

# **MEMORIES ON MY MIND**

*Alice*

*by*

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## Alice

Alice was a young girl when she joined our household as my playmate. Memories of events in early childhood are like dreams strung together; people drift about places shrouded in mist, images shimmer like those fast-forwarded on reel. I shut my eyes to concentrate and bring to focus events that brought extreme joy or pain. There were also two storytellers, mother and Alice, who gave a new lease on life to those days.

They told stories to put me to sleep when I would not on my own, some from the long-winded stories of the hard times we had been through.

There were three girls in my family, C, the eldest, S, the second and I, the youngest. I was about four years old when Alice came to supervise us at play. Mother had her hands full. If left unsupervised even for few minutes, we caused mayhem and sometimes destruction. Our unbridled play reflected poorly on mother who should be taking better care of us, her in-laws said. What they said mattered because our family, in 1941, were living with mother's in-laws. To complicate mother's life further, her father-in-law was living with a common-law spouse who was not our father's mother. A daughter from a previous alliance of his spouse also lived in the same household. When mother agreed to move into her in-laws' household until my father found a job, she was not aware of her father-in-law's adulterous life. A week after, when servants' whispers reached her ears, not used to that sort of thing because of her traditional upbringing, confronting father she said,

“Why didn't you tell me about all this? Servants tell me that your mother was from a good Kandyen family. No wonder your poor mother died prematurely, in the prime of life! No, I wouldn't have agreed to move here with my children had I known. I don't want my children exposed to bad moral values. If I am forced to live here, I'll be very unhappy. You gave up your job with pension rights to bring your family to this house of ill repute? All I now have is my reputation.”

Father was not narrow-minded like mother. When he was very young, he and his mother had traveled from place to place, gone from one home to another, unwelcome and even despised by some. When she passed away, he was helpless and alone to condemn his father or give him the cold shoulder. What choice did he have? And now, when his young wife was berating him, what could he do? He had no job; jobs were hard to come by, especially for a young man who ran away from his job. He was beginning to have second thoughts about that move but he could not roll the clock back. It was done and there was no use mourning and groaning over it. He sighed and shook his head. Thus far his father had been supportive of every move he made. His wife must be appeased somehow. After a futile attempt to calm her, “I agree this is no place for you and the little ones. This is only a temporary

arrangement. I'll get a job soon and then we'll move out to grander home than the one we left behind in Colombo."

But she was not convinced. She was thinking of the house they left behind and the madness, no, the stupidity, that led to the abandonment of the lifestyle he had carefully cultivated.

Before Alice's arrival, our family lived in a nice home in Colombo, the island's capital.



Mitsubishi AGM Zero

The war broke out and Japanese air raids threatened Colombo. The Japanese Mitsubishi AGM Zero (pictured above) attacked Colombo on April 5, 1942- the attack was led by the same Japanese captain who led the attack on Pearl Harbor. On April 9, 1942, HMS Hermes, the Royal Navy Aircraft Carrier, was sunk off Batticaloa by Japanese fighter bombers. On April 4, 1942 news of a Japanese naval armada 350 miles southeast of the island was reported.

We fled Colombo sometime in early 1941, before the Japanese bombing began. Large blimps were floating in the sky over the city. Their purpose, father said, was to obstruct enemy planes and deflect bombs that might be dropped on the city and our heads. People like father did not want to be sitting ducks in the war between these super powers. He explained to mother,

"I have it on the best authority that Colombo is not secure anymore. It's not a question of whether the Japanese are going to bomb Colombo; rather, when?" He was trying to convince mother that his actions were solely motivated by the need to protect his young family. "It's Burma today; tomorrow it'll be Trinco. If they capture Trinco, then it's all over. We're finished!" he shouted, turning up volume to instill fear of widespread destruction in mother's skeptical mind. When a bomb was dropped in a faraway place and its explosion reverberated to our shores by way of

mouth, rumor and idle talk, father and people like him, convinced that an invasion was imminent, cried out,

“The Japs are coming! The Japs are coming!”

Without making sure they really were, without stopping to think about the possible repercussion of losing jobs, livelihoods, and precious property, cowardly and shortsighted people of whom there were so many, father among them, fled the city to the naturally fortified hill country. He left his job, sold all the furniture, crockery and cutlery. He took advantage of the move to sell or give away nearly all our belongings.

In those days men made the decisions and women went along. In the beginning, it was so in our family as well. When mother looked around the house, her heart sank; it looked bare as if the Japanese had landed and ransacked the place! Mother, whose sense of reality and risk-taking father never shared at any time in his long life, could not understand his actions.

“You’re giving up a job with pension rights, selling the house, firing the servants and running away. You sold for a song the plush sofa that the children weren’t allowed to sit on, and the oft-polished mahogany furniture that they weren’t supposed to touch. Why are you running away from the elegant lifestyle you so carefully cultivated?” she asked in disbelief.

“The Japs are coming! Get ready quickly! As soon as possible! Pack what is left into a few boxes! We must leave the city tomorrow,” father exploded.

Mother was bewildered. She did not quite understand the urgency because none of her friends in the neighborhood was fleeing and none talked of the imminent threat of an invasion. They were all going about their business as if their houses and our house were hundreds of miles apart. Mother was having a hard time trying to understand his imperatives and reconcile them with the inaction of her neighbors.

“Sell or give away all our things, all our clothes, and all the furniture?” she asked, while protesting strenuously over his gullible nature and stupid actions.

“Control yourself, dear! Have faith in my actions. My father is a rich man and I, his only child will inherit all his wealth someday,” was his response. He waxed enthusiastically about the furniture and fittings in his father’s home.

Mother thought that the impending move was a flight from a job he intensely disliked. However, she was not ready to give up, without a strong fight, the independence she won when she left her parents’ home on the wings of marriage. She argued long with father. She implored him not to give up a job with pension rights, but he had made up his mind and already submitted his resignation.

“It is the pension rights of the job that you are about to lose and the loss of our home that trouble me most,” she pleaded. “Surely, it isn’t easy to get such a job and build all these assets again? What would become of the children and us? You must be

insane to even consider doing such a silly thing,” she pleaded, her voice broken by a surge of tears.

“You’re just like your father,” father countered. “All you can think of is money. If he hadn’t duped you and stolen those deeds from me, we might not need a job today. Our lives are more precious than a crummy job with pension rights. Beside, you haven’t seen the Chelmsford furniture and fittings in my father’s house, all solidly made of mahogany and ebony. He’s a wealthy man and I, his only child, will someday inherit all his wealth. Take a few boxes; just those things that are absolutely necessary for you and the children.”



Chelmsford Furniture

Placing his father’s wealth before her, he wistfully built upon it his future fortune. The saying goes, “Once bitten, twice shy,” but my gullible father was the eternal optimist. Mother felt considerable doubt respecting father’s promises and her father-in-law’s wealth, knowing fully well that the family had been cheated once before. In spite of his impassioned promises and optimism, mother remained a skeptic. She was married to him for little more than a decade. In that time, she came to know that he was not, strictly speaking, a responsible married man. He was utterly unprepared to accept the responsibilities of a family. He was overwhelmed by the parental duties it entailed and seemed bewildered by the entrapment of a marriage unwittingly brought upon him. He was forced to live within it, but did so like a marginal player ever ready to retreat into those carefree bachelor days. He was kind-hearted, jovial, and guileless; his personality was an unusual compound of goodwill, high spirits and good humor that endeared him to most, mostly because no one saw him as a threat to either their status or vocation. Fearing most, the empowerment of her in-laws through our family’s dependence on them, she even wept. Her vanity was hurt at the thought of living with in-laws. Expecting more disaster to follow this move, she even considered returning to her parents’ home. But how could she face the ignominy of

ridicule from relatives? She had brought three girls in to a world of masculine supremacy; not a single boy! How unwelcome even in the home of even her parents! If she had one boy, she might have gone back. She remembered her utter disappointment when the midwife delivered her third child, another girl, me, who father did not even want to see for a long time because he too was embarrassed to have sired three girls in quick succession. Mother, at first, pleaded the case for three girls, telling everyone within hearing distance and whoever cared to listen, how easy it is to bring up girls, and how loyal to the family they always are, while sons, when they marry, shift allegiance to the wife's family. They said, "Three daughters and no son! She cannot bear sons! What in the name of heaven will she and that luckless man do with three girls? Where will he find the dowries to give them away in marriage?"

Mother amazed them by delivering a fourth, A SON! But joy was short-lived. Her bad karma played out, and the son died when he was barely 18 months old from appendicitis, the inflammation and rupture of his vermiform appendix. That was the doctor's diagnosis, but mother knew better.

"How could it happen? He wasn't even weaned! It's not the appendix; it's that evil spirit; she snatched my child because her life on this earth was so screwed up. I should never have gone to that cursed house," mother mourned.

The supernatural came easily to mother. She was sure that an unseen restless force in the form of an evil spirit of her late cousin caused the untimely death of her only son. When the emergency happened our family was visiting the home of her aunt and cousins who lived on a plantation house in Madupitiya, a hamlet close to Panadura. It was soon after the death of her oldest cousin at childbirth. Everyone said the house was surrounded by the malevolent spirit of the dead cousin whose earthly life was tortured by a series of tragedies. At the time of her death she was aware that her husband was lost to a younger sister. She left the world crying out loud for vengeance; those present thought they were cries of a woman in labor. Her body was cremated but her spirit, with evil intent, soared into the air and circled above the house waiting for the moment to strike. Barely twenty-four hours later, it descended and snatched the infant from its little bed. It was found dead on the floor beneath, with its little head bent in grotesque fashion. How did a day old baby get there?

Whispers fluttered causing fear in the minds of relatives,

"She took her child! She returned to claim her property; she's bound to return and strike, again and again."

Neighbors, mostly young women, were afraid to go near the well where the spirit had been often sighted sitting on a stone, tearing out its hair and softly crying, a sight sad enough to make anyone weep. Sometimes, the baby lay abandoned at its feet while its beseeching arms were held up high, and at other times the babe nestled at its bared

breast. They were afraid to pass under the sapodilla tree that grew in front of the house because the spirit rested in its thick foliage and sprang down on an unsuspecting maiden who happened to pass by, occupied her body and came storming into the house crying out loud for the husband. He was never at home when those intrusions occurred.

But why did the evil spirit take my brother? Mother's explanation was simple. It could not bear to set its sights on another baby, especially a boy and one so cute, Mother wept when she lost her only son and was left with three daughters that our society deeply discounted. But when she looked down on the three heads assembled at her feet, she ceased to worry. Someday she vowed to show all of them how wrong they were to think that she was a luckless woman.

But mother's karma was unraveling in a horrible fashion. With every passing day, her destiny was entering a new phase of horror. Barely a year later, she was bombarded with more losses; the family's livelihood was at stake. It even seemed to her that she was wedded to a loser intoxicated with the spirits of adventure.

"What kind of life am I being forced to lead? No son, three daughters, no home, no livelihood and a future without a pension and hope. Whither would this move lead the family? Where were we going to live? Would father be always dependent on his father-in-law's charity? Would he ever get a job? Did he have the discipline to continue in the job even if he got one? What would I do if he were to suddenly die? What will become of the children?" were frightening thoughts that frequently crossed her mind.

Pondering about her predicament made her sick in the stomach. With every passing day, her destiny was entering a new phase of horror. So far one disaster followed another in quick succession; she often wondered whether the evil spirit of her cousin was still pursuing her. The future could not be foreseen or divined even with gods' help. How could it, when father had a mind as fickle as a child's, a propensity to wander like a mendicant, and a proclivity to search for adventure to delight his wanderlust as though he was still a gay, young bachelor? Even though his gullible, trusting, and guileless nature often repelled her, she had to follow him as a dutiful wife should, because she had no options. She was irretrievably attached to the marriage because of us. Not knowing what else to do in that troubled state of mind, she decided to consult an astrologer. A feeling of good luck took possession of her senses after a brief encounter with an astrologer highly recommended by a neighbor. The astrologer foretold,

"The sun is shining upon you, dear lady, so do not fear. Venus, in ascendance at the time of your birth, is in joyful conjunction with Jupiter. And now, Mercury enters Virgo. For you, young lady, this transition is most auspicious. It is bound to create a huge improvement in family finances. Mars enters Leo. The benevolent influence of

each, taken separately, is reinforced through this auspicious reunion. For you and your family, it portends good fortune; travel to exotic places; fame and riches are also indicated. Your husband will inherit a huge fortune. Any misunderstanding with him at this time will clear up in the good times ahead. Your three children are also destined to go far.”

Thinking that the father-in-law’s wealth, and Kandy, the distance of only 72 miles away, were what the astrologer divined as “riches” and “far”, mother, who



Astrologer’s Chart

previously showed the greatest opposition to father’s fool hardy plans, reluctantly relented. Thus, it came to pass that mother went along with the plans of the lesser of two homebuilders.

Without talking too much about the accommodation at the other end, which he had seen and she had not, he told her,

“How many times do I have to tell you? Take only a few belongings, mostly clothes. Remember to keep room in the car for us and three children!”



Loaded Up & Ready to go...



Can't we send the rest by rail?" she eagerly asked.

"Don't be foolish!" he stubbornly replied. "Where are we going to store them? My father's home is completely furnished. He has everything; and I, the only son, will inherit it all someday."

