

MEMORIES ON MY MIND:

Education

by

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Education

My two sisters and I attended the Good Shepherd Convent in Kandy; I, for ten long years and they, even more! Our parents believed the Irish nuns of the Good Shepherd order were good people excelling in the education of young girls while simultaneously enforcing moral values they also favored. The Convent, like so many other big schools in our town, was sex-segregated. Educators in those days thought that letting boys and girls share the same classroom would distract both from the goal of higher education. If they had only let the boys and girls weigh in their opinions on this critical issue concerning them, the classrooms would have been interesting habitats. To make matters worse for the three of us, my parents favored the Convent because none other, of the many girls' schools in our town, gave a better education to girls and, simultaneously, enforced stricter discipline, the latter much valued by tradition-bound parents like mine, especially mother. Neither nuns nor she spared the rod for fear of spoiling children, and neither allowed boys in our midst!

Even so, when I recall the experience of those school days, my heart rejoices with happy feelings of glory and triumph, because I triumphed in the presence of so many odds and hurdles I cleared. If I had given serious thought to my plight in those stress full times, I might even have trembled and tumbled into a vocational school. Looking back after the passage of fifty-plus years, it almost seems that I was being trained to live in multi-racial societies. When you work in hostile environments, you live beneath bullet-proof glass ceilings. A huge rock came crashing down as Sisyphus neared the top; likewise my efforts were sometimes rendered fruitless, but I persisted. Fortunately, in those days I was sheltered within my family. Often, when I came to a crossroad, I was also pushed forward by instinct or a young girl's intuition along a path randomly chosen, not knowing whether I would ever reach goals I dreamed of. Now, in retrospect, it even seems a predestined force was compelling me along the chosen path and, therefore, none was randomly taken although it may have seemed so at the time. There is in everyone's destiny an element of luck. I use the word 'luck' because it is the least controversial; believers in divine intervention in a person's destiny would not quarrel because their view god was on my side; nor would Buddhists who believe that in the genetic code I inherited there is a DNA associated with karmic law of causal effect. Buddhists and Hindus have long believed that our genetic constituents include genes inherited from our ancestors and those transmitted from previous births. Both would attribute my success to good deeds accumulated in prior births. I like to

think so too, because I am empowered; I made things happen in my life either by doing good deeds in a previous life or making the right decisions in this one. I am in charge and control even in those tender years because I had or inherited a wise mind and tough constitution that toughened even more in later years.

The Good Shepherd Convent in Kandy, the school my sisters I attended, is more spacious, decorous and ornate than the typical high school in the United States. The many solid buildings are constructed on different levels in the side of the mountain, Bahirawa Kanda, all linked together by sharply rising stairways or steps and even a little bridge.



Good Shepherd Convent, Kandy

I remember the times I would gaze admiringly upon those buildings of imposing appearance standing scenically in the sunlit air under clear blue skies. The setting was also tranquil; much more then because population pressure on land and resources were not as severe.

British colonialism left behind an unintended legacy, the English language; it connected me to the world by its unifying force. I became a citizen of the world. It transmitted science, and technology to millions around the world. It lifted the curse of Babel; it became and still is the language of international commerce and trade enabling the flow of trade between countries as never before. It spread capitalism and destabilized totalitarian regimes that existed prior to conquest; it empowered and ennobled individuals like me of Indian descent by grafting democratic traditions onto

existing feudal societies. It spread liberal democratic ideas and undermined the inequalities created by the caste system. And though this was never intended, it also re-energized religions like Buddhism and Hinduism that were undermined by Brahmins before the British came.

The rapid economic development of the colonies in the British Empire took place mainly within an educational framework supplied by Christian schools. The colonial government wanted people they governed to be well versed in English, and in the traditions and customs of the British so the colonies could be governed with least impediment and the youth educated within qualified to fill the many vacancies that arose in the civil service, financial institutions and trading houses. The Christian evangelical movement that followed British colonization grafted Christianity on to English education system giving credence to the cynical statement that the bible follows the sword. In those days, Kandy Convent was headed and administered by a coterie of Irish nuns whose main purpose was also to introduce the Catholic faith to heathens of the conquered nation. They had it all settled in their minds. English education was the respectable medium they chose, the Trojan horse from which Catholicism filtered down into young minds in their charge.



Nuns at prayer

The demand for an English education, then in fashion, made the daunting task of converting Buddhists and Hindus far easier than it would otherwise have been. And Christian churches were almost as effective as the East India Company for transferring wealth out of the colonies; the former to the hierarchical churches in Europe, and the latter to the “motherland”. While British imperialism ceased after independence and Britain was no longer

able to impose its will on our people, it left Christian educational institutions like the convents of the Good Shepherd order scrambling for advantages with the help of converts who held high office; they still survive albeit with less luster and power.

At first glance it may even seem that my school curriculum was more a calculated response to needs of the colonial government than to motives of the Catholic Church. It included classes in English language, English literature, English poetry, British history, European history, Western music, Western song and dance; but catechism and bible study, were also included and religious festivities and functions associated with the Catholic faith occupied a great deal of our time during and after school hours.

Underprivileged Ceylonese whose families could not afford school fees and those of lower castes converted to Christianity in order to enjoy the benefits of a free education available only to poor Christian children. To the extent that public funding was available to those fee levying denominational schools, the majority community of Buddhists were facilitating and even paying for their own conversion! To reassert Buddhist influence on education, two schools, Dharmaraja College for boys and Mahamays College for girls were established in Kandy; their curriculum designed like other English schools in town except neither an evangelical mission nor a reverential approach to an alien faith; both provided knowledge according to western traditions to Buddhist children. They were pioneer institutions venturing into a hitherto untrodden field; both, understandably dwarfed by Christian schools receiving international support; neither had the clout nor prestige they have today.

During the time Catholics were immersed in Bible study, non-Catholics of Kandy Convent were herded into another class for the study of ethics. Its curriculum was not designed to encompass moral and ethical conduct of Indian culture that flourished long before Christianity; nor did it include any discourse on customs governing the interaction between parents, gurus, the sangha and youth of Indian heritage; rather, it transferred the life-style of upper class British to transform natives into pukka sahibs. I learned western manners and etiquette in those ethics classes. Even today I fold the serviette (napkin) neatly after I use it, and place it beside my plate if I plan to stay as an overnight guest; however, if it is the only meal I partake in the house of my hosts, then I leave a disheveled serviette beside my plate to indicate that it is ready to be washed. I learned how to eat with knife and fork and eat soup (not drink it) from the side of the soup spoon.

“Always tilt the soup plate away from you to scoop up the last bit; never toward you!”

I learned how to lay (set) the dining table with fine tableware. I learned to say, “please” and “thank you” when appropriate. “Don’t talk while your mouth is full or while you chew! Swallow whatever you have in your mouth before you talk! Keep your elbows off the table! Don’t slouch forward in your chair! Don’t belch in company; you don’t have to show your host how much you enjoyed the meal by belching! It’s ugly and it’s rude! Sit upright in your chair; keep your feet and knees together, and your hands folded together on your lap!” By learning all these fine refinements of upper class English society, we thought we would turn into beautiful swans!

