for a wise man like me to deal rationally with a darn fool like you.”

A strange excess of anger, mother thought, enveloped him from head to foot. Then in a long gush of unprintable words, he ranted his anguish and raved over the frustration of his ambition. He was wild with rage; he felt a pure anger at both mother and grandfather. The servants, finding out the cause of the commotion, were the first to suspect what had really happened; and well guessing that the deeds were gone forever, consoled their master, “One thing for which we must thank him is a well-stocked pantry seldom seen in this house before.”

Mother cried because she could understand what all the fuss about. She was even secretly pleased to have saved him from the folly of his reckless decision to give up a government job. When her sobbing slowly stilled, she sought refuge in more argument. She told the servants with great eagerness, “I didn’t give the deeds to a stranger; I would never do that.”

Then losing sight of the main point among a host of incidental worries on her mind, she said,

“I don’t even talk to strangers because your mahathaya has asked me not to. The other day a man came to the door with some books to sell; I didn’t like the face I saw through the window. So I did not open the door. He waited a while and then went away.”

After this irrelevant digression, she returned to her father’s defense.

“Aiyo, what’s he quarreling about? I gave them to my father because he told me that he was having a hard time. The price of rubber is falling; he can’t sell rubber sheets at any price and they’re piling up in his factory. Isn’t it a daughter’s duty to help her father when he’s in need? How could anyone think that it’s wrong to do so? Beside, of what use is a box of deeds when your mahathaya doesn’t know where those properties are and how to locate them? My father is a tough, daring and dauntless man; he fears not the leopard, wild boar, cobra or python. He is well used to toilsome travel in those fearful wilds. Your mahathya is even afraid of a tiny mouse. Haven’t

you seen how a mouse or cockroach sends him screaming around the table? He has never in his life assumed risk or lived amidst danger; never tethered a cow; never driven an ox-cart, never tapped a rubber tree, never trudged seven miles on a gravel footpath strewn with sticks, rocks and boulders. He is like so many people you daily encounter who knows nothing of land development, much less how to operate a small business. Far better to let father develop these lands than let perish under the sun while their deeds rot in that box.

Overhearing her litany, father yelled back,

“You have been duped by the old man. Before you venture to insult me, think how unfair you are. If he only wished to develop the land, he could do so without the deeds. Why did he not invite me to go along with him and teach me how to as a father should? Why wait until I leave the house, then mislead and dupe his gullible daughter to do something that is sinful and improper? What it all means is that your father is a rascal, scoundrel, scam artist and thief!”

Who can blame father? He was infuriated because grandfather had outwitted him; luring and enticing him with a large dowry into marriage that he may not have otherwise considered. For several weeks he had built his hopes of making his fortune from this land to which he held title; now it seemed like a beautiful dream from which he had been rudely awakened; his dream had evaporated into thin air. The wealth he hoped for was clearly beyond his reach.

Mother, dejected at the turn the matter had taken and distressed by the verbal assault that she had not anticipated when, in the spur of the moment, she obliged her persistent father, remained unrepentant and defiant.

“Aney, what are you talking about? Your accusations are unfair. Father acted in our best interests. Those lands needed his care. The development of those lands involve labor more congenial to his habits and much hard work that you are unlikely to do,” she explained.

Father probably thought that she was elaborating and exaggerating dangers to vindicate her foolish action. Whether mother sincerely believed in all she said in her father’s defense or she was so doing because of an unqualified loyalty she had for her parents, good or bad, or because of the tame acceptance of the apotheosis of parental command, it was difficult for me to surmise. My two sisters and I heard the story of our disinheritance and our grandfather’s villainy many times while we were growing up. It surfaced whenever pressure from growing expenses invaded an otherwise tranquil household making the balancing of its budget more and more difficult.

Unfortunately, during our most impressionable adolescent years, we heard

the tale a little too often and it made an indelible impression on my young mind. I grew up without forming a close relationship with either grandparent or mother's many relatives who frequently visited our home in large number, because of mother's reputation as a gracious and bountiful hostess, to further deplete our meager resources. My relationship with mother's family further soured when, in later years, mounting educational expenses drove mother to seek grandfather's help. She wrote several letters to him that should have been written long ago, when our family first began to feel deprivation from stagnant income and rising costs of bringing up three girls. She probably figured that grandfather, recalling how she betrayed my father and family when she gave back a substantial part of her dowry, would rise to the occasion in her hour of need and come to her rescue. She wrote a long letter to him describing her plight and imploring him to give her the income from one of the lands she owned in the first month of her marriage.

"I do not want ownership," she pleaded, "only the income from the land for a couple years until the girls complete their studies."