Still under the influence of the astrologer's happy portents mother gave in to all his demands though with little enthusiasm, and not quite as much expectation. She contrived to salvage the things that, she thought, were the most precious. She took the liberty of rolling up our and her belongings into parcels that could be shoved into the smallest space in a couple of trunks. He piled his family into the car atop those



The Hill Country

My paternal grandfather operated a motel unit called a rest house in the idyllic setting of Peradeniya, on the busy Kandy-Colombo Road, barely four miles from Kandy, the historic capital of the island and also the refuge of its last king. Surrounded by the lush verdure of the hill country station, a cool climate and breath-taking scenery, the Peradeniya Rest House was a popular abode for weary travelers who, at the time, were mostly British, Australian and New Zealanders. In those days, the Rest House was both classy and stylish because mostly British officials frequented it. I have not been inside the Rest House in more than sixty years. Lapse of time and the fact that I was only a three-year old child when I lived there have combined to rob me of detail. I remember a sprawling white house with green trim and a red tiled roof. On the west were the rolling eighteen-hole golf links, and across the road, the world famous Royal Botanical Gardens. A circular driveway from an impressive green-painted metal gate at the roadside, led to the portico. On either side of the driveway are flowerbeds planted with mostly red, pink and yellow barburtons and red salvia. The portico, situated midway across the open verandah in front, was wide enough for automobiles to drive through. Under it, road-weary travelers in those days of slow travel alighted from cars and climbed two or three broad steps to the verandah where several reclining cane-backed chairs were kept for them to stretch out for a quick snooze. A few wooden tables, covered with white damask tablecloths, and several

straight-backed chairs were also grouped intermittently at which waiters served tea or drinks. Along the outer edge of the verandah, several succulents and “maiden-hair ferns” in large clay pots added a touch of beauty.

Ubiquitous waiters dressed in a brass-buttoned white starched coat worn over a crisp white sarongs, ushered in important dignitaries alighting from chauffeured cars. If a person as important as the Governor of the colony arrived, then my grandfather did the kowtowing and ushering, respectfully, accompanied by hustling and bustling attendants.

Behind the long verandah were the main reception area and the dining room, and further down were the bedrooms. Every wooden door, several with small glass panels, had brass knobs and fittings, frequently polished to gleam like gold. The cement floors were often waxed with Mansion Polish under the watchful eyes of the headwaiter, Sethu.

It was to the household behind the Rest House that we moved when father fled Colombo fearing a Japanese invasion and occupation. It began for mother a stretch of unlucky years, shabbier than any she had spent before in life or since. The room in the rear that we occupied needed repair. Mother, so far, had lived in bigger homes. Still smarting from the ignominy and shame of living with in-laws, the appearance of her new living quarters made her new circumstances degrading and more detestable. There was no reason to suffer in silence. An idea crossed her head and when it happened, no one could stop her. With characteristic touch of vanity, which came naturally to her, when father was not around, the spouse and her daughter were tending their vegetable patch at the far end of the property unhappy mother disparaged the living arrangements to her father-in-law.

“The room is ugly. Walls are stained and blackened by soot; the ceiling is dirty; several window panes are cracked; door is warped and don’t shut tight; beds creak; the light fixture dangling from the ceiling hasn’t a shade, and the drapes are tattered and torn.”

Upon hearing her lament, grandfather shook his head gravely knowing her complaints to be exaggerated. But without consulting his spouse for she might not approve, he sent for workmen to repair the room and for a seamstress to re-furbish them with new drapes. He had a great deal of explaining to do to his spouse that evening.

“Is that what she wants; completely refurbished quarters? I knew all along that she wanted to live here like a queen. Why doesn’t she go back to her parents’ home if they are so high and mighty? Until she arrived, we led a peaceful life. I tell you, she’s up to no good. Your son better beware; and you too. There is no use talking with you. You’re a greater fool than your good-for-nothing son to let that woman have her way,” she stormed out of the room and slept on a couch that night.

Everything within the room was made new and clean, but it was too small for our family of five. Father and mother occupied one half of the room; and we, the other. To avoid the in-laws harsh and unwanted advice on how to bring up children, mother accompanied us outdoors, to the wide open garden in the back where there was space to exercise our right to freedom of movement out of sight of elders. But we soon wore her out.

“Listen, children; come here at once! You three are tiring me; driving me insane! I can’t keep up with you,” she shouted herself hoarse.

We heeded her not and hopped away like rabbits chased by a blood-thirsty hound, escaping to forbidden territory, disappearing behind trees when mother was not looking, and whizzing past when she thought she had finally caught up. One critical situation led to another until one day S fell and hurt her self. From the open wound beneath the hairline, blood oozed and trickled down her face. S was taken to the doctor because the wound required stitches to close.

“It’s the mother’s fault,” the in-laws whispered. “It wouldn’t have happened if she took better care of the children. One of these days, those children will be lying under a train or bus!”

It was too much for our young mother. We needed someone closer to our age to run around with us, someone to keep us from wandering out of sight, and follow us through the hedge at the bottom of the garden. She spoke to father about the difficulties of minding three hyperactive children; he, to his father, who, in turn, consulted his spouse. Because she was unrelated to us, she had little patience with our young family. Without a moment’s hesitation, she said,

“This is a ploy. She is too lazy to mind those children. They are very badly brought up. All they need is a good spanking. If she brings a servant to this house, who is going to feed her? We will have six extra mouths to feed.”

In the meantime, mother knew what she was going to do. Her mind was made up. Without giving any thought to the six-extra-mouths to feed predicament of her in-laws, she set to work to find an older girl to play with us. Without consulting father, afraid that he might try to diminish her resolve, she decided to solve the problem on her own. Beside, she was still very angry with him for the predicament we were in. She frequently thought of the beautiful house she left behind in Colombo and its large enclosed yard in the back with space enough for children to safely play. The huge feeling of loss gave way to a rage that clenched her fists in determination to flout everyone’s authority and respect only her own; she was determined to teach all of them a lesson! Acting alone, in a letter to her father, she asked for his help to find a young girl.

The letter could not have gone at a better time. Alice’s father, the foreman on his rubber plantations, was assigned the task of finding the young girl. He could only

think of Alice, his own daughter. If he was rid of her, there was one less mouth to feed and some peace of mind when he went in the evening to his second wife, Alice's stepmother. Unwanted children, of whom there were so many in poor places, were bartered, traded, indentured as servants at a very young age. Alice joined our household when I was not yet four, and Alice ten, twelve, who knows? She was then about four feet tall. Many years, more than sixty, have gone by. In those years, I have grown much taller, standing now at five feet two inches, but Alice remains at the height she was then, about four feet tall and just as slender. Now, Alice's hair is streaked in silver, her face wrinkled like a golden raisin and her smile, a toothless grin. Referring to her unvarying height, Alice often said, "It is my karma; I am built close to the ground because I sinned in a past life."

She was enunciating a belief that tempered, maybe even steeled, an attitude to a life of deprivation and under-privilege, allowing her to accept with equanimity that which she was powerless to change.

"You are not a sinner, Aliso! You are not capable of sin, not in this life or in the ones before. You are too sweet, loving and kind," I said quite emphatically.

My eyes fastened on her, entreating her to say that she is incapable of sin. In those days, when I was a child, the word sin was loaded; it had fearful connotations. A sinner, shackled and manacled, dropped into a hell of raging fires that never burnt out. It should never happen to my Alice.

Alice stood motionless, without saying a word, but in thoughtful repose. Perhaps she was puzzled not quite understanding why she suffered while the wicked and the greedy were enjoying a bountiful harvest and good life. What crime could she have possibly committed in a previous life to suffer so much? Alice wrapped her short arms around me. Locked in her secure embrace, I did not have a care in the world. Alice's knowledge about Buddhism as a way of life and a religion, and her dogmatic ideas concerning the ways of gods, she derived mostly from mother. Mother wasted no time teaching Alice who was illiterate, the doctrines of Buddhism, especially her understanding of the law of Karma and Karmic burden according to which a human being follows a course of many lives that is described as Samsara; each life is the causal effect of those preceding. Attaining Nirvana, a state of blissful non-existence, is the way to terminate the journey through Samsara. I am not sure whether Alice understood fully either the cause and effect sequence of Samsara, that action is an effect of a cause, or the significance of nirvana as a place beyond the dimension of time and space or whether she, like most uninitiated, had only a simple understanding of karma and nirvana, filling the gaps with her observations of the small world around her, from her own suffering and the remonstrations of little critters to the pain we caused and their intelligence when assailed by critter problems.



Samadhi Buddha

Nevertheless, the ideas of compassion and kindness she communicated when I was young and impressionable have lived on. I cannot help thinking how ill-served and inadequate my life would have been without Alice, how well my ideas of compassion germinated with her guidance, how generously she served my family, and how affectionately and unstintingly, she supported my effort to make my parents proud. Between us, there is a history of strong love and abiding respect for each other. My feelings for Alice are far above mere personal convenience; I have for her the same sacred love I have for my parents. How can I ever forget the many things Alice said and did to shape my character and to make more comfortable the events in my life before I left home. Her simple beliefs have lingered in my mind to influence and direct my life even after. She taught me so much about the facts of this life, the ones before, and those that follow. How sharply Alice denounced cruelty to animals, deplored the sins of adultery, and intoxication! How indignant she was at falsehood; and how she raged when the strong oppressed the weak! Without Alice's abiding moral support and sermon, I might have lain in another, lower, plane without a better understanding of the outlook and character of a world guided by conflicting moral principles; without her unstinting service, I might have led a more chaotic life, and without her daily dose of simple sermons, been less merciful, compassionate, sympathetic, and kind to others, especially animals. Despite her situation as a servant, for the most part, her life is one of true nobility, a simple life that responded to suffering of all living things. Through the years, Alice has remained unchanged in my mind, like a beautiful bonsai, and just as precious.

With mother's help, I am able to construct the story of how Alice became part of our family. Hidden behind mothers' sari, as I often was when confronting the unknown and unfamiliar, I saw little Alice with bent head and awkward manner standing only a few feet away. She was wearing a short pink sarong well above her ankles and

white blouse. I wore sandals, but Alice was bare footed. I wore my short hair in bangs, but her jet-black hair was well oiled, combed back and worn in a long braid that fell over shoulder to reach the chest. Intimidated by the big lady who was quizzing her, Alice hung down her head and fixed her eyes on the ground beneath her feet. She stood before mother, fidgeting with her hands, her knees locked together like mine when I wanted to pee, and the corners of her mouth drooping as if she was about to cry.

“Alice looked like a Chinese doll,” mother said because her skin was fair and her eyes were small and slanted.

She had several fresh scars on her hands, and some fresh wounds crudely bandaged with strips of rag through which rings of pus showed. Later that same evening, I heard mother tell father that those wounds were from beatings by her stepmother.

Mother asked,

“What is your name, child?”

“Alice” she replied trying hard to wrap herself around her clenched fists. Had there been a hole nearby, most certainly Alice would have crawled into it.

In the same re-assuring and gentle voice, mother continued to quiz.

“Don’t be afraid, child, tell me how old you are.”

“Eleven,” she replied, her voice cracking into a sob as she spoke. She could have fooled mother.

“You look no more than eight. My daughter needs someone to play with,” she said taking me by my hand and pulling me forward.

She said, “Go with Alice and show her your toys. Alice knows many stories. She’ll tell you a story. Alice, come here!”

Alice came forward, ever so cautiously, and took my extended hand. Happy to escape from mother’s presence, Alice and I went, hand-in-hand, hesitantly at first, and like two frolicking pups when out of her sight to begin a long journey and companionship that has spanned many decades.

When I was old enough to understand, Alice told me about her own family, and about her father who never said a kind word to her or her brother. He was a grumpy person who issued orders to his children as if they were policemen and he their chief.

“It was always, Alice do this or that! Did you do what I asked you to do? Why not? You deserve a good spanking, and spanking began.”

She also told me about her deceased mother who worked hard, even when she was heavy with child.

“Such tasty curries she made,” she said with tears welling in her small eyes.

Whenever Alice spoke of her mother, she got lost in a mood of past longing. Sadness clouded her face, and tears began to freely flow. In the communion that followed

between Alice and me, she confided how happily the family once lived, and how it all ended when her mother died at childbirth.

“It is an unlucky child who kills the mother in the act of being born, just like bananas. Have you seen how banana trees bear just one bunch of banana and then perish? Alice asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Even before the bananas were fully ripe, the leaves turn yellow, and then brown. Thotakaraya felled it with one huge blow,” I said, dancing up and down the room, swinging an imaginary axe over my head. I stopped awhile to ask, “Did you kill your mother?”

“No,” Alice replied, “It was my new brother who also died in the process.

I was happy that Alice was not the unlucky one, but Alice said,

“I am also unlucky. What comfort could I possibly have being motherless and poor? Sometimes I wish I died with mother. My life became hell because father married again. I have a stepmother.

“My father has a stepmother too,” I said hoping that shared confidence would make Alice feel better.

“Mahathmaya is an adult; he can look after himself. We’re children. Our father ordered us to help our stepmother.

‘Don’t kill your new mother. Do as she says or else,’ he warned me.

I worked hard to help our stepmother because I knew that he would be furious if I didn’t. In the beginning we were all very happy. Any fears that I had were unfounded because our new mother was kind. But in all relationships, frequent sightings and contact tend to breed antagonism and contempt. Before long, she changed into a nasty stepmother. I can’t blame her because she had a hard time. She let her anger and frustration with the hard work, alcoholic husband, and incorrigible stepson, spread over me like a river in flood. Every childish prank of my sibling was seen as an act of willful disobedience ordered by me. We were beaten, I more than my brother because, being the older, I should know better and take proper care of him.” In the unresolved conflict between two contentious adults, Alice became the scapegoat. I was unable to understand much of Alice’s unhappy narrative, but I still listened because I saw tears in her eyes that brought tears to mine. Later in the day, I sought clarification from mother who explained that stepmothers are always unkind to their stepchildren.

“No, no!” I shouted when Alice said that she was beaten with a broomstick and swiped with firebrands. Festering wounds formed sores on her arms and legs and old wounds re-opened with fresh beatings.

“Our stepmother couldn’t wait for our father to come home in the evening to tell him about my wrongdoings. Because she dared not criticize an inebriated husband when he staggered into the house, exaggerated tales of our misdemeanors were used to get

even. I broke a pot; I quarreled with her; I burnt the rice because I was not tending to the fire while it was cooking; I did not sweep the floor or look after the sibling who bothered her without mercy. My father's violence was of the sort that lay latent waiting for a prompt. Under the influence of toddy, (an alcoholic drink brewed from the sap of a palm tree which grew plentifully in the area) he was temporarily bereft of reason. In the daytime, our stepmother beat me, and in the night, my father. At first, I took the beating without complaint, figuring that I deserved to be beaten for the sins I may have committed in a former life. But when the abuse became severe, I couldn't take it any longer. I spoke to our mother in heaven to intervene."