As I said before, Christianity formed the backdrop against which knowledge spread, and the dissemination of democratic ideas occurred. We were exposed to so much Catholicism in Kandy Convent that my parents and similar minded fearing proselytism, formed a Buddhist society, the Maha-Nuwara Kulangana Bauddha Samitiya; its main purpose being to operate a Sunday school for Buddhist girls and boys who attended Christian schools. Every Sunday morning my sisters and I were bussed to Sunday school in the company of other Buddhist girls from Kandy Convent, Girl’s High School and Hillwood and boys from St. Sylvester’s College, Trinity College, Kingswood College and St. Anthony’s. I awaited the approach of those Sundays with excitement and longing because it was the only day of the week when boys and girls came together: the boys rode the bus with girls, even sat next to each other in the bus, jostling and shoving each other for coveted places beside a heart-throb. For the duration of that bus ride, girls’ gaze was locked on the boys while tittering at their stupid jokes. The purpose of the Sunday school intervened to modify if not erase passions that sprouted in our volatile minds. One of the five precepts droned into our ears throughout that day was to steer clear of lust full pleasures. Our diligent Sunday school teacher, a longtime widow of impeccable morality, taught us to follow the noble eight-fold path of right action, right speech, right thought, and so on. She said that the Buddha concentrated so well that he was even oblivious to the provocative displays of Maraya’s (personification of Death) three lust full daughters. Even though, at the time, we understood no more about right thinking than animals in heat, our longings did not translate into romance. Fifty-plus years later when boys no longer matter, how grateful I am today to Sir Bennet Soysa and his wife, the indefatigable Lady Soysa, founders and benefactors of our Sunday school, for our early exposure to Buddhism, a religion that empowers individuals and frees them from a dogmatic assumption of divine intervention in salvation. In my home and in that Sunday school, I learnt that there is no god to save me. Nirvana, the end of self or the state of not being can be achieved only by my effort. I

must peel away the petals of delusion from the lotus of life to reveal the jewel of Nirvana within:

“Om Mane Padme Hum.”

It is a religion of love and compassion toward all living things. To gain more control over my restless mind, I meditated daily to overcome the mind’s tendency to roam.

Dhammapada, a Buddhist scripture, I knew well at the time, contained the moral code to guide me toward Nirvana.

“May all living things be free from pain, illness, and suffering,” is the last thought of the day before I doze off to a restful night. Because of an early exposure to the doctrines of Buddhism, I learned to tread lightly upon the earth.

The implementation of the Convent’s curriculum contained an unwritten prohibition that, I believed, was tantamount to a subversion of indigenous languages. We were not allowed to speak our mother tongues within confines of the Convent! It was a tough order to follow because my mother spoke no English and my inclination to speak in Sinhalese was ordained by that need; also it came naturally to me because it was my mother tongue. “How can you learn English when you keep talking in Sinhalese?” they rebuked. My first venture into English was as descriptive as it was comical: “That girl tennis court fall down.”

I had put the relevant words together in no particular order, just as I would if this critical bit of information was communicated in my own language.

Any grievance we felt upon being denied the right to speak in our mother tongue was tempered by shame of not being able to speak the language of our conqueror. In consequence we, of our generation, learned to speak and write English so well that many now do so far better than the average college student in the United States!

I started my school career in 1942, while my country was still under British colonial occupation. At that time, decisions relating to political, cultural, educational and social matters were still being outsourced to the white government overseas, white churches overseas, to white dominated government institutions within Ceylon, or to clubs within where sahibs and pukka sahibs, often inebriated and possibly swaggering, congregated for nightly professional and social intercourse. Several students, especially those in the limelight or those who occupied a place in the sun were predominantly of European or Euro-Asian descent. The Irish nuns appeared to form camaraderie with their parents because of a common religious-cultural background and also their economic power under British colonial administration. They were among the large regiment of colonial

professionals enticed to colonies by job prospects available exclusively to them and not to native inhabitants of Ceylon. In the hill country, where we lived, those occupations were mostly associated with the business of tea production. But among the large coterie of white parents there were estate superintendents, engine drivers, shop managers veterinarians, dentists, and doctors. Because of their identification with the Europeans, a family headed by a white engine driver had the power that an indigenous family of similar professional background did not. They lorded over the natives. Even those of lesser socio-economic status and consequence in the country from where they came, were lords of life in our midst; their whiteness was distinctive! Wherever the British went, among the first institutions they created was the professional club that brought together whites of similar background, ostensibly for purpose of discussing common purpose and for streamlining objectives. In Kandy, the best known was the Planters' Club, and in Colombo, the capital city, the highly visible, Orient Club, elitist outposts in the colonies that practiced British snobbery. In the beginning, those clubs, by limiting membership to their own kind, entrenched the purpose of colonial subjugation and exclusivity. During the heyday of colonialism, only whites congregated within. The non-whites allowed inside swept floors or tidied rooms or mixed drinks to serve their lords, often in gratuitous subservience. In the early forties, when I was just beginning my schooling, political power was being shared between British and the indigenous community. An important outcome of shared political power was that social institutions like Planters' Club and Orient Club became a little more inclusive in their membership. The rich and famous of the indigenous community, the nouveau riche, and those who were on the top rung of the social ladder were also admitted. The British had successfully created, within former colonies, an indigenous class of Pukka Sahibs who owed allegiance to the British crown and felt smugly superior to everyone else! Because of these political changes, privileged students in my time also included some from indigenous communities who had political and economic clout. Being included among the favored meant that they were the lucky few among Buddhists; and for them doors opened quite wide. The nuns of the Convent played favorites. The most favored were the students who came from rich white families; and the least were the nondescript, non-Catholic, non-white. There was even a difference in greetings that I used to witness; the latter greeted somewhat coldly and the privileged with excessive cordiality. At the time I watched those differences with fait accompli. I was in some sense a sacrificial lamb grazing on a watershed. So much was expected from me because my parents believed that the only way

to occupy a place in the sun was by educating my mind. They believed that it could be done only if I worked harder and still harder; they did not know how difficult it was to climb the educational, social and professional ladder when so handicapped. My parents gave us opportunities as best they could and expected us to reach the stars. All in all, colonial rule created so many hurdles for indigenous youth of my generation to clear. We were disadvantaged in our own country because of its conquest by an alien nation. In denominational schools in those days, girls like me had three crosses to bear: we were non-white, we were Buddhist children in a Catholic school; and even within our community, my family did not have the high economic status that, in any feudal or capitalist society, ownership of land or people or both bestow. My father was not a rich man; that too was a high hurdle to overcome. These were the issues that divided me from them and I could do nothing about them; they were there to stay. Looking back, I am amazed that I cleared the hurdles they created as well as I did. It was because of the timely transfer out of the Kandy Convent. More of that episodic event will come later!