Upon receiving that letter grandfather consulted Loku Mahatun, the oldest of the mother's five younger brothers. Without recalling the extent of his indebtedness to his older sister for the many times she had nursed him back to health in his disease-ridden childhood, he advised grandfather to tell mother to live within her means! When a reply to her letter did not come, mother took a train to her parental home expecting to get good news. She returned home in tears. If my mother was hurt by the ingratitude of her family, she did not share her feelings with either her three daughters or her husband; it was left for us to surmise. But she was an ambitious woman. Though relegated to an inconsequential social position within a family circle of three other sisters and five brothers, she was unique among them and unparalleled in ability, determination and resourcefulness. In the wide circle of her immediate and extended family; none could compare with her in setting goals and reaching them. She was a tower of strength upon which we all leaned. Strength! Yes, it was strength of character that she had in abundance to overcome the debilitating feelings of abandonment and isolation. To supplement the family income, she became the seamstress for the whole neighborhood. Sometimes, hoping to sustain her strength, I turned the handle of the sewing machine because mother's arthritic joints ached when, after a long, weary day, she sewed party dresses for the girls who lived next door well into the night. Father's opinion was wholly vindicated—that few among mother's relatives were uncontaminated by greed and avarice. "Naydayo" the Sinhalese word for relatives, he broke into its

syllables: “Nay” meaning “no” and “Dayo” meaning “those with love”; thus the whole word for “relative” was interpreted by him as “those with no love”. I, who watched those penetrating conflicts with aching heart because I was powerless then to make any difference to the burdens they bore, concurred.

At the time those conflicts were unraveling I often worried about father’s misfortune of being fooled into a contractual marriage and mother’s plight of being battered away like a commodity. Even without a large dowry, I knew that mother was a priceless asset in the balance sheet of a dreamer like father. She was a woman of indomitable courage, highly self-disciplined, and pledged by nature to steady effort and indefatigable toil, who spent the best years of her life in magnificent service to her husband and three daughters. I often wondered whether I would have accommodated my own father in a similar situation, and so wondering, gladly realized that my father’s relationship with me, or with anyone else for that matter, would never have been tainted with greed or deception. I would never have been put in the awkward position of having to plead on his behalf or to suffer so much pain and humiliation as my mother did. He often advised me, “Never forget that you must be honest in your relationship with others; never cheat or defraud them! Don’t engage in kind deeds or sweet talk to people when your ultimate purpose is to deceive them!”

Since the deeds were spirited away, grandfather’s visits were rare. He had gotten what he wanted from us. We were in Kandy, one hundred and two miles from Kalutara; it was a great distance in those days of slow travel. Beside, my father was by nature a peaceful man who liked nothing better than a quiet, peaceful life, uncontaminated by contact with his in-laws. He did not see his father-in-law too often and that was good enough for him. Whenever grandfather visited us, father, groomed by mother for several days prior, was cordial and polite for only a day or two. Mother preached to him almost without pause; told him that he must learn to forgive and forget. She reminded him that neither grandfather nor father would take all these worldly possessions when they died, that *thanha* or greed was self-destructive and a vice that stood in the way of attaining Nirvana. She explained to him that virtues and vices live side by side in all of us, that even the vilest heed the voice of compassion, that we must try to distance ourselves from those whose behavior consistently violates our sense of well being, and that we must not carry grudges throughout our lives because they tend to poison our blood and bring on disease, especially those of the head and the heart. Whenever mother lavished such sermons on him, father, who was a musician, would bring out his violin and spend some time playing the

most soothing songs. He appeared to be perfectly happy with his diminished lot and to have reached a state of supreme bliss brought on by renunciation of all worldly attachment that is a precursor to Nirvana. What I remember best is the cheery look on his face that appeared to have put to flight any evil intention, and that he was fully reconciled to her way of thinking after listening to her sermon. Mother too was pleased thinking that she had convinced him to bear no grudges, renounce greed and embrace the whole world, including his father-in-law, in everlasting love, just as the Buddha preached, and so doing find suitable accommodation in Nirvana. We three girls knew better; we were aware of father's distressful habit of speaking out of turn especially when he had been asked by mother to refrain from doing so, a habit that lasted the whole of his life, to the very end. On those few occasions when grandfather came, he resented being forced to take part in a game of forbearance he deplored and in which he did not wish to participate. From his memory he drew a recollection of being poised on the brink of grandeur and a flattering view of what might have been had his father-in-law not intervened. The rage within at having being duped by the old man, and his desire to get even, always got the better of him. The discontent and anger within surfaced to fill the void left by rising expenses, inadequate income and frustrated hopes, and an assumed sense of disaster. Sooner or later, he began the forbidden conversation. He was determined to punish the old man, punish him with impunity and so be avenged. It usually occurred toward the end of meal when we were seated around the dining table having feasted upon the sumptuous food that mother had so competently assembled. A large platter of yellow rice garnished with brown onion, cashew and raisin was central to the feast; smaller platters of breaded seer and potato badun; mouth watering brinjal moju, seeni sambol and devilled prawns curled up in a nest of onion, green chili and tomato surrounded. Mother was attempting some desultory conversation, about the superior quality of the rice and coconut grandfather had brought, to keep father's mind from drifting to the forbidden topic; but he was watching his archenemy, resenting that mother had gone to such expense to provide so sumptuous a meal for a man who was an anathema in his eyes. Unabashed and undeterred by her scowls, he asked the father-in-law for the deeds he stole from the family. I was sure that the grandfather knew what father was talking about, but he feigned ignorance. Father was further vexed by this assumption of innocence. He looked at three panic-stricken girls whose dowries would be difficult to assemble for their future marriage, a far worse predicament than the effect of the robbery upon the livelihood of his family and felt more energized. My nervous mother stood by pleading,