Weeks later, thankful for her deliverance, Alice proudly announced to her sibling, "I am leaving home tomorrow to go far away, and I won't be seeing you again. I am going to our Loku Mahathmaya's daughter's home in the hill country to look after her little daughter. She needs someone to play with. I'll be wearing fine clothes and living in a big house. The house has pipe borne water and electricity. Never again will I draw water from a well, or light a kerosene lamp in the evening, or be beaten by our stepmother and father."

How her brother envied her! But Alice's luck was as warped as that of the family she joined as a young girl. Alice slept outside our cramped room, on a mat that she rolled out every night. As the first beam of light announcing daybreak entered our room, we were outside. On rainy days we sat in the corridor with our backs against the cold wall and in our midst, a heap of war periodicals and magazines, a pair of blunt scissors, a pot of paste and a large scrapbook. We cut out pictures of tanks and soldiers fighting in trenches, and pasted them in the scrapbook. When the open drains filled with water gushing down from gutters, we tore pages from magazines, made small boats and floated them down the drain, and cheered excitedly as they floated past each other, tossing this way and that, battered by the swell.

Grandfather was a man of about sixty years at the time. Unlike my maternal grandfather, he was kind, gentle, jovial, good-humored, and in high spirit nearly all the time. When he came to watch us at play, we charged at him in delirious excitement, each clamoring to be carried, and he bending down to swoop up two at a time in his big arms. When he tried to leave, we blocked his exit and dragged him back to our playground. We loved him dearly. I lay on his stomach listening to the sounds of a storm brewing inside. Sometimes I lay on his chest listening to the heart throbbing, "badam, badam", like a imprisoned dog beating the walls of its kennel. His patient voice softly soothed me, and tender hands stroked my head. At that moment, I believed there was none, not even father, whom I loved more dearly. Father often said that grandfather had a large heart. Mother retorted that his heart was so large that it went to the length of indecency. How else could it accommodate a common-law wife and her daughter, an only son, daughter-in-law, three



grandchildren and who knew what else? His own son's development did not take the desired course, charged mother, because his philandering ways did not allow time to lend to his upbringing, further degraded because he dared to bring to a home of familial austerity his mistress and her daughter. What a breach of decency that homecoming must have been in those days!

"His wife, unable to bear the promiscuous ways of her husband, died prematurely from a broken heart," whispered servants.

Grandfather knew how to influence people, earn their respect and run his business. His personality was an intriguing mixture of charm and business acumen. A pair of sparkling eyes appeared to dance to the tune played by who ever he was talking to; but he knew how to get everybody to work for him. While he got others to serve him most competently, they were made to feel they were serving themselves. The source of his extraordinary power over people lay in his generous nature. He was an uncommon man in the eyes of his employees because, unlike other employers, he gave them gifts on so many occasions. The pretexts for gift giving were the many religious and cultural occasions, even those unheralded by the British. He gave and he received! Beggars were not welcome inside the iron gates, but those who waited outside were fed and even clothed. Despite his generosity, charm and dancing eyes, he ruled the workplace with firm hand. My poor father inherited his charm but not the ambition and guile needed to initiate and manage a business.

Relatives of our paternal grandmother distanced themselves from grandfather. We were too young to either understand the seriousness of extra-marital affairs or care about the impact on our social standing because we loved him as only children can love.

Grandfather entertained lavishly, and was generous with his money. In his son, the love for a good life without toil grew with its daily satisfaction in the home of his father.

When our family first arrived how glad grandfather was to see us alive! The joy of sighting was so great that his lips quivered as he sorrowfully asked, "One of these days those Japs will bomb the city. What would have become of you all? I want our two families to live together, forever. I hope my grandchildren are never again exposed to the threats of war. My home and everything in it are also yours, my son. The children shall have the best of everything," he promised eagerly. If either the father or son had long-term plans, they were mostly fanciful. It was perhaps the overflowing of heart in the company of his grandchildren that stirred up false hopes and inspired unbridled promises and commitments.

His welcoming words took firm root in the son's mind, and he beamed happily. Both spouses, however, with other thoughts in their heads, said nothing.

At first, the reception was most enthusiastic. Overjoyed too, was the shaggy dog, Booli, who, sniffing us and liking the odor went for a licking.

“We didn’t have a dog in Colombo, but we had a cat,” said C. “Our mother doesn’t like dogs. She says that dogs, unlike cats, don’t clean up after they do number two. They smell bad and shouldn’t be let inside the house.”

“When dogs are allowed to run around freely, children run amok,” explained mother. Grandmother, realizing that it is time to say something, clarified,

“Booli is only a watch dog. It’s tethered to a post in the backyard and not allowed to run amok, and most certainly, never allowed inside the house. Those children will not be playing with Booli. Who untied Booli? Ramu, come here at once! Take Booli away and tie it up!” she shouted.

Grandfather did not say that he untied Booli from a cruel tether to give it a little freedom and also provide us some excitement. Ramu, the gardener, the dog-handler, and the errand boy, emerged from behind a pillar.

“Don’t tie it up!” shouted S.

”Let it stay!” said grandfather.

Ramu, whose ill-defined functions also included the care of Booli, a task he rendered indifferently as Booli’s unkempt appearance testified, stood by confused, his large eyes darting back and forth unable to make up his mind about whom to satisfy. To ensure that he was given a full plate of rice and curry at mealtime, he fawned on grandmother in the most shameful way; but he heeded grandfather’s orders over any other to secure his position as the general factotum. Booli, unaware how perilously close it had been to capture, dashed madly about, excited and eager, trying to entice us to play. But mother would not allow us to play with Booli because,

“You’re too well-dressed to be playing with that dirty dog.”

The description registered in grandmother’s mind. She whispered in Ramu’s ears.

Less than five minutes later, Booli was caught and carried away. Booli was tethered night and day to a post in the backyard with a leash long enough to take itself in and out of the kennel behind the post. Having so little freedom of movement, it was little wonder that Booli barked a lot, mostly upon hearing the commotion from the kitchen. It barked all day, and almost never, at night.

“A fine watch dog!” everyone said.

“We should give it away,” grandmother said.

“Oh no!” said grandfather. “The smell of the dog drives away the snakes.”

“What nonsense!” said grandmother; “Booli or no Booli, all kinds of snakes come to the garden. They steal eggs from the chicken coops and also gobble up chicks.”

“You should untie the dog and let it run around the garden. What kind of management is it where you tie up the dog and allow snakes to run loose?”

grandfather retorted.

“It’s a filthy dog; its bark drives me insane!” she replied.

“You have a choice,” butted in father. He was enjoying the exchange between father and stepmother gleefully, “Untie the dog, save your eggs or go insane. Ha! Ha!”

As if he had not said enough that was damaging, he added,

“The dog looks as filthy as its keeper, Ramu; both need to be scrubbed and washed. What else can the poor dog do except bark loudly to alert its owners that it’s tethered to a post night and day and bitten by fleas?”

“Well said,” endorsed grandfather.

Contempt was distinctly heard issuing from grandmother’s lips.

A large hole that Booli’s tenacious paws had scooped out filled with rainwater to serve as a wallowing pool on hot days. Outside the kennel, from the post to which it was tethered, Booli went restlessly back and forth, as far as its leash allowed, from one end of the hole to the other. Its long shaggy white coat was never its true color. It was always in shades of brown because it wallowed in the mud hole like a water buffalo. For that reason also, Booli was not allowed inside the Rest House. Nobody, before we came on the scene, cared at all about Booli’s appearance or comfort. The poor dog could barely see because its eyes were concealed behind a thick curtain of matted fur. A couple of weeks into our stay, Alice grabbed Booli by its tail, and while she held on to it tightly, mother trimmed the fur which fell over its eyes.

In the beginning it did not seem to matter to grandfather that his son was without a job. After a couple months grandfather told the son hesitantly,

“I have a job for you that may not edify but will occupy your time. It is a job after your heart, one that conforms to your flamboyant style and love of adventure. Why don’t you act as tour guide and escort tourists who visit the Rest House to beauty spots and historic sites in the country?”

Father was thrilled! Mother was not so sure because she saw the grossness of being married to someone she described as a tour guide.

“How to tell relatives that my husband escorts tourists around the country when there are so many of them hanging around train stations and taxi stands?” she asked.

“Tell them that I am doing it for pleasure and not for the money; that it isn’t a job, only a past time,” he replied.

“How to tell them that you are jobless and scrounging from your father,” she persisted.

“Why do I need a job when father can supply us with more than a salary can ever buy?” he retorted.

“Don’t you feel any shame to be so dependent?” she asked in indignation.

Father, as foot loose as his children for whom staying in one place was also unthinkable, was impatient to begin the escort service to historic sites like Anuradhapura, Sigiriya and Dambulla. He, who had the flair for swiftly mounting the

camera on the tripod and taking good photographs, acted as the official photographer of the tourists. Because he spoke three languages, Sinhalese, English and Tamil, more or less, he also played the role of their ticketing and booking agent. His performance was also marked by an innate ability for showmanship. Notwithstanding his lack of experience as a tour manager, a person more experienced in the business of tourism could not have fared better. Because he had idle time on his hand, he was gone for days or weeks at a time.

We eagerly awaited his return because he had so many stories to tell. Mother wanted to get us out of her way.

“Go children! Go to your father! He will tell you stories about his travels in elephant-infested jungle with those Suddhas (whites).”

He was glad to oblige because children, unlike adults, are not judgmental and we loved hear stories. His vivid imagination translated the most ordinary situation into a hair-raising adventure. He narrated with the eagerness of a soldier returning home from an unpopular war that nobody cared to talk about, suddenly honored by a nondescript but appreciative audience. While his own mother, if she was alive, might have found his gentle, child-like, and fun-loving disposition endearing, to his stepmother, it was annoying. He and his large family were a growing burden; so many thorns in her side that she wanted to pull out.

“He doesn’t grow up because his father treats him like a child. No grown up will do the kind of work that he so fondly and eagerly does,” grandmother derided.

Mother sometimes concurred with grandmother’s opinions of father’s graceless occupation and lackadaisical lifestyle. But he was a source of joy in our play, a conspirator in our pranks, and a believer in our fanciful world of fairies and elves. He was a dreamer, an adventurer, and our beloved companion. The spirit of romanticism motivated his whole life, right to the very end. By the things he said and did, we were in paroxysms of laughter. He observed and portrayed living things with such accuracy and sensitivity that his imitations seemed to have lives of their own. He could caw like a crow and cackle like a hen. It was not only the sound that he created, but his head would also bob and twist like a crow or hen. He strutted around the room like a deer holding his hands on his forehead like a pair of horns. He swaggered like grandmother thrusting out his posterior, spreading his arms and elbows to imitate her spacious form; a look of belligerency would suddenly take hold of his normally gentle demeanor, and pausing at a door to throw one long, shuddering look in our direction. When our lives were dull he would create in our minds a garden of brilliant colors in which we wandered, talking to fairies and elves and chipmunks. He read to us from an abridged version of The Arabian Nights, Peter Pan and Sinbad the Sailor. We listened to those tales of wonder with open mouth and never tired of listening even when each story was repeated many a time. It was a

beautiful time of my life. The close and intense relationship between grandfather, father and us is one of the things that made those days wonderful, allowing me to recall the memories with fondness. I spent so many sweet hours following father or grandfather and wanting to be entertained by either.

No one knows whether father earned enough in his job to support his wife and three children, but it did not matter because we enjoyed free board and lodging. How regal and sumptuous the freebies were! Grandfather shopped only at Whiteways, Cargills and the Elephant House for the groceries and household needs. Father saw nothing to complain about those household arrangements, but mother disapproved of his dependence.

“Our home isn’t our own. I refuse to call it so because it’s a house of sin. If it weren’t for the children, I’d be long gone.”

Without understanding why it was so, we agreed that we were living in a house of sin. Under Alice’s tutelage, we thought that our home was engulfed in sin because so many chicken and goats were killed to feed tourists. Alice told us that killing animals is a sin for which those responsible would have to pay in a future life. Because the cook did the killing, we did not mind at first, and even wanted an immediate pay off so that the killing would stop. But Alice told us that those who gave orders were just as culpable as those who carried them out. Mother tended to agree with Alice.

“Who gives the orders?” I asked.

“Your grandmother and grandfather,” mother replied.

Grandmother was dispensable, but he was not; we were willing to sacrifice her, but not him.

“Will our grandfather be punished,” I wanted to know.

While the mother hesitated, Alice helped out,

“They’ll be born as chickens or goats in a future life and suffer the same karma. There’ll be a cook to cut their heads off.”

Thinking that the future life was soon to come, C ran to warn grandfather of his impending karma and danger in a future life.

“Don’t let the cook cut off your head, grandpa!” she advised.

The grandfather was very agreeable.

“Certainly! I shall see to it that he doesn’t. I have the fullest confidence in you to protect me from that rascal. Do you know why he wants to cut off my head?” asked grandfather, his curiosity greatly kindled.

C rattled off, “Well, you see; it is because you order the cook to kill chicken and goats. Mother says that you will be born a goat in a future life and Alice says that the cook will then cut off your head.”

The unbeliever let out a howl of laughter to show his granddaughter that it was all baloney. Then, recalling his spouse’s conspiracy theory, that there was a secret plot

against him and her, he frowned. Was his daughter-in-law trying to set up his beloved grandchildren against him? Was she trying to drive a wedge between him and his only son? If so, she must not be allowed to succeed. He must somehow outwit her. He did not know what else to do except shower more and more candy and toys upon us to keep our affection: dolls almost as tall as me, a walking doll in frilled organza dress and ribbons in her curly blonde hair, a doll that looked into her hand-held mirror and simulated the action of powdering her face, a soldier in khaki uniform and helmet. When wound up, it marched across the floor; a monkey on a swing and several celluloid and porcelain dolls that we dressed in clothes that mother made. Each time grandfather returned from a shopping expedition with chocolates, and toys he was met with loud laughter and quarrel among us unable to decide who gets what.