Ceylon obtained independence from British rule in 1948, but for many years following independence, pre-colonial designs prevailed. Educational institutions like the Catholic Convents, heavily subsidized by the public treasury, were not impacted by the changes in the political structure that occurred in 1948 because policy changes in funding of educational institutions only came in the mid-1950's by which time my school career was nearly over. As I mentioned before, the educational framework for the development of Ceylon in as an important entrepot port, trading and financial center of the vast British Empire was put in place by Christian educational institutions. Because of them we learned the speech, manner, life and style of our conquerors. Within the framework of an English education, western cultural heritage was transmitted to us. Like a prolonged baptismal, we were thoroughly immersed in it. To wipe out the neglect of indigenous culture that happened during British colonialism, after Independence in 1948, Sri Lankan politicians legislated a policy of "Sinhala Only" believing as wrongly as the British that one language cannot co-exist with another. In approximately thirty years, between the sunset on the British Empire and sunrise on United States' global commercial domination, I who was under the tutelage of Irish nuns in the Convent in Ceylon and others like me, became strangers in my own country. We went fleeing to four corners of the globe to escape the wrath of a new army of oppressors. In my mind, like scenes from a documentary video filmed on location, are memories of my school days. Now, they flash before my eyes as real as they were in those

days. Seeing them, I still experience the joys of victory, pain of defeat, frustration of encountering insurmountable hurdles, and the rivalry and team spirit I experienced then in the company of friends and my family. I remember my upbringing; I recall with such clarity events, things and people that made me who I am. Education was the mission and purpose that energized my young mind although I was not aware of it much of the time. I loved more to be in the company of my friends and enjoy the fun of friendship. Even so, sometimes I pursued the educational goals my parents had set with frenzy because I wished to share the burden that my mother carried. The place at the top of my class was hard to achieve and keep. I bring to life many friends, as youthful as they were, all in early or mid-teens: Leone, walking about with agile gait tossing a head-full of golden, shoulder-length Shirley Temple curls that fell over her temple, below her chin, and around her head; sweet, serene, gentle and much envied. She had two sisters, attention getters as well, Charmaine, the older and Fleur, the younger. And there was Sumana, who sang in a dreamy way, in gorgeous soprano voice, “O. wandering one....” in our performance of **The Pirates of Penzance**, a role she, a darker complexioned Sinhalese would not have won except that it commanded her incomparable voice.



The Pirates of Penzance

I also recall vain Moira, a first class boarder and the cynosure of all eyes, imposing and attractive as a western movie star. She always had many underlings in tow; the nuns too favored her for being rich, a first class boarder, good looking and of first generation European descent. Then there was Dorothy of a lower order (“She’s a third class boarder who sweeps drains before she comes to school,” we whispered) with decaying teeth,

runny nose and unkempt hair, a cross the nuns bore in their mission to educate young minds. Unforgettable is Sneha always first in her class and also comical. They laughed with her because she was very witty, and laughed at for looking like Eddie Jayamana, a well-known comedian in those days. We all loved to rally around because there was so much fun in her company. Beryl, incorrigible and inattentive in class, often the cause of inattention in others, sometimes thrown out of the class for being too disruptive or for not bringing her homework. I was her secret admirer because she did things that I dared not except under her protective arm or hidden behind her spacious back. On few occasions, we both spent class time supporting the wall of the hallway outside the classroom, hoping that the principal, vicious Mother St. Peter would not happen to come by. Enid, rather pretty and coy, much admired by boys because an older brother attended Trinity, the exclusive prep school for boys in our town. And then there was irrepressible Maureen, of Euro-Asian descent, a link between “them” and “us”. She was fair of complexion; not as fair as those of direct European descent; she had brown hair and cat’s eyes. Her Sinhalese last name revealed her ethnicity. Behind her back, we said, “That’s how you look when your parents crossed the great divide.” They all survive, unchanged in my mind, in a state of permanent adolescence; lively, joyful, exuberant, competitive, athletic, immature; oftentimes happy, sometimes sad, but forever young because I have not seen them since. The faces are mostly adorned with smiles and laughter; occasionally, distorted by hate, treachery, horror, scorn and anger. Where are they all now? Fifty- plus years later, many may not be among the living. We wore white uniforms with two box pleats at either side of the waist, a white striped blue tie around the shirt fronted neckline, black shoes, white socks, and blue ribbon to secure braided hair. Neither make-up nor jewelry was allowed.

Before the start of each school day, we waited outside the assembly hall, Catholics in one formation and non-Catholics in another, in immaculate order, one behind the other, scrambling for places next to friends, then silent and attentive, until marshal sounds of the march played by Miss Lobo, one of our music teachers, summoned us inside for daily prayer recitation and announcements. And then, into the stately hall with vaulted ceiling and arched windows in the style of those in cathedrals, we marched, two by two, entering through two separate doors: Catholics through the main door in front opening out to a covered portico under which Miss Anghie’s small Austin Seven was parked, and non-Catholics through a much smaller back door. The principal, Mother Saint Peter, an Irish nun, led recitation of the

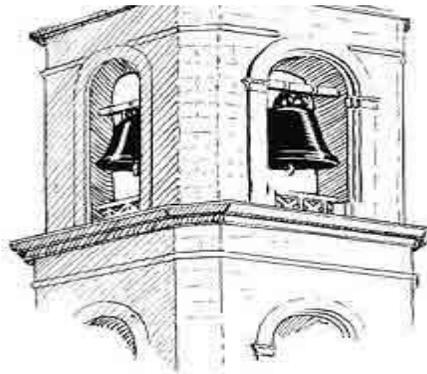
Lord's Prayer from the wooden stage, in stern and severe fashion as she had for years. Voices of the chosen rose in unison, boring but hurried, *"Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil for evermore, Amen."*

The Lord's Prayer was everywhere; even non-Christian minds were full of it. It thundered down from the stage, echoed up the stairs, along the corridors and into the classrooms. Days, weeks, months and years of even divided attention given to these daily recitations made an indelible impression on young non-Catholic minds; perhaps that was the intention. I can recite the Lord's Prayer with one breath of inhaled air! Catholic students participated, in total sublimation or with cursory interest, in a ritual that was insisted upon by the Good Shepherd order. After Hail Mary and singing of several Latin hymns, orders and commands designed to impart discipline to disorderly minds, binding on both Catholics and non-Catholics alike, were given in the same severe and stern voice.

The envoy of God I disliked most, Mother St. Peter, donned from head to toe in black and white, commanded the stage and her voice droned in my ear. While she was preoccupied with a sermon on sin, my roving eyes swept the long hall that seemed like a picture gallery, the walls hung with paintings mostly of soothing pastoral life, done by an artistic alumnus. Those paintings compelled my attention.