“Aiyo, this is a disgrace. Please don’t begin the quarrel in the presence of children.”

It seemed impossible for our young minds to understand that unmitigated greed could have driven grandfather to such odious and mean purpose or why poor father was tormenting mother by resurrecting an incident from a distant past knowing very well that it was pointless. We were bullied by the quarrel among those we loved most to take sides in a historical dispute that was beyond our complete understanding or resolution. We were, like the pendulum of the clock in the dining room, swinging from side to side. My initial feelings were of indignation and fury that grandfather had, for the sake of land, willfully compromised his daughter’s dignity and well being something my father would never have done. But we were anxious to end the dispute on grounds of decency, also fearful of the encounter ending in fearful blows to each other. However, because father was so distressed, I was involuntarily transformed from innocent bystander to a dispossessed rebel; but because mother was on the verge of tears and grandfather was a guest in our home, visiting us after a long time, I pleaded with father to stop, but to no avail. It was impossible to make him understand; and I was furious at my lacking the power to make a difference. If I only knew how to pacify father, only knew what to do to soothe his temper; but I did not. Father was mad to see the calm way in which the old man responded to his demand for the return of his deeds.

In a strident voice, he asked,

“Don’t you remember the deeds you obtained from your conniving daughter while she was doped on the fish curry you brought in the brown dish in that china cabinet? Don’t you remember how you both deprived my three girls of their inheritance?” he charged, almost implying that the deprivation happened with the stealth of a conspiracy between the father and daughter.

“Oh no father; please don’t,” my sister begged.

The two men faced each other across the table. What anger I saw in both, grandfather and father. The outpouring of father’s anger was inevitable as it was outrageous, his conduct guided solely by his wish to reclaim the lost lands. Big drops of sweat hang below the hairline and trickled down both sides of father’s face. A clenched right fist pressed down on the dining table ruffling the white damask tablecloth covering it. He was banging his left hand on the table as if he was swatting a fly. He drew quick breaths after each sentence he uttered and I feared that he was going to have a heart attack. Grandfather’s muttered responses were beyond my hearing range; however, an allusion to a fool was loud enough to be heard by all. Mother cut a pathetic figure trying to soothe grandfather’s spirit with some

tenderness and expressions of regret, while simultaneously coxing father to forgive and forget. Because father lived so completely in the contemplation of his disinheritance, perhaps he was thinking,

“No, I will not this rogue profit from his ignoble deed.”

Father wished to make mother understand and never to forget that grandfather, and no one else, was responsible for the outburst. Father, in all probability, did not care what he said or did to provoke grandfather because he felt vindicated by his actions. Grandfather’s fists were also clenched on the edge of the table. We did not know what they were going to do to each other with clenched fists. The same fear I felt when I lay huddled in bed listening to the violence of the thunderstorms raging outside possessed me; even worse because there was neither the bed nor the four walls of the room for comfort and shelter. While I was trembling in fear, our nervous mother was standing by trying to apologize, to explain, to calm, to soothe ruffled feathers, to let grandfather know that she was truly sorry for the timing of the outburst. It was quite obvious that she was still afraid of him. After a few moments of nerve- wracking confrontation, the grandfather turned uneasily aside. Then, making strange guttural sounds, he twirled the ends of his mustache between the thumb and his index finger. Recalling my maternal uncle’s observation that his hand reached out to his mustache whenever he was about to make a momentous decision, I feared that he was going to leave us sooner than he previously intended to, bitter and revengeful that his fearful authority was undermined in the humble presence of his grandchildren; and if he left, mother was sure to launch a ceaseless tirade against father for several days to come. In small ways, we were all losers. Worse still, I feared that grandfather might rise from the table and take a swipe at the father. He was a ferocious character, austere and over-bearing; used to submission from his family and all those who served him, and absolutely haughty and dictatorial in social conduct. His harsh voice was not conducive to the development of cordial relations or attachments. He rarely spoke to us, his only grandchildren at the time; and whenever he did, a withering voice came down like a dry wind over lush terrain,

“How are you all?” he asked.