Some days, late in the evening when grandmother thought I was in the backyard playing with Alice, grandfather and I dined together- he sitting at the table and I under it. It was a great thing to be dining with grandfather even when hidden under the table at which he ate with such pomp. He had his own table where he dined alone before anyone else; the headwaiter, Sethu, served him. What delicious tidbits he handed me as I lay there waiting, well concealed by the damask tablecloth dropping over the sides. I choked on the delicious bread roll while trying to swallow a mouthful without chewing. Hearing my discomfort, he passed down some orange juice in the cup that was meant for coffee. Uncomfortable as the crouching position was, I waited until the dessert, usually a bowl of caramel custard, was handed down. How delicious and sweet the taste! Caramel custard always brings back recollections of my dining experience with grandfather, the sweeter for being surreptitious and forbidden.

Grandfather ruled the front portion of the Rest House. Women folk in the household rarely ventured there because of female decorum; inappropriate for genteel women to be seen in places where strangers, mostly men, frequented. So grandmother never found out why I had a poor appetite for the large bowl of lentil soup and buttered toast that she set down before me at supper.

“She has a poor appetite because she’s given too many snacks between meals,” she complained casting a disapproving look at mother.

“As long as she doesn’t fall ill, does it matter whether it’s a snack or a meal? No wonder the child hasn’t an appetite; you give her lentil soup, day after day,” mother retorted.

“When my daughter was her age, she ate lentil soup and buttered bread every day,” grandmother declared. “When you can’t afford anything better, a daily diet of lentil soup and toast is good enough; but when it isn’t a question of affordability, rather one of wickedness, then it’s a different matter,” mother rebutted.

Grandmother, stunned at first by the rebuttal, did not back off, “If she doesn’t like soup and bread, I’ll send her to bed on an empty stomach. That’ll teach her a lesson. Or better, I’ll serve the soup and buttered toast for breakfast the next day. We don’t have food to throw away.”

Mother, aware that I had dined with the grandfather, was unconcerned but not silenced by those threats.

“Whose child is she? I dare you to serve soup and buttered toast for breakfast!” she threatened.

“We don’t throw away good food,” she said again in stern voice.

“Well in that case, feed it to the dog! I doubt even Booli will have the stomach for it,” rebuked mother.

Sarcastic dialogue and sallies were common between them.

Alice and we were bound together by many shared emotions, foremost among them, the unrelenting dislike of grandmother. If only she shut up and disappeared, how wonderful our lives would have been! She worked herself into a fury over the most trivial matters. We were confused by a propensity to discipline for petty things that no one else bothered about, and when she did, my body burned hot and my hate felt like madness. I was wildly out of control, stamping my little feet and yelling so loud that mother clapped a tight hand over my mouth and whispered,

Don’t stamp you feet so hard on the ground, child, the earth goddess will say, “Nodhakin”-I don’t ever want to ever see you!”

I yelled back that I didn’t care. Hearing me in that incorrigible and combative mood, grandmother scolded,

“How can a mother put up with this nonsense? No child of mine will ever talk back to me like that.”

“She is not your child and never will be because she descends from impeccable stock,” mother rasped.

Those quarrels between mother and grandmother, mostly because of us, were daily occurrence in our age of innocence. Sometimes verbal darts flew in all directions. We were being raised in an explosive and convoluted world of contentious adults.

Confusion is created within young minds when too many adults, who neither like nor respect each other, quarrel all the time. My eldest sister, C, learnt to take sides and to shift her allegiance to the highest bidder. At a very young age she learnt the art of wheeling and dealing. C was bribed by grandmother with cakes and cookies, toys and new clothes to turn against mother. C gave her love and loyalty to whoever served her best; she learnt to discount her family’s status for its dependence on grandparents. Much to mother’s utter disgust, her children were the bargaining chips father used to remove strains in the relationship with his father that his stepmother had the propensity to cause.

Mother detested grandmother for the harm she was causing our family. At school C talked to the teachers about happenings in her home. Thus, the teachers got to know, and other parents also found out from their children, that our grandfather was living with his mistress. A brazen few asked mother why she exposed her children to the corrupting influence of her in-laws.

“Promiscuous behavior in adults is sure to have a corrupting influence on children,” they warned her.

Father was furious with C because she was making our family look indecent; but mother was secretly delighted. She had more weapons in her arsenal during firing time, an event that happened with increasing frequency.

To describe the sort of adversary with whom she had to deal, Mother told them, “That woman has no scruples of conscience. How else could she have nabbed a married man and ousted the mother of his only child? She must also practice witchcraft.”

The servants thought so too. They told Alice,

“She keeps a magic potion wrapped in betel leaf in that pouch around her waist. She drops a little portion of it in the glass of orange juice that her spouse drinks each morning.”

Alice believed in sorcery and its evil power over people. She thought that grandmother was trying to harm grandfather and gain control over his mind. Because Alice was afraid of the “old woman”, I was also afraid of her. In my mind she was the wicked witch who scared away the beautiful fairies in our garden. Nothing grandmother did escaped our attention. We kept a careful watch to see where she was and what she was doing. She was past sixty. Perhaps the life of prior privation had soured her disposition settling a scowl between piercing eyes as upon a face sculptured in stone. The kitchen was her domain; there she fluttered about driven by a sense of importance and responsibility for the catering. She was well suited to be a vigilant custodian and a painful censor of conduct of those working in a kitchen. She went from one table to another, supervising the work of chief chef and his subordinates and scolding everyone for not doing things her way. From the kitchen she went to the corridor outside where other work stations were lined up for the purpose of executing and speeding up the incidental tasks and putting the finishing touches to dishes; from there back again to the kitchen. Back and forth, she went keeping everybody agitated and in low spirits. She was far sighted and wore spectacles to read the almanac, her only reading material. She stretched out on a reclining chair, strategically placed in the back verandah allowing her to see what was happening in the kitchen, the corridor and backyard. No business was begun or event undertaken, and no journey planned or company invited, without seeing how the positioning of planets impinged on the outcome. The servants found a way to



thwart her watch. They hid her spectacles whenever they got the chance, and grandfather chastised her for forgetfulness. What a capital joke that was! One day when she could not find the spectacles, her anger exploded into a blind rage against everyone, including us. She scolded us for cluttering the place. She was sure her spectacles lay under the clutter. Grandfather spotted the spectacles sitting on top of her head. Rubbing his hand on his head, he said rather severely, "Shut your mouth, woman! Stop looking with your loud mouth! Look with your eyes and feel with your hands!"

The admonition was greeted with bursts of laughter and redoubled gaiety by all. He sometimes bore for her a resentment and haughty unkindness, especially in the presence of others. It was obvious to them that he was not as helpless and afraid of her as she tried to make him. Since the spectacles were found on top of her head, she did not create a commotion when she could not find them. Exhausted after a fruitless search, she disappeared into her room to lie down and perhaps reflect on her memory loss in solitude. Many hours later, the spectacles mysteriously appeared on a windowsill or table that she thought she had missed in her search.

"You must not take them off your face, ever!" grandfather advised.

Father said,

"She doesn't need spectacles. She sees everything we do with or without them."

It was for such remarks that he got into trouble.

Nobody liked grandmother; even Booli ran away with its tail between its hind legs, showing its teeth in a snarl when she walked by. The servants disliked her too, but dared not cross her path for fear of summary dismissal. She suffered from swollen feet, aching muscles and joints and frequent headaches. Her karma was acting up, according to Alice. Alice was frequently summoned, away from play with us, to rub down her legs with smelly oils. We stood by unhappily as Alice's tiny body bounced up and down energizing her legs.

According to mother, grandmother had two ambitions: to become the respected family matriarch, which mother would not allow, not by any means, and to acquire father's inheritance for her daughter, about which mother seemed not to care.

However, she told father that her relentless cunning, guile to match, and sorcery would someday work to her advantage. Someday she will succeed in transferring his rightful inheritance to her daughter.

"She dispenses the magic potion to your father every day. Servants have seen her do it. She puts a pinch of some white powder in the glass of orange juice he drinks every morning. In my village some people practice sorcery. They can poison minds, cause dissension within families and acquire for themselves money that belongs to others. They can make healthy men sick or wealthy men, poor. If you're not careful, your

father will be a victim of her witchcraft, and you won't inherit a cent from the old man."

Father was skeptical at first, but when his father was taken seriously ill with diarrhea and vomiting, he began to wonder. More suspicion when he was taken to hospital. The doctors were unable to diagnose the illness.

"Perhaps it is something he ate or drank," the doctors said.

"Didn't I tell you that she is poisoning him?" asked mother.

Mother did not let father or us eat the food that the "old woman" handled.

Grandfather, though he was very careful about what he ate, never fully recovered. He suffered from the nervous effect of the digestive disorder and from spells of dizziness. The stomach ailment persisted, and gradually got worse, further substantiating the story of the magic potion.

Conflicts between grandmother and mother became more numerous and serious; over what we ate, what we wore, when and how we should be disciplined, and father's non-productive lifestyle. They argued about one thing and another, with great passion and noise. Grandmother infuriated mother, aroused father, ruled over grandfather by her manipulative actions, terrorized servants and disciplined us more than mother did. She even tied my leg to a chair whenever mother and father were gone to restrain me. Tender feelings for her daughter were as close to love as she could show for another living thing. She was mean to Alice because she was mother's servant. She pinched and slapped Alice even without provocation. She wanted mother to know that Alice will not be given three meals a day if all she did in the house was play with us. So, for many hours a day, Alice was either energizing her varicose legs or cleaning the chicken coop and feeding chicken.

"Sweep the floor of the chicken coop! Clear the droppings and feathers! Collect the eggs in the basket! Be careful not to crack a single! Go to the kitchen and ask the cook for the garbage pail! Sort out the banana, orange and papaw peels. Discard the bones! Feed the chicken! Don't leave the coop till all the work is done!" shouted grandmother.

Alice was plunged into a state of confusion not knowing in which order to begin work.

"Are you deaf? Didn't you hear what I said?" she yelled advancing toward Alice who stood petrified. It was a heartrending sight to see Alice standing there so helpless amidst a storm of chastisement. She did not know where to begin and what to do; she trembled and looked down at the ground in terror, but from time to time raised her eyes, loaded with tears, to see from which direction the blows would descend.

Grabbing poor Alice by the arm that was as thin as a stick, she jerked it until Alice's face puckered, the corners of her mouth twisted in agony, and she cried out in pain. It was more than poor Alice could bear. When let go, Alice ran like a mouse fleeing

from a cat. She did not stop until she reached the kitchen, out of her reach, and scared stiff in fear of being pursued. Recovering quickly behind the wooden door, she grabbed the large garbage bin and pushed it outside. Stopping from time to time to assure herself that she was not being watched or followed, she dragged it across the backyard that, mercifully, sloped away from the house. When she was outside the field of vision of anyone watching from the verandah, assuring herself once again that she was not being pursued, she let go of the pail and stretched out her hands to soothe the pain; she was in no hurry to enter the coop. Wearing by the effort she had expended on pushing and dragging the huge pail, and feeling the need of some rest, she sat on a stone nearby. The sun was nearly overhead and burning down on her head; there was no wind to rustle the leaves in the trees, and yet the air was so soothing and relaxing; it dried her tears.



The bird in the pomegranate tree

Sighting Alice, a bird in the pomegranate tree sang with all its little might knowing it will soon be rewarded. Alice aroused herself from falling asleep. She remembered that she too was hungry. Wiping sweat from her anxious brow, she knelt on the ground, leaned against the stone, tilted the pail toward, dipped into it and sorted out the scraps. She tossed some mango peel to the bird. A crow flew past cawing loudly, wanting to participate in the feast. Finding a half-eaten slice of papaw, Alice ate with relish. She dared to eat food meant for chicken! If caught in that act of thievery, she would be beaten. Neither Alice nor the bird could convert refuse into edible meat. There were times when Alice came near to losing her patience and running away from her terrible servitude; the fact that she did not was either because she had nowhere to flee to or the habit of servitude. She had learned early in life to control her temper, hold her tongue and shoulder burdens that many would have found too heavy to bear. Alice was a solitary weeper except in our company. During our playtime with Alice that mother insisted upon, Alice forgot how horrible her life was.

When she heard the old woman's loud summons, it brought back the pain and suffering she had to endure. Unable to protest or be openly defiant, Alice took to muttering, a habit that has lasted her whole life. Her lips were in perpetual motion but nobody understood a word she was uttering, not even me who was often so close to her side. "Aiyo Deiyaney!"- Oh God!- was all I heard. Perhaps she was calling upon her mother-in-heaven to bear witness to the pain inflicted upon the daughter she left behind and to awaken in her conscience the sense of horror the daughter was forced to endure.

Sometimes I followed her inside the chicken coop. Life among the chicken was not unpleasant. Alice was kind to the chicken and they appeared to heed her commands. Gathering around, they clucked for her attention. When Alice and I squatted on the floor to be on an equal plane with them, they pecked us, ever so gently. When the birds flew at each other, Alice intervened to stop the squabbling. Being such good chicken they heeded. Sometimes, she even offered them some friendly advice. "My little red one, don't you think you have had more than your share? It's the brown one's turn. You must learn to share."

Living among the chicken for so many hours each day, giving counsel to the chicken seemed like a perfectly normal thing to do. She found in them a patient audience who listened intently when she complained and told them of her worries. How endearing the appearance of a sympathetic response when she shared with them her pain and how gratifying the feeling when they appeared to respond to her good advice. They all seemed attentive and interested in what she said. Alice clucked like a hen and crowed like the rooster at dawn. She was able to tell me things about chicken that even my know-all mother did not.

"The rooster is the ruler and it looks after all the hens. Among the hens, a pecking order exists; from watching them peck each other, you can tell which one is the dominant hen."

"If the rooster is the ruler and looks after the hens, why does it peck them so ferociously from time to time?" I wanted to know.

"We humans also peck each other," Alice replied.

"Alice, when our grandmother beats you, is she looking after you?" I asked.

"She beats me because I sinned against her in a previous birth and must repay for my past karma," Alice replied.

"Did you know our grandmother in a previous birth?" I asked.

"You ask such strange questions, little mistress. I must have or why would I slave for her in this one?" was Alice's reasoned reply.