There were things to be observed in those paintings of far more interest than the sermon on sin. I recreated each painting inserting things that I wished those paintings had. Now, I wonder how much of the description I recall here is drawn from my fertile imagination. A stream cascaded down a steeply banked rock formation into a turbulent pool where white water crashed against the black rock; trees, bushes and ferns, their leaves glimmering with wetness, drooped over the white water. On a grassy patch in the foreground perhaps there were two mallards poised to take-off; and against the blue sky, more mallards in flight. Was there another painting of mother and child, both wearing long white dresses and straw hats, seated in a meadow amidst thousands of white daisies, watching rabbits and birds foraging in the grass- a scene of beauty disfigured by the knowledge that the child is blind. Or did I see that in our textbook, The Highroads of Literature? Even the painting of a somber sea ravaged by high white crested waves, a deserted sandy cove strewn with seaweed, and a black cliff rising up to a gray sky spotted with seagulls in flight may be a recollection of a picture I saw elsewhere. The backdrop of the stage from which Mother St. Peter led

the Assembly was a breathtaking forest scene of massive oak trees with branches interlocking to form a dark canopy above, except in one spot through which rays of sunlight filtered to light up a patch of ground thick with rust colored leaf-mold. In the center stood an alerted deer, its frightened head raised imperiously above the grazing ground, ready for take-off if further threatened. Here too recall may be embellished with detail that the forest scene may not have had. But of this I am absolutely certain: the green velvet curtain in front of the stage was swept back to the sides and held in place by golden chords with tassels at both ends. This same assembly hall was the venue of our year-end concerts.



A startling bell rang on the hour from eight in the morning until three in the afternoon, five days a week. A chosen pulled the rope that hung down from a rafter to which the bell was tethered. It shared the space at one time with an enormous beehive; the hive resurrected itself even after periodic removal! With cruel punctuality the bell summoned us to school, prayer, sport activities, dance, choir practice, and into various classrooms where we learned English literature, English grammar, languages, science, mathematics, arts and crafts from gifted teachers recruited from within the country or overseas. I, like all the other students, passed each day in calm or restless pursuit of our studies and in several extra-curricular activities planned and ordered by nuns.

My two sisters and I, sang in the school choir. On Wednesday morning, soon after general assembly, choir practice began. We sang as many songs as time permitted from our repertoire of English classical and even American folk songs like the Little Brown Jug. Miss Lobo played the piano and Mrs. Mackey conducted choir. My mind is full of the words and music of one of those spirited songs I sang every Wednesday morning during chorus time. It was my favorite song and the signature tune I hummed for several days until another took its place:

*“Come away elves while the dew is sweet,
Come to the dingle where the fairies meet;
Know that the lilies have spread their bells,
All over the pools in the forest dells;
Come, come away,
Come, come away,
Come! Come away!”*

Louder and louder, sweeter and sweeter, we sang the happy refrain in eager voices summoning the enchanted folk to our presence, wishful that our loud welcoming would lure them upon shimmering wings to our presence.

Exquisite were synchronized voices of happy children singing one song after another: From The Woodlands, Loch Lomond, My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose, So Deep is the Night, Danny Boy; Irish Eyes are Smiling, and It’s a Long Way to Tipperary. Many more songs flowed rapturously from children’s eager voices; tenor, soprano, and alto, blending together with delightful resonance. We sang about places we had never seen, people as foreign as the nuns who ran our lives, and events more exciting for being imagined than real.

So successful were the little choristers that we were called upon to perform **Gilbert and Sullivan** operas for the year-end concerts, a different opera each year. To ensure the success of an ambitious undertaking, a singing nun was summoned from Ireland to train our young voices.

“I don’t want to hear any nasal sounds, please. Sing from deep down here,” she admonished while placing her hand on the large white collar that fell over her well-robed chest from facial wraps that nuns of the Good Shepherd order wore. To demonstrate the difference between guttural and nasal sounds, she bent forward ever so slightly and sang with great emotion and gusto, showing the full extent of her talent for singing sonorously to a captive audience of mostly snickering young girls.

The end of year concert was a much-awaited event by students and parents alike. Five other girls and I, of almost equal height, dressed in yellow, brown and gold, fluttered about the stage on tiptoe, trying to simulate the airy-fairy quality of autumn leaves. We flitted up and down and diagonally across, back and forth and from side to side, rising gracefully in the air and whirling across the stage like leaves caught in a wind gust, swirling our arms this way and that; pirouetting and gliding across the wooden floor with outstretched arms, in synchronized movements of arms, legs and feet, while a spotlight chased our shifting shadows on the wall. Autumn was a phenomenon that neither the other five girls nor I had ever seen, but we all did what we were

told to do and our dance sequence was an epitome of harmony and grace. As the musical accompaniment slowed down and dropped several octaves indicating the finale, we fell in a communion of effort and lay perfectly still on the floor, without the slightest movement of arm, leg or even a finger, just like fallen leaves without the wind to stir us up, until the curtain was fully drawn to shut out the audience from our view. The hall below the stage was thronged with parents and well-wishers. When the curtain was raised, six exhausted dancers rose to their feet. We stood before a cheering crowd, acknowledging the thunderous applause with deep bows. We had won the hearts of all with our impeccable performance. My eyes searched the multitude of faces for the two dear to me; the spectacled gentleman and the prim and proper lady seated by his side. How proud father and mother were of me, their daughter on stage!

On stage, away from the sight of the audience below, was the upright piano that provided the musical accompaniment for our choral performance. Later, beautiful sounds poured forth from mouths of little choristers that included my sisters and I to stir the souls of many in the audience. Some, like father, closed their eyes to enjoy a deep emotional experience and to better transport themselves to enchanted lands heralded in the songs; others, like mother, not feeling any pleasure from the singing, and not understanding a word of it, stared vacantly at the stage. Even so, she too was a satisfied and proud witness to an event where her daughters poured out their heart in happiness. One song after another, we sang in children's eager voices. A few discordant notes may have emerged from the lips of some excited choristers, but the partial audience would not have scrupled to say so. There on the stage, a short while later, a girl dressed as Rumpelstilskin danced triumphantly around an imaginary fire made of gold paper and red tissue, confident that the beautiful girl that he had helped to turn straw into gold as the king demanded, would never find out his name.

Behind the stage on which we danced the Irish Jig, whirled about like autumn leaves, advanced in rhythmic steps with a flashlight in hand for the **Torch Dance**, where we ranted like pirates in the **Pirates of Penzance**, there was the Green Room in which stage sets and costumes were stored. It was a windowless room equipped with tables, shelves and cupboards. What a treasure trove of paraphernalia this small room contained! Bells, cymbals, horns, flutes, triangles, castanets, drums and other percussion instruments to create a gamut of noise that brought joy to young hearts. In wooden chests and cardboard cartons, there were gossamer-like gowns and silken ballet shoes, belts, ribbons and bows to transform us into fastidious form. How joyful those times when my friends and I dressed up as fairies, elves,

goblins, gypsies or pirates and pranced about to the noise of castanets and drums! How hard we tried to get our shapeless feet into tiny silk ballet shoes!

We passed each day in noisy pursuit of learning, suffering with loud complaint to each other, beyond the hearing of nuns and teachers, of course. Many teachers, like Miss Murtiss and Miss Anghie, had a passion for teaching; perhaps they were marked in the cradle the minute they were born to become teachers in a convent; both were remarkable teachers and only the best were admitted to their classes. But their knowledge was mostly imparted in unkind and sometimes cruel manner. Even the best among us fumbled, stuttered and stammered in their presence. The students dreaded Miss Murtiss even more than they did Miss Angie. Miss Murdress was how they referred to her behind her back; but the parents favored her more than any other because she worked miracles with the dumbest student.

“She is wicked,” we all agreed. We trembled in her presence and mocked her when out of her sight.