To the nervous reply that we were all doing very well, his invariable response was,

“You’re doing well? No wonder you sprint about like monkeys on an ant hill.”

His bold penetrating eyes cast forbidden looks reminding me of a gargoyle I once saw that terrified me. I wished father would manage to control his temper and not surrender to his anger just this once. But father, seemingly

inspired by the courage of the righteous, was undaunted by the dark scowl and the fierce eyes of his tormentor. Here was his chance for revenge, and by Jove, he was going to have it! Not so emboldened, mother was fluttering around like a butterfly disturbed from its resting site; protesting volubly. We, three sisters, were confused, almost petrified, by the mutiny. We did not feel that the circumstances warranted the outburst because mother was so distraught and she had gone to such length to prepare the feast that we were all enjoying until the fitful outburst. A mood of gratitude, inspired by little gifts grandfather brought for the household, also clouded our judgment. He brought rice, coconut, fruit, vegetables and such things that made mother very happy. Now, she could save a little money from the grocery budget to buy the dress or pair of shoes one of us needed, but could not have because there was little money to spare. These small gifts induced us to make all possible allowances for grandfather's misdeeds. As the argument got louder, mother overly concerned about her father's feelings, intervened between more sobs. She feared that he would leave even before the table was cleared. Looking at father with tears running down her face, she asked in a voice choking with emotion,

"Aiyo, why are you bringing up this story again? Listen, we have gone through all this a thousand times before. This is not the time and place to resurrect this story. Beside, what good will it do? Don't you think that some things are best forgotten?"

"Never!" shouted father. "As long as I live I'll remember how this man deprived my children of their inheritance. I'll make it my business to inform prospective sons-in-law to beware of his scheme. They'll not be fooled like me. If they do not hear my story, the same bundle of deeds will be recycled, again and again, while he keeps his property for those worthless sons."

Perhaps his object was to awaken the indignant attention of the three daughters. Unaware of how large the inheritance was, or knowing as children often do, that there is no use chasing after it, we were not stirred into further revolt. Frightened and exhausted by the events, I whispered to mother,

"Aney, mother, this is horrible; this is serious! Make them stop! Please, mother, make them stop! They'll hit each other."

What terrified me was the thought that they would seriously hurt each other. The real "coming to blows" altercation that I feared most did not happen. However, grandfather, who came to spend a few days, visiting the temples in and around Kandy, especially the Temple of the Tooth, and meditating for the early termination of his journey through Samsara, departed by the first train out of town. While grandfather was engaged in making his escape, and



father was trying to make sure he parted with the greatest possible feelings of guilt, mother fluttered around ready to spring into action, ready for any orders grandfather might wish to give to make his exit as smooth, least disgraceful and demeaning as possible. My crafty grandfather knew how to buy and keep the tender feelings of affection and loyalty of his grandchildren with small gifts. He gave each of us a crisp ten rupee note, and mother, one hundred rupees! Mother, still in a ferment of irritation from the confrontation, and upset by a secret sentimental preference for her father, scowled and barked at father for several days after the old man's departure, just as we feared she would. The torment lingered for many days after his departure. Who knows what relief father obtained from that chance of an open confrontation with his archrival? Mother commandeered the small gifts grandfather gave us soon after his departure to spend on school supplies. Never in the many years of their marriage did I hear mother accept responsibility for depriving our family of an inheritance or show any remorse for what she had done. But I went through my childhood watching mother adjusting her whole life, often depriving herself of even the most trivial luxuries, to give us the most support possible so that we could achieve the utmost and the goals she set before us. I was transformed from an innocent and loyal grandchild to a dispossessed rebel, and grew up more and more alienated and distanced from mother's many relatives. Within this small family circle of isolation and despair, I resolved to do my utmost to redeem my parents someday.

In the summer of 1988, I claimed my inheritance from mother's side of the family. Overcome by a sentimental mood, I brought back from Sri Lanka an old porcelain dish with a dome-shaped lid, ornamented with a sprawling motif of flowers and leaves in shades of brown, in which grandfather brought the fish curry when he visited his newly wedded daughter. Its shape, design, and appearance show its antiquity; every flower and leaf is tainted with sad meaning. It is treasured by me, not as an antique in the collection of old china; rather, as an irreplaceable symbol of blind affection that existed between a father and daughter in days gone by. I dug it out of the china cabinet in which it was safely stored and brought it back to the United States. Looking at it I have asked myself how different would our lives have been if father were not so cruelly dispossessed?