When Alice's days were devoid of cheer, she consoled herself with the thought of powerful impact in a powerless life, that while she was paying off debts outstanding from a previous birth, her tormentors were becoming more and more indebted to her;

that those who were harming her now would have to compensate her in a future life; and however deprived she was, she imagined herself fully rewarded then.

A large part of Alice's life and thoughts were directed toward comfort and preservation of animals, both large and small. Great care she took to harm none, not even an ant.

Alice often said, "I'll never again be born poor; never slave for another in a future birth. I've lived this one without harming anyone, as compassionately as our Lord Buddha. Like him, I'll tread ever so lightly on this earth."

The cook made frequent visits to the chicken coop and each time he selected two of the plumpest hens.

"This one is nice and fat. They'll make big roasts. You've done a good job of fattening them, Alice," he told her.

"Sinful man," unhappy Alice scolded him. "How dare you insult me when they don't heed? Because the fat hens go first, I tell them not to eat too much. At mealtime, how they peck each other for a premier place at the feeding trough!"

"Keep trying! One of these days those chicken will listen to you, and when they do, I'll lose my job. You'll fare much worse because they'll beat you unconscious," said the laughing cook.

"That doesn't bother me," said unhappy Alice, her voice broken by emotion and hurt. Ignoring Alice's pleas and admonitions, the cook picked up two squawking birds by their feet, one in each hand, and swaggered to the barrel near the garden tap. Placing one bird inside the barrel and clamping the lid of it, he wrung the neck of the other until it snapped. The head was severed from the body and tossed into the garbage bin. The still writhing body was plucked and placed on the cement slab beneath the garden tap. Frequently, he stopped to shoo away crows that dived for bloody tidbits. The smell of blood and squawking of frightened chicken in the coop drove the tethered Booli into a spell of frenzied barking. Leaping into the air and tugging at its tether, it tried to join the fray. Above all the commotion the thundering voice of grandmother roared,

"Will someone silence that crazy dog?"

The crazy dog and mother were the only two living creatures that could not be silenced by her imperious command.

Water from the tap mixing with blood from torn necks ran into the open drain. More ugly and gruesome was the sight when the cook slaughtered a goat. We were ordered to keep away from the slaughter site behind a shed in the backyard. How Alice reviled the cook's involvement in the carnage! How she criticized, castigated and chastised him!

"You will go to hell when you die! Is this a way to earn a livelihood?" she asked him every time after a slaughter.

But the cook was committed to those killings and even found ways of causing more pain to the animals to provoke Alice more.

“They are created to be eaten,” he said making light of his insidious occupation. Just like his master, he had no problem reconciling tenets of Buddhism, “I shall not kill,” with those of Christianity, the religion of the conquerors that, “Animals are created to be eaten by man”.

Alice, swearing and indignant, shouted “You took that from the master. Anything he says, you say it better.”

“Yes, I do. On judgment day, I’ll hang on your tail and reach heaven. In any event, I figure that master orders the killings, he must take prime responsibility for my actions.”

Repelled by the sight of those killings that I sometimes watched from close quarters and fearing the after-life repercussions that Alice so vividly described, I became a vegetarian.

Alice did not kill even an ant. Once our two bedrooms were infested with field mice that mother speculated were planted by the “old woman’ who knew that father was scared of mice. Mother set a trap baiting the mice with a piece of cheese. But, time and again, the bait disappeared and not a single mouse was caught. Mother, a visionary of sorts who had the knack for divining behavior with more than ordinary intuition that women are supposed to have, suspected that Alice had something to do with her foiled extermination attempts. She placed Alice under surveillance and caught her in the act of tripping the mousetrap. Alice explained to me that she was compelled to a life of servitude because of sins she had committed in a past life. It was her resolve to commit none in this life.

Alice was a source of amusement to the kitchen staff. Being the youngest of the servants, she was at the bottom of the pecking order. Because she was a simple village girl, the other servants found her ways intriguing and amusing. For her deep religious beliefs, she was martyred. Because of her frayed relationship with people, Alice had so little to say to them and so much to say to the animals and birds. Booli followed her around the garden, chicken fed out of her hands, snakes seemed to heed her advice, and birds up in the tree sang sweetly to her. She was unafraid of the mongoose that chased a black snake to the bottom of the garden; and even of snakes that slithered up the down spouts in search of rats and polecats nesting in the ceiling. She talked to mynah birds, parrots and magpies in soothing voice as if each was her friend. To a trespassing snake, she was even solicitous,

“Go away! If you value your life, you’ll not hang around here. Our bloodthirsty cook will surely kill you!”

After a moment of total paralysis, the snake slithered away as if the import of her good advice finally sunk in. Even of the venomous hooded cobra, Alice often said,

“It’s an innocent creature that will do us no harm if we leave it alone. If you don’t hurt the cobra, it’ll not hurt you.”

Whenever we, C, S, Alice, and I played together, the sparkle in our laughter spread, and the voices of frolicking children rang aloud like bells. . Responding to our joyous cries, Booli barked without pause and tugged unceasing at his tether until it was let loose. The sun’s rays struck down on the spaces where we played, along the pebbly footpaths where we roamed, on the flowerbeds that we were told to mind, and the wide and open lawn on which we played catch ball. Often there was little or no breeze to cool our hot brows but we did not care. The large mara trees were the only shady spots in a golden landscape; under their spreading branches, we frequently paused from play to get relief from the sharp rays of the noonday sun.

In the distance, the hills of Hantane loomed tall like a protective wall. Within the garden, along the narrow footpaths in the tall elephant grass, I cautiously crawled looking for fairies that C said lay hidden. Alice thought that fairies would be hiding in the hollow of hollyhocks or the curled petals of roses. It was C who always saw the fairies, never in those flowers, and always in the grass. C, the only one attending school at that time, said,

“Fairies have wings and veils of shimmering gossamer, wear dresses of gorgeous silk in shades of pink and blue; and in their hands they carry wands that sparkle like diamonds. They wave their wands, and you’re transformed into a frog, if you’re naughty. ”

“Look Alice!” she cried out, “I found the wing of a fairy,” handing Alice a tiny translucent thing of shimmering silver shaped like a tiny wing.

“Please find the fairy and fix it back, Alice,” I begged. “She can’t fly and is grounded somewhere here. Let’s look for her before Booli does.”

Alice reassured me,

“Don’t worry! She won’t be grounded for long; her wing will grow back faster than the hair on you head.”

Mother, whose knowledge of such matters did not match Alice’s, said

“This wing belongs to a dragon fly.”

C, who was then in grade one, knew a whole lot more about fairies and elves, gnomes and goblins. She told me that mother thought the wing belonged to a dragonfly only because fairies and elves are invisible to grown ups.

“Only children see fairies because we look for them. Fairies are what children look for when they go out to play. Fairies, like dogs, like to be around children. S and I believed C because she had seen a tiny creature, clad in iridescent green, blue, pink and orange colors fly away when she poked around the rose bush.

“Look! Look!” she cried out, and I saw the glimmer of rainbow hues arise from a rose on the bush, lift up like a leaf stirred by the breeze and disappear over the hedge

where we could not pursue it in its flight. S touched the rose with its lovely pink petals and the gold dust the fairy had shed clung to her fingers. How proud she was that her hands were stained with fairy dust! She would not wash her hands all day; not until quite late in the evening when C ruefully remarked that it was only the pollen from the flower.

Along the footpaths between the flowerbeds we strayed, up the flowering trees, beneath stones and toadstools; in green grass sometimes flecked with red, we wandered looking for fairies.

According to C, some hours of the day were more likely to make them visible: at the brief moment of sunrise when the world dazzled in golden glow of sun beams, and song birds sang melodiously in the trees, or at sunset, when colors of the evening were the soft splendor of blue, pink and mauve.

To evoke their presence, C described the shimmering silk dresses they wore, the gold and silver broaches in their soft silk hair, and the white satin slippers on their little feet.

We were living our childhood in exciting times. The war was escalating, and it brought to our presence soldiers never seen before. Their skins were light and their hair the color of fallen leaves. Mother explained,

”They’re another race of people who live thousands of miles away in a far-away country called England. They occupy our country because they fought, captured, and killed the king who once reigned over us. The English are now the lords of many countries including our own; they come and go as they please.”

Mother told us the story of how the pharanghis, foreigners, conquered our country.

“The guards assigned to protect the shore line from the enemy, sighted the first white men frolicking on the beach. They went before their king with a tale that was hard to believe.



Pharanghis Coming ashore



“O, Lord of the island, its beaches, and surrounding seas! On this day have arrived on our resplendent isle a people, the pharanghis, unlike any we have seen before. They are fair of face, much taller and bigger than most among us. Their hair is the straw. Stranger yet is what they ingest. They eat stone and drink blood.”

“Do they really?” C wanted to know.

“No dear,” mother assured her. “The guards did not know that they were eating brown bread and drinking red wine.”

“Who are the pharanghis?” C asked again.

“Pharanghi means a foreigner,” she replied. “They’re people who came from far away countries, invaded our country, captured our king, and now rule us. Their king is our king.”

“Was our king afraid of them?” S softly asked,

“No! He was a very brave king,” mother replied. “The description of the trespassers had a quality of the bizarre, but he wasn’t afraid at first. However, he later trembled when they fired canon upon canon upon his ill-fortified kingdom and his soldiers lay squirming and dying in primordial fear. They conquered us because they had firepower. The shots from guns they carried and from canons mounted on their ships could travel a great distance, and with such force to even fell the mighty tuskers on whose backs our brave warriors fought. The Sinhala army was vanquished and the king captured. Our beautiful isle, this great Buddhist country fell into the hands of the pharanghis. Our ancient religion, culture, and most of all, our noble way of life is now threatened with extinction. The British king is our king and we sing, “God save our king!”

Alice was indignant; I, who understood very little of the narrative was dropping off to sleep and C said,

“When the white governor visited our school, we sang,  
Send him mictorious; happy ngorious.”

The mother continued,

“Their missionaries evangelized our people; they built churches and schools on sacred temple lands; converted our people to Christianity by giving them all sorts of perks; called us heathens because we don’t believe in a god unlike them who commit so many sins and then ask forgiveness from their god. In Buddhism, man is supreme and he’s responsible for his salvation. There’s no god to forgive us for the sins we commit. We carry our karma to future lives. Buddhists believe that it’s man’s actions in previous births, his karma, that drives his fate in this life. But the pharanghis think of us as heathens who must be saved. The missionaries are sent here to save our souls and the soldiers to save our bodies. The soldiers are here to protect us from the bad guys.”

“Who are the bad guys?” S wanted to know.

“They’re the Japanese; but the British kill even better than their arch enemy, the Japanese,” said mother as she picked me up and prepared to leave.

After her departure, Alice took over,

“We’re Buddhists. Everyone knows that Buddhists don’t kill. The British are here to do the killing for us.”



The British military in the colonies

Within the Royal Botanical Gardens, across the street from the Rest House, the Southeast Asian command post was set up. The soldiers built barracks inside the Royal Botanical Gardens of Peradeniya. Rows of cabins of corrugated metal siding and galvanized roofs, all painted in green, were well camouflaged and concealed within the luxuriant trees and dense shrubbery. New battalions of soldiers arrived every week. I saw nearly all of them because they spent the evening in the Rest house and sometimes, when too inebriated to go back to their barracks, even slept over. We did not know how well or badly the war was being fought in South East Asia, but the war that was fought in the salubrious surroundings of the Royal Botanical Gardens in Peradeniya and within the Rest House where we lived appeared to be going rather well. The signs and symbols of success and victory showed up everyday to celebrate. The celebrations were a daily event; the dining room was decked with large vases of fresh flowers; food was plentiful and every soldier ate his belly full. Course after delicious course were ravenously eaten; grandfather performing superbly the duties of host. When a course failed to come in promptly, he pushed open the door behind which the ladies stood peeking and bellowed commands. The bar tender had his hands full; hard drinks freely flowed; faces became ruddier from too much eating and drinking, and behavior as combative as

seen on any war front. In the beginning, the women wanted to see it all by peeking from behind doorways or through keyholes, and we saw as much hiding behind their saris. They reached the point of satiety within the first couple weeks of such sightings, and began to denounce those binges in outbursts of loathing. Never before had anyone seen people consume so much food or drink so much! There was no fighting in the vicinity because there were no Japanese or Germans in the hill country of Ceylon or any place else in our resplendent isle. We did not see any soldiers dying on a battlefield because our brave soldiers kept the Japanese at bay, but we saw enough to convince us that World War II was taking the desired course. Our little hearts swelled with gratitude, love and pride when Sethu, who was handsomely tipped by the soldiers each time they were graciously and humbly served, informed us that those fair soldiers in our midst were risking their lives to safeguard us from vicious people!

Rolling his eyeballs to indicate the danger that was timely averted, Sethu, the headwaiter told us,

“The few Japanese who once lived here were either imprisoned or executed. They were caught transmitting information of strategic importance by beating coded messages on their drums. If they had succeeded who can tell what might have happened?”

During the war years, the Rest House was bustling with soldiers who came to wine and dine and make merry after the hard work at whatever they were doing to safeguard a strategic piece of real estate that now belonged to the British. Thanks to the rapid deployment of troops in the hill country and the development of the catering business to satisfy the insatiable appetites of soldiers, grandfather’s income skyrocketed. Grandfather, much beholden for the business they brought, was eager to please and serve them in any way. Without a single directive from above, the Rest House transformed from civilian to military function. How he bustled around when an army captain or general alighted from a military vehicle under the portico!

Dressed in the regalia of an Aratchie, the gold-flecked comb on his balding head and the red sash across his breast, he received the dignitaries with much aplomb! He bowed low before Lord Louis Mountbatten, Commander of the Southeast Asian forces, as if he descended from the gods.

For a military party, he ordered delicious hors d’oeuvres and soups; the kitchen staff fixed appetizing entrees, whipped up mouth-watering desserts; the waiter who served in the bar mixed the finest drinks. Mounds of dainty mini-sandwiches were assembled on large platters with the Government of Ceylon logo emblazoned in gold letters. The large kitchen was a hive of activity; and tables were set up along the corridor outside the kitchen for the assembly line of workers, each apportioned a task.