“This is how she shouts,” scorned Beryl screaming at the top of her loud voice, “Out, out, out of my class. Don’t you dare come back without my permission!”

In those days teachers like her, and there were many, especially among the nuns of the Good Shepherd order, believed that knowledge and good humor were mutually exclusive properties to be kept in separate domains and never displayed together in the classroom; otherwise, a lifetime of ignorance would follow. School counselors, principals, teachers and even some parents thought that knowledge must be imparted with stern stricture, never with kindness. We were confronted with new knowledge rendered in environments disallowed today because such harshness it is widely believed spoils a child’s self-esteem and may even cause neuroses. In those days we learned to leave our high spirits at the door, and not let fun enter the classroom. We all rose together when teachers entered the classroom and shouted out our greetings in one voice, no one carried out of fear. When the bell rang upon the hour to announce that class was over, no one left until the teacher had exited and was down the hallway and nearly out of sight. At the end of the school year if we earned an A-grade from either Miss Murtiss or Miss Anghie, we were elated and wanted the whole world to know.

There were also a few teachers whose only function, it seemed, was to bore us to death; notoriously so was Mother St. Paul, our roly-poly math teacher. She was a school legend. We all thought that she was not qualified in algebra and geometry, the subjects she was assigned to teach seniors. She was less gifted in mathematics than some of her students. “Far better at

mind those pink pigs that look so much like her”, we ridiculed, her assignment after school hours. It seems to me upon recall that all she ever did in the classroom was read out aloud a theorem from the geometry book, and write it out painstakingly on the chalkboard. She could not relate the rider to the theorem it was based upon to institute the proof. The right angles and sides of a rectangle were pointed out as though we were blind and could not see them in the text. She concealed her ignorance in incomprehensible mutter; rebuked the brightest and listened only to the lesser. The abler students, swift at solving problems at the end of each chapter, were never called to the chalkboard; she summoned the lesser that barely understood the subject. One day when the lesson was so boring, some half-listening and others dozing, uninvited by Mother St. Paul I rushed to the chalkboard, and ably assisted by my friends who knew the solution, wrote it out, step by simple step, for all to see. Mother St. Paul managed to stammer, “Thank you. Well done!”

I took a deep bow while wiping imaginary sweat from my forehead in a display of ridicule.

That affected pose produced a paroxysm of laughter from the mostly disengaged class. Those who were asleep awakened to inquire, and finding out the cause, also broke into laughter and derisive comment. She had to discipline me. I was ordered out of the class for disrupting its proceedings. “Why me?” I asked. “It was they who laughed. All I did was to solve the problem on the board.”

“Out! Out!” cried Mother St. Paul, hurling the eraser she used to wipe the chalkboard.

“Go! Go!” shouted some of the students. My friends watched in stupefied silence afraid of being asked to accompany me. I was confused because I had forfeited the good opinion of my fickle classmates.

With gritted teeth we endured Mother St Paul for a whole school year, while doing battle with her during every class period and waiting impatiently for each period to end, with resoluteness of nuns who also had many crosses to bear.

Students loved Mother St. Collette, even those who did not read Latin, or English literature, subjects she taught. I remember most her gift of subdued laughter, and her gentleness. Her presence gave to life within the Convent civility, refinement, and good cheer. Some students would willingly have worshipped the ground she walked upon. She was tall and very good-looking. Even in the black and white habit she wore she walked elegantly unlike the other nuns in the Convent who mostly waddled. Why she chose to become a nun was a mystery, cause for wonder, and invited frequent

speculation among students. Perhaps she had suffered greatly, and even though the emotional hurt healed, she renounced the pleasures of life and sought refuge in a nunnery. Rumors abounded; some said that she was jilted; and others, the more devout Catholics said that divine voices commanded her to Christ.

The day finally came for a confrontation and sounding of our curiosity. Kamala warmed into sufficient courage and asked, “Why did you become a nun? Tell us about your life before you were ordained.”

Perhaps her sense of propriety was irritated by our inquiry that it overcame her constitutional primness or she hid a story within that she dared not express, and as waves of recollection swept over, she lowered her eyes, her face aflame from embarrassment. More likely it was her anger at our intrusive behavior; her fingers trembled as they swiftly turned pages of **Cicero’s Pro Milone**. She tried to read a Latin sentence from the text, but her voice faltered. And without another word, she rose from the chair, walked across the room and looked out of a window that overlooked the driveway leading to the Convent from the main road as though she doubted her ability to hold back tears. She stood there, her eyes fixed on something outside, her arms hanging by her side. Having gained composure, she returned to her seat. Even though she had difficulty sustaining her normal voice, pretended not to remember what we wanted to know and continued to read as if nothing had happened. She did not explain to the waiting audience why she journeyed halfway across the world concealing her beauty and potential beneath a hideous garb, and why she cared so little now for things of the world that excited our adolescent minds. Her silence was unsettling; it was too important a matter to be let alone, and our fertile imaginations went to work. Without corroboration or denial of the many stories that were circulating, we embellished the one that Sneha spun. It created in our minds prone to exaggeration, fanciful visions of bittersweet romance, crashed hopes and raging battlefields for which we all had secret passion.

“She is a martyr to an undying love,” said Sneha in sober voice. “Ten days after her engagement to this dashing young pilot, he flew to France to fight Germans,” she paused awhile allowing us time to create a raging battlefield in our field of vision. Then she dropped the bombshell! “Two weeks later, the plane he was piloting, was shot down by those damn Nazis. He was killed instantaneously!”

“Blown to a thousand bits,” I corroborated hurriedly to the eager and credulous listeners. “The plane or the pilot?” asked a concerned Sumitha in muffled voice. Before I could reply, Sneha answered,

“Both. Plane and pilot. When news of his death reached home, his fiancée plunged into a deep sorrow. She was broken by grief. She fell to the ground in a fainting fit and lay in a coma for many days. When somewhat recovered, and before her wounded heart completely healed, she entered the Convent affirming an undying love for her sweetheart now embodied in Christ. She learned to live without love, to lead a joyless life in that drab outfit, to look upon the beauties of the world indifferently, and to console herself with prayer.”

I think we believed Sneha’s story because it was incomparably heart rending, extravagantly sensational and fastidiously romantic; it had the power to create terrible images of death and destruction that adolescent minds seek and eagerly receive. The story traveled from moth to mouth gathering more detail and different arrangements of the thrilling events as it moved along. No matter how differently the story was spun, it produced the same reaction: How could the loss of a sweetheart compel someone so beautiful to renounce the world and undergo the pain and suffering of ordained life? “Why, O why,” we asked each other, “Would the loss of a lover lead one so dazzlingly beautiful to a career and life more gloomy than a moonless night when there are no stars above to light up the dark sky? Why, O why, would someone so lovely heap such misery upon herself when there are so many gold fish in the sea?”

Mother Holy Cross, a big, fearsome nun, taught me in elementary school, but I was more fearful of Mother St Peter, the principal who had a special aptitude for saving unholy lives. Some students even swore that they heard her discourse with the devil, and from it, sought guidance and learnt vicious ways. Mother St. Peter’s strident voice descended on us like the crack of a whip startling even the most brazen and rambunctious. Upon sighting her, those with agile step ran away, leaving a few with fumbling step, to face the holy terror. In her towering presence, beneath her unblinking eyes, they huddled close to one another, petrified into motionless things. She examined each from head to toe, peered into their faces with penetrating eye, and pounced upon a hapless one for a sinful omission;

“Where is your tie?” the righteous voice thundered, ferocity compounding the pitch of voice.

“Mother, please...I forgot... It’s at home. Yesterday I spilled ink on it. My mother washed it last evening but it wasn’t dry this morning.” a supplicating and terrified girl explained in whining voice.

There was proper punishment for that kind of unpardonable sin.

“Always ready with lame excuse. I don’t believe a word of what you said. Don’t you or your mother know how to dry the tie with a hot iron? Don’t

you have the slightest bit of shame to come ill attired to school? Stay after school and write a hundred times, 'I will wear my tie to school everyday'. I warn you, if I see you again without the tie, you'll be sent home," she continued to yell.

Nuns like her demanded complete obedience, enforced strict discipline and accepted no excuses. They believed that they were molding children to a way of life that was god-ordained. Never did school authorities get stuck in a nightmare of appeasing either defiant students or their irate parents. Neither did nuns feel obliged to convert to ways of students nor feel compelled to adapt to their changing lifestyles. It would have taken the sighting and order from the heavenly father to change those commandments they so severely enforced. The dirigible young minds in their charge were gradually perfected in a way of life nuns believed in. Children brought up in that convent setting observed Victorian proprieties as though they were the essence of life, and the only solid foundation of knowledge and a civilized society.

Sometimes when I see a picturesque school I am reminded of Kandy Convent. Behind the school, church, nunnery and playground is Bahirawakanda- the hill of Baharawa, the demon. Many stories circulated among students of how Bahirawa abducted maidens and killed wayfarers; but our passion for adventure led us along footpaths winding between wild flowers and the dense wilderness of elephant grass, the more timid following footsteps of the brave, to Bahirawakanda where there was enchantment of imagined devilry. Neither tales of demon sightings nor of ghostly encounter deterred even the most timid from heeding summons from the brave. We had to see it all! What a beautiful sanctuary it was for birds, butterflies and all kinds of insects! How joyously we inhaled the air scented with smells of grass and flowers! We crawled through elephant grass, bitten by ants and pricked by bramble; quaking at the slightest sound, even if was only the wind rustling trees; holding each other's hand for inspiration and comfort, our keen eyes seeing so much, mostly inconsequential things like wild flowers that we gathered to play stupid games like, "He loves me; he loves me not". We popped the heads of single stemmed flowers to see how far they soared and depending upon the launch our love was affirmed or denied by a chorus of voices. Glowing with passion and longing for our first love, we danced beneath the trees as if in a trance, taking delight in imaginary unions of mutual adoration, grander for being imagined than real, shouting out poetic hyperbole to express our wonder and joy, with such intense passion of longing in our pleas.

*“Dearest, come to me!
Dearest, hear! Oh hear!”*

One tree in that sanctuary attracted more attention than most. In season, its leaves were covered with beetles of iridescent color: blue, green and traces of red and gold. During the morning recess, when the sun was just beginning to brighten up the landscape below, the surface of nearly every leaf on that tree rippled and sparkled into myriad points of light. I collected the largest and most colorful beetles in empty matchboxes, took them home, and tried to feed them on leaves from the same tree, but none ate and none survived. More and many more insects were harvested; it was the love of beauty that compelled this harvest of extermination. I hoped to preserve their gorgeous rainbow like beauty forever and watch their metamorphosis into things of even greater beauty.

My friends and I waited impatiently for the lunch hour to stroll in Bahirawakanda that in our eyes was atop the world. We stayed well within the parameters of school property, of course, but occasionally, ventured a little beyond. We knew where the boundaries were because we had walked to the perimeter on weekdays for nature study or to learn the art of tracking through an imaginary forest during the training of girl guides. Up there it seemed as if we were released from the shackles that tied us to the desk and chair in the classroom; free to do whatever we wanted, free to laugh and sing loudly and behave in any funny way we wanted. We imagined that we were far, far away from the scrutinizing and forbidding eyes of authority. We played hide and seek and catch-me-if-you-can, often chasing one another or being chased around trees, behind bushes, down pathways and across the netball court, sprinting, jumping, hopping and dancing, and even shunting back and forth like steam locomotives. Up there, on top of the world, we wandered in the land of our imagination inspired by the fairy tales we read, in the company of elves and goblins. How easy it was for our imaginative minds to transform the green grass into red, a dragonfly into an elf and fancy the events that happened in the *Land of Red Grass!* Sitting on the flight of steps, just above our netball court, my friends and I recreated scenes from Christina Rossetti’s, *The Goblin Market*.

We saw mischievous little people run through the tall grass, scramble over hedges to hiding places and disappear from sight. We poked and prodded around their dens. Aroused and angered by our interference, goblins emerged in swarms like ferocious red ants, climbed on our feet using their tiny hands and feet, howling, growling, shrieking and screaming.



Goblins

Measuring no higher than our toes, some climbed atop stones to reach out and pinch our ankles with their long fingernails no more than the tips of pins or needles. But how they hurt! We stomped the grass hysterically in mock fear and delight. The chorus of angry voices of little green men, visible only to the most discerning of human eyes such as ours, was like the rustling of leaves in the wind.

The verdant hills of Bahirawa, the demon, provided my friends, Astrid, Beryl, Chitra, Enid, Doreen, Sumana and Mallikha and I a change of scene from the dull classroom and the joys of easy adventure. During the lunch recess we hurried toward those hills up a long flight of narrow steps. The hillside was virtually treeless and open; clothed only in tall grass; the crisp cool air greeted us. It was the perfect habitat for a safari; for chasing imaginary lions, hyenas, leopards, rhinos and elephants with long sticks, the lethal weapons to take down the game if we came upon any. Quite often we ventured in twos; but sometimes, we split up into two teams; one going ahead and the other following; the one leading used a penknife to cut signs in the barks of trees, stones and straw to signal actions and shouted or whistled to those who were following to keep them on the right trail. Any little sound, even the flight of a startled bird or the rush of the wind in the trees, or the loud crackling of gravel under someone's feet, would stop us in our tracks to confront our quarry. Having vanquished it, we regained courage and moved forward fearlessly.

One day, however, something startling happened. Even those of us who did not see the incident were terrified by the reported encounter:

“Don’t go up there, ever again,” gasped a terrified Sumana. “Chitra and I were strolling along the footpath. We heard a whistle, looked in the direction from where it came and saw this man raise his sarong and display his private parts. He stood there like a statue awaiting our approach. We were too engrossed in our conversation and did not see him until we were few feet from him. He scared me to death. I think he was Bahirawa because he emerged from a puff of smoke looming suddenly larger and larger and everything else disappeared. I only saw him and the empty gunnysack at his feet. For a moment I thought he was going to snatch one of us and put in that sack. Chitra’s hell-raising shriek sent me into wingless flight ”

“Don’t dramatize, Sumana,” chided Chitra. “It wasn’t a puff of smoke and he isn’t Bahirawa. This man is human; he was smoking a cigar. We came within a few feet of that creep that is why he looked so large.”