Lord Louis Mount Batten

One sliced the bread so thin that even surpassed the magic of an electric slicing machine. Another made mayonnaise by mixing egg yolks, finely ground mustard, vinegar, softened butter, salt, paprika, salad oil, flour, and water in measured portions. The mixture was cooked over a low fire until it was creamy in texture and then whipped with a large fork until smooth and thick. While all this was going on, another was busy boiling carrots, beetroot, and asparagus. The boiled carrots were mashed and mixed with the mayonnaise and so was the asparagus; but the beets were sliced thin and mixed with ground pepper and vinegar. Someone from the kitchen brought in hardboiled eggs in a large saucepan. They were swiftly immersed in cold water, shelled and finely chopped; the ham and cheese were also thinly sliced. The communion of women, grandmother, her daughter, and our mother made the dainty sandwiches. Mayonnaise mixed with the mashed carrot, egg or asparagus was thinly spread on two slices of the sliced bread, slapped together, edges trimmed with a sharp knife and each cut diagonally across into four smaller segments. Or mayonnaise was spread on two slices of bread and slices of either beet, cheese and ham or sliced cold beef were sandwiched between the bread and then cut into mini-sandwiches. . Mother arranged the sandwiches, usually an assortment of twelve, on each cheese plate. How attractive the display of alluring color, beet-red, carrot-orange, asparagus-green, egg-yellow, pink-ham and yellow-cheese! We were by her side waiting to eat the trimmed crust that sometimes got discarded with a little bit of filling.

So that his patrons knew how well grandfather championed their cause and the war effort, a pile of propaganda literature describing and illustrating the battlefield were

placed on a magazine rack within sight and reach of the soldiers. Grandfather ordered Sethu,

“Keep a good supply of those periodicals at all times in that rack! The captain will see how well we support the war effort and send more soldiers here. We must cultivate their business or they’ll go their canteen instead.”

Ever since the soldiers arrived there were more chicken in the coop and more goats tethered to the fence posts. Alice waxed more eloquent about the doctrine of rebirth and sin of killing those animals. She had more worrying, praying and grieving to do. The war escalated and the British fought on land, sea and in the air. In school, C had been taught to duck under a table with a pencil stuck between the upper and lower jaw when the sirens sounded. Like a pendant on a chain, half a pencil dangled from a string around her neck. How smart C looked dressed in her white, starched pique uniform, the blue and white striped tie around her shirt collar, black shoes and white socks on her feet, and her long hair worn in two long braids tied with blue ribbon! S, Alice and I wore pencil necklaces too because whatever C did in school we imitated. Because pencils were hard to come by in those days, Sethu cut one pencil into three pieces. Whenever we heard a siren, we stuck the pencil between the teeth and dived for cover under a big table. Sometimes, hearing the buzz of a plane up above in the skies, we all ran to the verandah for a better sighting. Planes were a new phenomenon and the drone of a plane in the distant sky brought out a crowd of onlookers. From somewhere in the distant sky, a dull buzzing arose that quickly swelled to a roar, approaching, imminent

“Seek shelter! It may be an enemy plane carrying bombs,” the waiters cautioned.



Japanese Air Raid

We paid little attention for our eyes were converged on a spot in the sky above- a brown plane streaking across the blue. We continued to watch its approach in the sky above from behind the huge pillars on the verandah. The buzz soon became a roar overhead, and then both the sight and sound faded into the distance, yet the sighting remained in our minds to be recalled during war games when we did aerial combats.. Alice had no will to kill a living thing, but she could not resist participating in our war games.

“It’s alright to pretend as long as you don’t do the real thing,” she explained when Sethu taunted her for hypocrisy.

“She’s a fake,” he said, “She kills humans and spares chicken.”

C was in school during most of the day.

“She’s going to kinnergarten,” was how I described C’s early morning departure in grandfather’s car. The fun began upon her return later in the day. Alice was the bad guy- the enemy. We studied the pictures dispatched from the war front showing air combat and fighting at sea and on land. Mesmerized by extremes of action in the killing fields of Burma, we dug imaginary trenches in the backyard and blasted each other’s territory into oblivion. At moments, a more aggressive fever took hold, when we staged, assault upon assault, in a frenzied effort to wipe out the enemy, who was always Alice, forcing her into surrender. The shells from our guns exploded in the air and fires erupted everywhere just like those we saw in the periodicals. We lighted up an imaginary path of destruction with incendiary devices to destroy villages, demolish bridges and roads, and wipe out battalions of soldiers. Sirens blasted and ambulances raced back and forth carrying the wounded and dying to Red Cross centers. In our fertile imagination, one tin soldier deputized for thousands of enemy soldiers and one truck was a fleet of armored vehicles. For many hours on each rainless day, we pursued Alice through tall elephant grass bending lower and lower to keep our little heads from bobbing above. When we thought we were well concealed in the grass and safe from our archenemy, Alice following close behind sneaked up on us. She pounced upon an unsuspecting trio, and all hell broke loose. The air was loud with our murderous screams. S did not like to be attacked from the rear because it was scary, she said, but Alice told us that there must always be an element of surprise in war; surprise attacks, usually from the rear, were most likely to succeed. Though we made some surprise moves ourselves, Alice was never caught off-guard.

To get better guidance and help in our separate war, we went to the backyard and peeked through thick foliage of the hedge that separated the Rest House from a military camp at the bottom of the golf links. Tropical vegetation grows so lush and thick that there was only one small gap in the thicket wide enough to see through. The miscreants saw, between the hedge and tents in the distance, a clearing of

mowed grass and tree stumps. The open space was being used for a strategic purpose. Beneath the few trees still standing there were wooden commodes like those inside our toilets except they were unpainted and the cream sheen color of new wood. How tickled Alice and C were to see soldiers sitting on those commodes with their pants drawn down, in postures of complete surrender, untouched and unconcerned by the war being fought in Southeast Asia! Some were reading magazines, while others were laughing and talking; a few sat impassively, staring into space; all in no hurry to finish their business. S and I, distracted by Alice and C's giggles, could not understand the purpose of that congregation. Something over there amused them. What was Alice whispering to C? What was C saying to Alice? Why were they both giggling? We focused our eyes sharply on the bare buttocks and then we understood. "They're doing kakki," S said in surprise and embarrassment. "Sssh...don't shout! We'll get into trouble," Alice cautioned. The bare buttocks were yellow, like huge pumpkins, unlike their faces that were usually pink or red from the humidity or too much drink. We got no help in our war effort from that surveillance, but seeing them thus, sans the pride and pomp of their uniforms and military insignia delighted us. Many a time we peeked through the hole in the hedge, taking care not to be caught snooping by mother or grandmother, who would punish us severely, especially poor Alice who should have known better. One day we saw a red-haired soldier with a red mustache cleaning those toilets. Emptying the contents of those commodes into a large bucket, he hoisted it upon his back and carried it away. Alice and C were most surprised because in our minds, a white man should not be performing the most menial of social tasks. According to the social dynamics of the indigenous society, Sakkiliyas or lavatory coolies, cleaned toilets. More surprise awaited us and indignation was our common response, when later that evening, the same soldier, the one with red hair and red mustache, came to the Rest House in the company of other soldiers to wine and dine together. It was disgusting behavior to socialize with your coolies! In our society, genteel folk neither associated with lavatory coolies nor broke bread with them. It was just one more distinguishing and superior cultural characteristics of our lion race, a proud people who, though conquered by a persistent and ruthless enemy during the brief time they turned their backs on the sea to gaze upon their glorious past, knew how to keep lavatory coolies in their place!

Story time with Alice was fun time. She had a few stories in her repertoire, but being such a good narrator, and given her propensity to embellish with newer and richer detail each time, we asked for more of the same. Her favorite was the story of Koko (the he stork) and Kiki (the she stork). "Please tell us the story of Koko and Kiki!" S and I often pleaded. It was a hot afternoon when the temperature had reached a zenith, and there was not even the

slightest breeze to cool the shimmering air, no birds were to be seen in the trees or the rooftop. Booli, addled by the relentless sun, had disappeared into its kennel, and the grandmother, succumbing to the heat, lay in blissful sleep in her room. We could neither be put to sleep nor be enticed to play, and were lying belly down on the cement floor wearing only our white cotton underpants.

“I have told the story of Koko and Kiki a thousand times,” protested Alice.

“Just one more time, please,” pleaded S and I in unison.

Alice, who had a secret preference for little me, could not say, ‘no’ to the louder and more compelling of the two voices.

“Please, once more!” I pleaded beating my pudgy hand on the floor.

Alice threw a radiant smile in my direction and sat down between us to tell the story of Koko and Kiki. “Once upon a time, Koko and Kiki, two snow-white storks, lived on the lush banks of the great brown Mahaveli. During the off-monsoon season, the mighty Mahaveli dries up to look like a gravel road ravaged by receding floodwaters. However, when the monsoon rains hit, the river often overflows its banks. During periods of prolonged drought, the two storks thrive on a diet of worms, tadpoles and minnows stranded in stagnant pools in the riverbed. It is a fine life as long as they don’t come too close to the nasty crocodile lying low in the reeds, waiting to nab the unsuspecting creature that wanders by. Koko, who has seen and felt its sharp teeth during a brief but fearful encounter in which it only lost a wing tip, warned Kiki to be careful,

“You wouldn’t want to come within hundred yards of that monster. Its teeth are like sharp thorns; it has more strength than a bull. If it catches you, it will tear you apart and gobble you up. You’ll be more careful than I, won’t you, honey?”

Kiki quickly replied, “I most certainly will!”



The Crocodile in the Reeds



One sunny day, Kiki standing upon one leg as it was accustomed to doing, was slurping up a breakfast of wriggly worms when it noticed a movement in the rushes along the bank. At first, thinking that it was only the wind in the reeds, it continued to feast. But the reeds bent this way and that as if disturbed by a living force. Thinking it was the nasty crocodile and fearing for its life, Kiki was about to fly away downstream to where its mate was, when the rustle in the reeds was accompanied by strange cries that sounded familiar- like a baby crying. At first, afraid to go any closer, it scanned the site where the bushes formed an impenetrable thicket behind the reeds. Its gaze traveled slowly along the bank for the crocodile, and saw its unmistakable form hundreds of yards away, on the other side. Again and again, the same heart-rending cries leaped up from behind the bushes and rose skyward in the wind.

”Crocodiles don’t cry like this, and I sure hope the crocodile won’t hear it,” thought Kiki. Kiki approached the bank, one cautious step at a time, moving closer and closer to investigate. Poking among the reeds with its long beak that is fashioned for such purpose, Kiki found a baby wrapped tightly in a white shawl, its baby face showing a great deal of anguish. Stretching its neck as high as it could go, Kiki looked in every direction to see whether its parents were nearby, but there were no humans anywhere in the vicinity. Kiki saw its mate, Koko, in noiseless repose in the shallow downstream water, standing upon one leg and pretending to be a reed, hoping thus to lure a fish to the surface. Few sounds were to be heard: the ripple of the shallow water flowing over the bedrock, the leaves rustling in the wind, and the fitful cries of the baby. Like most birds faced with an unexpected crisis, Kiki too was rendered speechless and motionless; it did not know what to do. It could not abandon the baby and fly away because the crocodile was bound to find it sooner or later. A moment’s reflection suggested one thing it could do under those circumstances: summon Koko. Their two heads always did better than one in times of doubt and uncertainty. So, over and over again, it sang, terribly out of tune,

*“Koko, Koko fly over here!*

*Something I see, for which I fear.”*

And Koko sang back,

*“Don’t eat it until I fly upstream.*

*More fish over there than down it seems.”*

Kiki continued the duet,

*Koko honey, it’s nothing to eat.*

*Though this thing’s got plenty meat.”*

Koko asked,

*“Kiki honey, whatever could it be?”*

And Kiki who had no patience with Koko in times like this, sang in a shrill voice,  
*“Koko, why don’t you fly over and see?”*

So Koko flew over the site and circled overhead, once, twice, thrice before alighting. At first, it was unable to recognize the thing that Kiki was pointing to; he could not see it well because it was swathed in a shawl and partly shrouded in reeds. Flying high and then low, and closer and still closer, Koko realized that it was a distraught baby wrapped snugly in a white shawl.

As she always does at that point in the story, S interrupted to ask Alice what Koko and Kiki did with the baby?

“They carried it away to their nest,” she answered.

I, who was silent because Alice did not like to be interrupted too often, could not resist my own line of inquiry. I wanted to know whether the baby was a boy or girl. I knew that the baby’s gender changed each time Alice told this story. Last time, it was a baby girl.

“A baby boy,” Alice said. My excitement could not be contained. I anxiously asked, “And what happened, then? Did they find his parents?”

Alice, shaking her head, replied,

“No, they didn’t. Even though they flew far and wide looking for his parents, they were nowhere to be found. The storks decided to bring up the baby. How lovingly they looked after the little boy, feeding him with a fresh catch of fish every day!

They spent many more hours fishing in the Mahaveli because they now had an extra mouth to feed. The baby had a ravenous appetite, and upon the rich but unvaried diet, he grew up to become a handsome boy. Alice interrupted the story to remind S that she must eat all the food on her plate if she wanted to be big and beautiful someday.

Only after that important admonition and digression, did she continue,

“The little baby ate well and became a big boy. Like all big boys and girls, he was incorrigible; he wouldn’t do as he was told. You can keep a baby in a nest, but you cannot keep a big boy confined to one, can you? Alice asked S.

We responded with an emphatic, “No!”

S said, “No matter how large that nest, it must surely be much smaller than the room we occupy.”

And Alice said,

“It was smelly as well from the discarded fish bones. Our room doesn’t smell because we dine elsewhere. It isn’t untidy either; I tidy up and sweep every morning even though it doesn’t stay tidy for long. You both throw things about and sometimes walk in without removing your sandals. You track in mud on rainy days. How many times I sweep that room each day!” The story was becoming less and less agreeable, more like a litany of Alice’s daily chores.

“Alice, go on, go on!” cried impatient S.

Alice continued, "One day, the boy wandered off into the woods and met a wood cutter.

"Are you lost?" asked the woodcutter. "Where do you come from? You can't be from our village because I haven't seen you here before. And where are your clothes? Didn't your mother tell you that you shouldn't be walking around naked?"