“He was dark, tall and unkempt; his blood-shot eyes burned right through scaring the daylight out of me. He looked like the demon in a temple mural I saw long ago. I sure, he is Bahirawa,” reiterated Sumana not the least bit willing to be corrected by Chitra’s explanation.

“Bahirawa, No! No!! As soon as I saw him, I knew that he’s a flasher. It is a vulgar sight. He was stroking, you know what, and beckoning us. At first, I stood rooted unable to move or speak. But soon I gathered strength and I ran as fast as my feet would carry me, vaulting over branches, and not even stopping to see whether Sumana was following. I was shrieking at the top of my voice.”

“I didn’t think of you either, and ran as fast as I could until I reached the netball court. What was the white stuff dripping from his fingers?” inquired the innocent Sumana.

“What was it? What was it?” asked the other girls, giggling in excitement.

“You idiots, shut up! Don’t you dare talk about this to anyone; most certainly not at home,” advised Chitra.

We were not intimidated by that sighting to keep away from our hill forever, but we never went in pairs.

I have not been inside of the church where the nuns prayed, nor have I seen the nuns kneel in prayer inside. But I have heard mass being chanted in that church and the sonorous voices of the nuns sing hymns, all in Latin. A small cemetery behind the nunnery and church was the burial ground where nuns who died thousands of miles way from their homeland were interred. No markers or tombstones were placed over the gravestones; only small wooden crosses and well-tended flowerbeds to show how well the survivors cared for

the dear departed. The cemetery was a forbidden place- out of bound to students. Why forbidden, we reasoned when a graveyard was unlikely to injure anyone? Being a place of peaceful rest, it was more likely to make us less fearful of death. We dared to go into the forbidden cemetery, again and again, not stopping to consider the consequences of being seen by a nun or a ghost. It could have been either because one bore a strong resemblance to the other!

The brave led us into all the forbidden places. We followed them over barbed wire fences to steal a rose here or some wild berries over there, and every time a faint heart uttered a shriek, it sent all into flight, tripping and falling and sometimes even bruised and bleeding.

Years passed by swiftly. Children became adolescents. Our bodies were filling out; girls were sprouting breasts and the boy, mustaches and beards. My friends and I were struck by the obnoxious phenomenon known as puberty. For three days and sometimes more, we wore diapers and examined the backs of our white uniforms frequently on those days for telltale stains. Little by little our habits and thoughts changed. My friends and I were now at that age when the urge for safari adventure had dwindled if not completely abated. We were after a more elusive quarry: boys. When the time came, we of the younger generation recognized a deep disorder in the nuns' way of life and thinking. They had renounced worldly pleasures and they would not allow us to make even eye contact with boys. Because our parents suffered from the same indisposition, girls in the Kandy Convent, generally speaking, had no opportunity to interact with boys except with their siblings or close relatives. Unknown to both nuns and parents, however, all pretty girls had boyfriends; and nearly everyone had a crush on someone of their own or opposite sex. During lunch break, when all things disallowed happened, after a quick sandwich in the luncheon room, many of us would sit on those steps facing the main road leading up to the assembly hall. There, we displayed ourselves as best we could, properly, of course, by modern standards, not out of real interest in those boys but out of obstinate, adolescent inclinations. How heart-felt, tender, and sweet my secret love was for that scrawny boy who pedaled his ramshackle bicycle slowly past the Convent gates; I loved him with such yearning, even scribbling his initials with red ink on every flat surface on my body, even on showy places like the palm of my hand. Those boys were the lovers in our romantic dreams. How our hearts swelled with unconsummated love!

Boys from several colleges in town, Sylvester, Trinity, and Kingswood rode slowly past, more than once, on their bicycles or in their parents' cars.



Prep school boys cycling past

The more brazen girls even stood alongside the curb to get a better view of the forbidden fruit. They eyed their heartthrobs longingly, but rarely had a chance to speak even one word to those whom they coveted. There was joy in sighting the boys and the contact from the love notes trafficked between couples, siblings often delivering the mail. It was mostly with the cooperation of their sisters that some boys disclosed interest in the girls that aroused them, in turn, the reciprocation. Our yearning was in proportion to the intensity of pubescent love, either “eternal” or “until death do us apart;” more exciting also because it was often surreptitious and forbidden. If the nuns were aware of these amorous proceedings, they appeared not to be, prompted perhaps by purest of motives that such tenuous sightings and encounters were safety valves through which the steam of teenage passion was released, without which periodic explosions were likely to occur. It was indeed thought by my father that by allowing us to indulge in our fantasies, we would not deviate from our educational goals or drift from ethical and moral codes established and enforced by the Good Shepherd order. A dirty mind lodged in the lily-white body- lily the school flower.



The school crest

Physical encounters between boys and girls though difficult were not insurmountable. On occasion we saw a student wearing the school uniform walking hand in hand with a boy in the Wace Park. She was playing truant and if seen and reported to the authorities by an over-zealous fellow student, the transgressor was sure to be expelled or severely punished. For those of us who would not dare to stay away from school without the permission of our parents and teachers, a reprimand or caning before general assembly restored notions of propriety and decorum in the delinquents and re-affirmed them in minds of onlookers. As I mentioned before, sometimes the punishment was more severe: expulsion!

We thought those moral codes were meaningless, if not outright stupid. In the common room where a few chosen magazines were kept for our reading pleasure, our innocence was protected from unseemly and provocative exposure of Esther William's arms and legs! A cover photograph of her in a magazine, wearing a one-piece bathing suit, was carefully shaded over in an austere black pen to make it look as though she was wearing a long-sleeved blouse over a pair of bloomers! Thus, we were well protected from displays of vulgarity. Believing that it was best done by an avoidance of vanities, we were austere and stoically raised, taught to show indifference to sexual pleasure, stay calm under temptation, dress properly without revealing lust-provoking body parts, and observe silence most of the time according to the well-worn dictum, "Ladies should be seen and not heard." We were instructed to behave properly, ever suffering like Christ upon the cross!

Many trivial student and teacher relationships, of which modern educators would never even have been conscious, let alone concerned, aroused the nuns and brought on tasteless and pointless censorship. One incident is etched on my mind. In those days there were few women science teachers. When it came to the time for an appointment, the nuns were overtly concerned about hiring a member of the opposite sex to teach us science. They must have debated long and hard. A male teacher was brought in from Sylvester College, a Catholic school for boys in our town. We had good reason to believe the nuns told the friars to send an elderly, unattractive, sloppily dressed man with serious expression and without the least aptitude for transgression. I believe these instructions were carefully followed because our science teacher bore all these characteristics plus one more- he was balding. As unattractive as he was in our eyes, and highly unlikely to stir romantic ideas in even the least attractive among us, a nun always sat at the back of the class like a sentry to ensure that no improper liaison developed between teacher and student during class time! One afternoon we saw the science master hastily turn his back on us to conceal the smile that

had erupted on an otherwise glum countenance Searching for the reason, we looked back and saw the sentry struggling to stay awake and watchful, her hooded head bobbing up and down and from side to side.