"I am not lost," replied the boy. "I live here. I don't have any clothes to wear. I live with the storks in that large nest shrouded in shrubbery by the riverside."

"I live here. I don't have any clothes to wear. I live with the storks in that large nest shrouded in shrubbery by the riverside."

It occurred to the woodcutter, in a flash, that he was talking to the little boy that was lost by a couple in his village, many, many years ago. They left their baby son on the banks of the Mahaveli and went swimming in the river. A strong current carried them downstream, many miles away from where they left their baby. Two fishermen rescued them, but they could not remember where they had left their baby.

"So that's where you were hiding, in a stork's nest? You must be the boy my neighbors lost, many years ago. You look just like your mother. Come with me and I'll take you to your parents. They've been grieving for you all these years." The little boy explained, "It was fun living with the storks. They don't worry about anything. They're up with the sun, go fishing every morning, and go to bed when the sun goes down. It's a fun-filled life that we lead. No house or garden to clean, no furniture to dust no floors to sweep, no chicken to feed, no pots or pans to wash and dry, and no clothes to wash"

Something about that lifestyle pleased Alice and she was ready to take off in that direction, but another thought aroused my attention. I was afraid for the boy's welfare and wanted to know whether the boy found his parents.

"Did the man take him home to his parents? Were they his real parents?" I anxiously asked.

"Shut up!" commanded S. Don't you remember that Alice said many times before, they were his real parents?"

"No, I don't," I pouted, then turning to Alice, I inquired with a great deal of concern, "Were they really his parents?"

"Yes, they were his parents," was Alice's quick reply to prevent a flare up between us.

"Were his parents glad to see him? Did the boy scold them for abandoning him? I also wanted to know.

"No! They didn't abandon him. They lost him in the woods. The mother and father, who had grieved for him all these years, were very glad to see him alive and looking so well. They were re-united as a family and lived happily ever after."

"What happened to the storks, Alice? Weren't they sad to see him leave?" I anxiously inquired. Alice paused for a moment. Perhaps she was thinking of the fun world of storks that the boy had lost forever. Alice said,

"What happened to the storks, Alice? Weren't they sad to see him leave?" I anxiously inquired. Alice paused for a moment. Perhaps she was thinking of the fun world of storks that the boy had lost forever. Alice said,

“You see the boy was becoming too big for the storks to look after. How can two small storks look after a big boy when I can barely look after you three? Someday, you’ll also grow up and go away. The storks were glad that the boy had found his parents. They flew away to the lake high up in the mountains where there was more fish and the air was also much cooler. They were not seen again on the banks of the great Mahaveli.

We were not listening to Alice. We were airborne in search of the cool mountain lake where the storks, Koko and Kiki, resided.

Two years had gone by since our family came to live in the Peradeniya Rest House. Both S and I were also going to school, the Good Shepherd Convent in Kandy. The longstanding feud between mother and her in-laws was becoming more toxic and to mother it foreboded disaster. Storm clouds hung over the house every day, unavoidable when two families lived under the same roof for an extended period of time, each headed by a strong-willed woman and each family its own private agenda, each conflicting with the other. Just like any women in contentious family circles, mother and grandmother were uncompromising. More and more frequently, mother assumed her haughty manner and showed the ways of her proper upbringing; and she never failed to arouse grandmother’s irritation. The fact of the matter was that the older woman stood in secret fear of mother as a better manipulator than herself because she had three endearing children to assist. The older woman and her daughter, who had no legal standing in the family circle, felt threatened by the presence of the legitimate son and his young family. She was afraid of her spouse’s fickle nature. Charmed by our sparkling talk and fetching ways, he might include us in his will, she thought. Afraid that it was bound to happen, her extraordinary selfishness and meanness increased over the two years; her actions and talk were most damaging to our young family.

The ideas that invaded mother’s head were mostly of extreme revulsion. She often gave expression to her outraged feelings in strong language. Her self-respect and love of privacy were at stake, she declared. She even thought the old woman might poison us to be rid of the competition. She frequently complained to father of the many obstacles that impeded her social life. She often argued with such vehemence that startled the children; for greater emphasis, she even shed copious tears, telling him that she was forced to forget her origin and upbringing in those scandalous surroundings, even complaining that her relatives did not visit her any more because of his father’s mistress and her illegitimate daughter. She chided him for his dependence on the charity of her father-in-law; forced him to listen to elaborate accounts of real and imaginary injuries, and sobbed as she narrated how badly they were treating his children. She wanted her respect and privacy restored,

independence established and authority confirmed within her own domain, be it even a hut that she could call her own.

Mother had long shed her coyness, mild manners and genteel ways of the village damsel father had married. She was taught to respect the authority of elders, but her teachers never quite anticipated a situation where two fiery temperaments clashed continuously, day in and day out, week after week, for two long years. Fearing that he might even lose his inheritance if mother continued to dispute, father agonized over his plight. He did not know how to take the initiative and make the changes needed for a better life for all of us; he implored mother to put up with the status quo for a few more months, until he found a job. Mother declared,

“There does not seem to be an end to our dependence on your father. Year in and year out, you asked me to be patient until you find a job. But you are not even looking for one. You tell me not to clash with your father for fear of losing an inheritance, but I think that it is too meager to be concerned about. I shall not tolerate this situation much longer, I warn you.” He appeared to pay no attention. It was a peculiarity that lasted his whole life, right to the end, that when mother began to sermonize, he seemed to be far away as if he was not listening to anything she said. She was infuriated because she thought that he was telling her, by his disengagement, “Nothing you just said has made any impression on me”.

But whatever she said did make a huge impression on him as his later conduct showed. Unkind action and words were generally foreign to his nature, but she had succeeded in planting in his mind concerns and grievances that never existed before. Instigated by mother, he called his stepmother a vulgar woman and her daughter, a bastard. They, who despised him because he was the rightful heir, reciprocated his feeling in full measure by calling him a good-for-nothing loafer, too lazy to support his family, and a scrounger living off his good-natured father. Unhappy with his father for having ill-treated his mother and also holding him responsible for her untimely death, the son expressed himself very angrily to his father,

“Why don’t you discharge your duty to you son? In the name of the woman whose untimely death you caused, do the right thing by her son. Before she died of a broken heart, my mother told me that she gave you a considerable sum of money and jewelry that you used to set yourself up in this business. What is hers rightfully belongs to me. You have behaved wrongly and selfishly.” He paused in front of him and stared him in the face.

Hearing those harsh words, grandfather’s ears started to buzz as if a bee had got inside. He had avoided the expression of matters concerning his deceased wife to his son fearing the outcome. He was much too delicate and discreet to let his son, whom he pitied, upset him. The old man struck his palm against his forehead in absolute despair, and agonized over the dilemma he faced. He could barely rise from the chair

because his legs stiffened and lost the power of movement. His son's harsh words grew upon him in proportion to the weight of his years and infirmities. He pulled the white sarong he wore to disengage his ankles, and sank back into the recliner to rest his throbbing head upon it. He was not in good health. The doctor had been cautioning him with useless words,

"If you don't take it easy and slow down, you will be soon delivered from a job that is killing you."

Lately, he had been thinking of handing over the business to the son, but was concerned about the lack of business acumen he noticed in him. Beside, he had also to consider the interests of his spouse and her daughter. He had to keep the reins in his own hands because the two women were alone and he had no intention of leaving them in the lurch, penniless and poor. Frustrated by his predicament, the old man lost his cool. "Son, don't provoke me; if you continue to, someday you will be sorry for the consequences," he said in a discouraged, almost pleading voice while rising from the chair with effort.

"Hell, no!" replied the son, "this is the most extraordinary discourse between a father and son. How dare you threaten me with disinheritance after you have behaved so abominably toward your legitimate wife, my mother? So you think that there is no shame in what you did so long as you don't hear what people say? This is a house of ill-repute; an unfit place to bring up a family. I call it scandalous!" He broke off, but the index finger of his outstretched hand was still wagging and pointing to his father's face.

There was a pause; neither said a word for both were examining, in their minds, the damage each had so far caused; it was a long dreadful moment of silence. Father thought that he had said a great deal of what was in his troubled mind to make our mother proud; but the conversation had gotten less and less agreeable. He had arrived at a point that he had thus far avoided because he was so helpless and dependent on his father. He had said too much, far too much, but the surge of anger pushed him to say even more,

"I shall most certainly provide other living arrangements for my family as soon as I am able."

So saying, he stalked out of the room, with a quickness of step he used whether irritated or not.

It had happened! He had brought the moment to a crisis in one fit of blinding rage. Now, for the first time, he felt as if he did not belong in his father's home. In the past two years, never had he ceased to think of it other than as his parental home where he and his family had not only the right to live, but where they also received a royal welcome. He felt that he had overstayed that welcome. He had to find a job and a home for his family, both simultaneously, and as soon as possible.

The old man threw himself into the chair, unbuttoned his coat and muttered to himself over the offensive behavior of an ungrateful son upon whose family he had lavished so much love. It was clear, however, that his son's eloquence on this occasion made a deep impression on the father. A man much accustomed to conciliation, and trusting none other than his instincts in personal matters, he tried to appease the son and his family in many ways because there was guilt on his mind, and he also felt that his departure from this world was imminent. But try as he did, the feuding relatives could not be reconciled.

All extended families have some jealousy, rivalry and hatred affecting their daily lives, but his was too much to handle. Their hatred for each other, he could not subdue; nor was he successful in mollifying their suspicions of each other. Nothing he said or did could make them regain their former friendly footing. The feud between the two families came out into the open and took a decisive turn for the worse when the son and his daughter-in-law ceased to be on talking terms with his common-law wife and her daughter. They were strangers in his home. The old man was at wit's end not knowing how it would end. He knew that his son and his family had little to live upon. He knew that part of his small fortune he owed to his deceased wife. He had some secret remorse within urging him to perform some compensation toward the son. For the sake of the children whom he adored, he must make some restitution, not immediately, but at some other time.

The son's proud wife had other ideas. Should the worst befall, she reckoned, she and her children could go back home to her parents. She recalled the return of a substantial part of her dowry to the father and felt that he was duty bound to help her in time of need. One way or another, she was determined to leave her in-law's house. For the children, there were other reasons, less compelling but more relevant, to move to a new house like the one they left behind in Colombo. The thought of being cooped up in one room for much longer was most unpleasant and almost unbearable. For Alice, such deliverance was even more welcoming; she would no longer participate in the business of looking after a brood of fowls that were fattened for the table.

The war was over and we all rejoiced because our friends, the soldiers who came to the Rest House daily won the war. The nasty Japanese were vanquished, Sethu gushed. On the morning of the day appointed for the departure of the troops, a respectable crowd gathered by the roadside to cheer them off. When the soldiers took their last march along Peradeniya Road, Alice and the three of us were there to watch the troops file past in formation and in step to the resounding march played by the band in front. Like everyone else, we were holding the Union Jack in one hand and showing the index and middle fingers in victory salute. We were participating in the event in a glad-sad sort of way. The crowd was shouting thanks to the soldiers for

fighting their cause and protecting them from the enemy. Contemplating their imminent shipment back to home base, untouched by the ravages of the war that had taken the lives of many of their comrades, the soldiers were smiling and waving. The glamour of their ruddy sun-burnt faces, the tall uniformed bodies in dare-devil motion marching to the rhythm of the drum beat, memories of our war games, aroused in us a longing to be marching beside them.

“Someday when I grow up, I want to be a soldier,” I triumphantly told everybody.

“Only boys get to be soldiers,” countered C.

“Alice, I like to fight in a war. We have such good times when we play at war. Why can’t I fight in a real war when I grow up?” I persisted.

“Women can’t be soldiers, But you can be a nurse and look after the soldiers who are hurt in the war,” Alice said consolingly.

How we cheered our heroes! How heartily they grinned back showing their yellow teeth, grins even from those who never before acknowledged our humble presence because they were now returning in triumph to their country and homes.

“Imminent departure makes friends of us all,” said the sagacious Alice.

Alice was grieving because Master Bean was going out of her life. Of all the soldiers who came to the Rest House, none was more cordial and friendly than Master Bean. At first, he stood by and watched us at play. The excitement in our war games proved irresistible and he soon joined. He provided the vital link between the real war and our imaginary effort to capture it, without which it would have been mere child’ play. His participation brought a degree of realism not manifested in our prior improvisations. He was an expert in trench warfare and that knowledge he passed on to us. He taught us how to get in and out of drains during bombing raids and how to drop on our hands and swing into make-believe trenches. Master Bean gave orders, in universal sign language, to attack the enemy from the air, sea and land. It was not an easy accomplishment to move in and out of drains while lying prostrate on the ground. His quick and agile movements delighted the waiters, who wondered how a soldier could participate so heartily in children’s play. Master Bean was most endearing and welcomed because he also brought us candy.

At the moment of departure, we were separated from Master Bean by a few feet at first, but the distance increased with each passing second. We stood there by the roadside with the sense of past pleasure and the sad thought that they were no more! We waved goodbye and watched his receding form march out of our sight. Our wanderlust minds were marching beside him to board the ship and sail across the ocean to a battlefield in a distant land, while our listless bodies stood by the roadside looking on. Cheering and waving to them and being waved to, the soldiers went out of our lives. We continued to watch even after the dust stirred up by their heavy



boots had blown away. Alice talked about the futility of war, but we were broken with sadness for our lost recreation.

”Why can’t we play war games any more?” I asked.

“Don’t be silly! The war is over,” was Alice’s firm response.

I, a little abashed, let it pass uncontested.

The Rest House became a lonely place. The drop in income from lost business plunged grandfather into despair and more heartburn. It brought to a head the disease that had been slowly growing within; more dizzy spells, more headaches, more heartburn, and his stomach ailment also intensified. He saw his doctor frequently. Every morning and several times each day, he took a dose of some medication that tasted like gripe water from a bottle that had a label with a bunch of purple grapes. Enticed by the large billboard at the entrance that declared in big bold letter, “ANY TIME IS TEA TIME”, a few tourists, who might otherwise have driven by and never set foot inside the Rest House, came inside to sip a cup of the invigorating brew. Once they crossed the threshold, they, the white tourists who were mostly Australian or New Zealanders, were enticed by the seductive description of good food, the golf course, the Royal Botanical Gardens, the salubrious environment and homely comforts to spend a few days. Neither the Singhalese nor Tamil travelers were enticed by the billboard. On rare occasions when they came in, they ordered only tea, drank it slowly and moved on. Rarely, if ever, did any order a gin or whiskey or even a plate of sandwiches. When traveling away from home, the indigenous communities preferred to stay with either friends or relatives. Grandfather became rather moody and he was seen talking to himself; probably holding counsel on the bewildering subject of how to bring order to his chaotic life. No matter how hard he tried, he was unable to either resurrect the glory and income of the war days or bring peace to his warring family.

While the global war ended, the domestic war heated up and reached a boiling point. Mother was becoming more belligerent because she wanted a home of her own. She gave loud expression to bitter disgust accumulated over two years, pouring it out like the flood waters from a busted dam. She complained of lethargy and weakness in both legs and arms; even suspected the old woman of secretly poisoning her. She was, however, energized upon seeing her archenemy. The two women quarreled whenever the two men were not around to smooth ruffled feathers. Like two cocks in the same coop, they strode back and forth, with threatening postures and menacing countenances, spitting insults at each other. They disputed over money, work schedules, children, servants, food and everything that surfaced in daily living. The older woman arranged the furniture after her preference; the younger woman moved a houseplant to a different location perhaps because she liked it more that way or

perhaps out of spite. Its new location displeased the older woman who considered the move a personal affront to her authority.

“How dare you disarrange my scheme?” she challenged.

“Keep out of my way! I shall do exactly as I like and I defy you to stop me. I have every authority to do whatever I like in this house because I was not redeemed from the gutter by my husband,” was the mother’s triumphant rejoinder. Mother stung her deeply with those remarks. Because mother was so frustrated by her predicament of having to live with and suffer torment from her in-laws, she poured more scorn than was necessary for so trivial a provocation. It began as an exchange of heated words over a houseplant, but soon escalated in volume to become a battle of extended coverage, to include other family members and the servants. While mother and grandmother were engaged in this verbal combat, we, the children, appeared on the scene. Like pouring kerosene on flames, we further provoked and exacerbated the older woman’s temper by dancing about and singing at the top of our voices to drown her out whenever she started to speak.

Whenever there was a confrontation between the two women, the servants chose sides. They were waiting for the chance to cause more trouble and so enliven their dull lives. A remark thoughtlessly uttered by mother in the ubiquitous presence of a servant, was swiftly communicated to grandmother. Their insubordination to one or the other, depending on which way the wind blew and wherein the advantage would be neither woman tolerated. When the men returned, they were told so many versions of who started the fracas, who told what to whom and who suffered more from the outburst.

Friction abounded. The hostility between the two women was revealed mostly in mother’s demeanor; she was terser in her speech; laughed and smiled less; seemed less friendly to those around her and spoke little to father. She scolded us for the most trivial wrongdoings, and most worrisome to father, she was hardly eating and rapidly losing weight. She seemed tired and out of sorts. As the tensions increased, so did the fear in Alice’s heart. Under the reproachful and withering gaze of the old woman, from her biting tongue and her sharp nails, Alice suffered more than anyone else. In her presence, Alice trembled like a bowl of jelly. She either dropped the bucket of chicken feed or missed her footing and fell into the drain. The old woman shouted obscenities and Alice whispered prayers to her mother in heaven for quick deliverance one more time. She also called on the many gods to witness her plight. “I do not deserve to be harassed so. What sins have I committed in previous births and against how many to deserve so much abuse by so many and for so long? Surely, I could not have been so great a sinner!”

We were all unhappy. Alice had a logical explanation for the bitter feuds and the unhappiness within our extended family.

“The gods are angry with all of us,” she said with a sigh, “because so many beautiful birds were slaughtered every day to feed those soldiers.”

What puzzled us most was that those involved in killing and eating the chicken and goats, the cook, grandfather and everybody else, acted as if it was a perfectly natural thing to do. I had heard it said in the catholic school that I was now attending, that animals have no souls and were created by the almighty god to be eaten. Alice was indignant when we told her this.

“For shame!” she said. “We are Buddhists and you are mouthing cruel ideas that have no place in our great religion. Those nuns have no hearts; if they did, they would not leave their families behind to sail far away from their families. Don’t they know that animals suffer pain just like we do?”

I was unsure but Alice was so emphatic that for the time I was in her presence, she won me over. To me, Alice’s explanation seemed a plausible one for our plight. I was alarmed by the thought that I may also have to pay for those sins in a future life. S expressed our concerns to mother. Mother said,

“There is nothing I can do because that is how your grandfather earns his money. I wish we could move to another home where we all will be less contaminated by the sin of slaughter compounded by that of adultery. It all depends on your father. He must find a job.”

To make good things happen to our family, mother prayed to the gods, mostly Hindu gods that all Buddhists surreptitiously worship. We went to the Temple of the Tooth and to the nearby devale to seek help from the Hindu god, Vishnu. We all joined in prayers. Alice, evidenced from the rapid motion of her lips, prayed more than even mother. The kapurala, the keeper of the devale, intervening on our behalf for the consideration of the coin mother gave him, implored to Vishnu in shrill voice, “I beseech you to help this poor lady who has come from afar to ask for nothing more than a job for her husband so that the family can move out of the home of her in-laws where they now live a most contentious life. Just as the sap begins to freely flow when a majestic elephant with its long tusks gores the trunk of the rubber tree, so must her prayers to you bear fruit, I beseech thee, O, Lord Vishnu, help this unfortunate family.”

Many coins changed hands and many more entreaties by the kapurala before divine intervention occurred.

Meanwhile grandfather devised a plan to promote domestic peace and tranquility. He divided the servants into three groups: one group under his control, another under his spouse’s charge, and the third, under his daughter-in-law’s command. The three groups of servants started quarreling with each other, sparking even more disputes among the controllers. There was more dissension among the feuding parties than ever before. A pecking order, much like the one within the chicken coop erupted;

mother's servants, ranking at the bottom of that pecking order, got picked on the most. Everyone pecked Alice, who ranked the lowest within it. Alice's prayers for deliverance, louder and more strident, resounded in heaven like thunder. No longer able to ignore her prayers or put off the decision, the gods split the extended family apart, irrevocably and forever. Father found a job in partnership with a friend from his school days who owned a trucking business that ferried provisions to the tea estates in the hill country and transported the manufactured tea to the auction houses in Colombo. He moved his family to a house he bought with money he received as compensation for an accident suffered in the workplace many years ago. Mother assisted with the little savings she had accumulated in two years of free board and lodging.

News, through the mouths of the servants, informed grandfather, that his son, daughter-in-law and his precious grandchildren were ready to move out of his house. His anger was so inflamed by the secrecy in which the proceedings were carried out that he resolved not to let father take any of the furniture, or his beloved grandchildren, the toys he had gifted. The day for our departure arrived. The previous day there was unmitigated excitement about the move. The servants bustled about helping mother to pack our possessions in trunks and boxes. When the moment of parting arrived, there was so much hugging. Even though nothing had gone the way he had desired during the last two years, it seemed to us that grandfather's heart was still filled with love and gratitude for the joy that we, the little ones, had brought to his dreary and work filled life. Taking turns, we leaped into his arms and rubbed our tearful faces on his wrinkled cheeks. He hugged us closely and there were tears in his eyes. Grandfather took my little head in both his hands and kissed me on both cheeks, over and over again. Forgetting the toys we were forced to leave behind, we sang in one voice,

"Grandpa, we'll come back and visit you every day. And you must also come and see us."

"Everyday," he promised, and we let out wild cries of joy.

"Sethu, you'll come too, won't you?" asked C turning to the headwaiter who was sad to see us go.

He nodded his head because the reply got stuck in his throat. All the servants were there on the verandah to wave goodbye; but grandmother and her daughter were nowhere to be seen. Care they had taken to be at the bottom of the garden, as far away from the scene of parting, at the appointed time; but nobody missed them. Mother bustled around in rapturous joy that showed in her excited laugh, loud chatter and the smiles she bestowed on everybody. She wanted the servants to observe how happy she was and later report to the old woman and her daughter how high-spirited the occasion was. To make us feel better, grandfather said,

“I am keeping the toys here for you to play with when you come back to visit your old grandfather.”

When we whined in protest, mother intervened. She promised, with uncommon eagerness, to replace the lost toys with better ones. As the car sped away to our new home, we turned around to wave goodbye, I saw him standing there surrounded by the waiters, in a mood of despair.

Our new home, Bede’s Lodge, was located along the Kandy-Colombo Road, only about two miles from the Peradeniya Rest House; but mother established a distance that seemed like two hundred miles between the two households. Dear Alice moved out of the chicken coop into a small room in the basement of our new home, and with a lighter heart than had been within her for many years, she went about her work and pleasing one mistress. She had the happy feeling of being restored by her prayers to a more humane domain. When I think about all those events that happened in my infant years, none brings me greater joy than Alice

In response to mother’s persistent vituperations, father, though he repeatedly said that he liked nothing better than to forgive his father for the wrongs done to him and his mother, also severed relationship with his father, though at a much slower rate than mother. Our young family never attempted reconciliation with the old woman and her daughter, and moved on with our lives. We never met them thereafter.

Children of tender age can quickly forget even a doting grandfather whose gifts of toys they were made to leave behind. Almost obsessively, mother reviled the in-laws and slowly succeeded in also reducing father’s emotional dependence on his father. Responding perhaps to her disapproval, any communication between the two households completely ceased. After a while, even father stopped visiting his father because so much bad blood had exchanged in their relationship. When grandfather passed away a year later, from a stomach disorder that the doctors were unable to cure, none of the three grandchildren attended the funeral of a once beloved grandfather. So complete was the severance that even father participated only briefly in the funeral arrangements; that our mother would not attend her father-in-law’s funeral was a foregone conclusion. Who can tell whether his unfortunate illness, which the doctors were unable to diagnose, was an ailment arising from natural causes or the consequence of poisoning for which there is no treatment? Toward the end, we were told, that he could not retain even a liquid diet; he lost strength rapidly from severe vomiting and died within a matter of days. Commenting on her father-in-law’s illness and untimely death, Mother said,

“It was a sickness for which there is no cure. The old woman slowly poisoned him. But he deserves whatever he got for being so gullible and unsuspecting. Men suffer in the end because of uncontrollable passion.” The design of that crafty old woman prevailed in the end. She and her daughter benefited from his death. To father’s great

vexation he found that he had lost the coveted inheritance to the usurpers. Mother said,

“You didn’t so much as inherit a spoon or fork from the old man,”

“I don’t want to support our children with a contaminated inheritance,” responded father. “He earned it by killing so many chicken and goats.”

Not to be put off, mother said,

“How about your mother’s money; he used it in his business didn’t he?”

“How can you tell it apart? All of it was contaminated by his occupation. Beside, someday I’ll think of myself as a self-made man who created a fortune with no one’s help.”

“At the pace we’re moving, it’ll take you many lives to arrive at that stage,” she retorted.

Looking back at the events of my early childhood with the benefit of hindsight, I take comfort that our adversity was not lasting perhaps because it energized mother into counteraction for many decades thereafter. Soon after grandfather’s death, the job of managing the Rest House was offered to father; but mother did not want him to touch it with a barge pole, because it is not an edifying job, she insisted. She was mindful of the Noble Eightfold Path that Buddha had laid down to guide devotees toward Nirvana- one is right occupation. She did not want father to earn a living ordering the killing of chickens and goats and dispensing alcoholic beverage, she said, and father went along with her decision!

Fate plays cruel jokes on the gullible and innocent, and it is inexplicably cruel that fate dealt father, so kind and good a person, such a poor hand. He, by going to live with his father to enjoy the bountiful harvest while the old man lived and inherit everything he owned upon his death, became a victim of a cruel disinheritance for the second time in his life. Twice within the span of ten years, our unfortunate family lost an inheritance. Even more cruel and ironical, were the events that controlled our destiny: mother’s father willed everything he owned to his worthless sons and father’s father disinherited his only son in favor of an illegitimate daughter of his mistress by a previous alliance! In mother’s eyes her father-in-law’s treachery and betrayal of the sacred trust of parenthood were more unforgiving than her father’s because father was an only child. In her scheme of things, the son must inherit a father’s wealth. But our poor father was not so destined.

Mother often said,

“If I meet that astrologer again I’ll certainly expose him for the fraud he is. We’re still on the move, and we’ve gone far, but we haven’t inherited a cent.”

With what indifference I now recall the memory of our paternal grandfather who I loved so well with such tender heart in my early childhood. He like all the relatives of my mother had no place in our lives, did naught to sustain us when we most

needed help, never lifted a finger to help out, he like my maternal grandparents let mother, father and the three of us hang on by a mere thread as the swift currents of life carried us forward, tossing us this way and that.

I have often wondered about the bitter relationships within an extended family and what effect they had on us? What damage did the early exposure to the bad influence of family feuds, and the quarrels that were almost a daily occurrence in those impressionable years of our childhood do to our young family? Three young girls of impressionable age were exposed almost daily to the sharp and harsh exchanges between parents and children, to incendiary displays when they shouted at each other, to the bad example of disloyalty within extended families, and to ferocious actions, even of murderous intent that perhaps caused the early death of someone for the sake of an inheritance. Today when I see families coming together because of bonds that are strong and enduring, the pictures in my mind are revived again; I sigh for not being so blessed.

Alice was the only precious thing that fate or karma brought into our lives in those years. Her honesty and sense of duty made her well suited to the role of a surrogate mother in my family. How honorably she discharged it, and how self-sacrificing her performance! She was present to witness the passing away of father, mother, C and S and, in the end, assisted each to the best of her limited ability because she too had aged. Today she lives in a lovely home for senior citizens situated in the heart of Colombo 7, also known as Cinnamon Gardens, the posh suburbs of Colombo where the rich and famous reside. How often in spirit I visit her, and wish her a healthy life and the bliss of Nirvana after death!

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