Corporal punishment, though not frequently used, was carried out on rare occasion. I recall only one public caning in my ten years of schooling, given to three teen-aged girls found guilty of stealing school property. More common were lesser punishments like a ruler bearing down on the knuckles when the homework was untidily done, or recommended steps to the solution of a problem were repeatedly omitted. For a misdemeanor, such as forgetting to bring a needle to the sewing class, I was thrown out of class and spent an hour in the hallway outside. But I was not deterred. I repeated the offense and drew a more painful punishment, having to stand on my chair for one whole hour and hoping I would fall off the chair and break my neck! One day, my back was the billboard upon which an untidy exercise book was displayed. During lunch recess I walked around school grounds displaying my sloppy work to fellow students. The school grounds were always neat and tidy, and students' lives meticulously organized to the last trivial detail; the dress we wore to school, places we visited, movies we watched (Song of Bernadette!), books we read, and even the friendships we formed were endorsed and approved by nuns. Thus, I was taught the importance of punctuality, organization, perfection and tidiness; added to them how to behave like a lady.

In the Kandy Convent students did not pass from one class to another as a matter of course, and without proper preparation. We were separated into classes according to our abilities; the brightest in Class A, and those least prepared in Class C. It was a learning experience where the brightest minds were challenged and stimulated by interacting with each other. They were not held back until the lesser had caught up. In Classroom C, the weakest students were given necessary time, guidance and direction to reach higher standards, and transferred to either Classroom A or B when they did. Upon the sounding of a bell that announced the termination of one period and beginning of another, teachers went from one class to another to teach their specialty. So varied the curriculum and often such interest from teachers, young minds in their charge were inspired, by love or fear, to search for more knowledge either in the classroom under their supervision or in the well-stocked library where complete silence was rigidly enforced. The libraries in the United States sound like the playgrounds of Kandy Convent! The hill country of Ceylon was the headquarters of the South-East Asian command during World War II. During those war years when the main buildings of the Convent were taken over by the British Red Cross and

converted into a regional hospital for soldiers wounded in South-East Asia, temporary classrooms were constructed on our tennis courts. A huge red cross was painted on the roof of the main building that was previously where our classrooms were. It signaled to the enemy that the building housed a military hospital and was not to be bombed. So even though we learnt to place a pencil between the upper and lower jaw and duck under a table when the sirens blared, we knew that being in the vicinity of a hospital we would be safe from air raids. The main gate to the Convent, fronting Kandy-Colombo Road, was closed and guarded by a gatekeeper. To get to school, we climbed Bahirawakanda Road that winded upward to the hill behind the Convent. Midway to the summit, few yards from Janaki and Ganga Devi's home, this narrow and badly paved road forked into two footpaths: one leading to the Convent grounds and the other to Bahirawakanda and Astrid's home. Because motor vehicles could not negotiate this stretch of road, it was an arduous climb each morning to get to school; in stormy weather, far worse; mud puddles were ankle deep.

Classrooms, hastily constructed on our tennis courts, were temporary sheds abutting the hillside for protection from the torrential monsoon rains. They had thatched roofs of woven leaves of coconut palms, and half walls of wattle and daub to let in as much light as possible into the improvised classrooms. The overhang of the roof was wide enough to include a paved walkway around the building allowing teachers and students to get from one partitioned room to another, but it was not wide enough to keep out the driving rain. During the South-west Monsoon, more severe of the seasonal deluges, both students and teachers were cold and wet. The classrooms were damp; the smell of rain-damp clothes and the discomfort of wearing wet shoes and socks lingered for most of the day.

The nuns appeared not to notice our misery because they supported, without reservations, the British war effort and colonial enterprise.

Across the ascending driveway to the Convent, by the grotto, a granite cave built in the style of the one in Spain where a shepherdess was believed to have sighted the Virgin Mary, a tall and ugly metal gate was built to separate the school grounds from the military hospital. A guard kept vigil at this site, his sole purpose being to keep the students out of the military grounds; but we were not deterred. From our vantage position on higher ground, our rubbernecks stretched as ambulances drove up to the emergency entrance and white-coated orderlies carried the wounded, draped in white sheets stained in blood, through the doorway leading to the staircase we had formerly climbed to go our classrooms. Who were the injured? What was their mission? Were they pilots or foot soldiers? From where were they

brought thither? How were they injured and by whom? How badly hurt were they? But those proceedings were shrouded in secrecy. There were no answers to the questions that erupted in our curious minds. Speculation was rife and opinions were mixed as to the cause and consequence. The gatekeeper, who sat on a three-legged stool all-day and saw much more than we did, and who might have talked to those orderlies who worked in the hospital was not talkative. The how, where, what and why were beyond our knowing; nevertheless a very small part of me was sad because the war in South-East Asia was brought to our doorstep on those blood-stained stretchers.

After the war the temporary classrooms were torn down, but the cement floors remained, a bad legacy that the departing British military bequeathed, a small impediment at first, but one that grew steadily to become a huge impediment. We played lawn tennis on cement floors. The ball, the only one, bounced so high to disappear, many a time, in the thick vegetation on the hillside above the courts! The game stopped and we crawled through the thick elephant grass looking for the ball. More worrisome was our fear that we could trip on those hard cement floors and suffer serious injury. After the war, we were free again to participate in sports meets; tennis, netball and badminton tournaments. Drill squads from every school in town participated in sports meets that were an annual event on Bogambara Grounds. We competed with the crack squad from St Scholastica's School led by Rita John. Our squad marched in perfect synchronized movement of arms and legs, swinging our arms forwards and back and keeping time to the thundering command of "left, right, left, right" from the leader of our drill squad. She raised hopes that we could not fulfill; she said that we were going to win and we all thought we were. As we passed the stadium, our hands rose in unison to salute the mayor of Kandy and the judges who stood watching with critical eye the display on the green below; we prayed that they would think that we were the best marching squad out there. The Scholastica's team was ahead; Rita twirled the baton in her hand, flung it overhead and recaptured it neatly in her outstretched hand, again and yet again without missing a beat of the rhythm from the marching band. How impressive a performance that was! We hoped that she would trip, fall and lose the baton. It never happened and, to our great dismay, their squad won the competition.

Our little town burst apart in a frenzy of excitement when two schools competed in the sports arena. The netball matches heightened excitement to a fever pitch. There again, the team from Hillwood College was hard to beat;

but my heart did not grieve over our losses to Hillwood as I did when our drill squad lost because I was a mere spectator at the netball matches. Our Western oriented education was of rich diversity. It combined the sciences, literature and languages with dancing, theater, sports, sewing, cookery, religion (Christianity, of course!), and ethics. We learned to sew under the direction of sewing teacher. She taught us so many different kinds of stitches: running, shadow, tailor, blanket, and cross. Embroidery, hedge tear, simple darning, and button holes- all were done as neat specimens and mounted in a book. A sewing inspector visited the school periodically to examine our sewing books and grade the school. My two daughters who studied here in the United States, where the per capita expenditure on a student's education exceeds that of any country in the world cannot hold a needle!

The students recited from memory, many with more zeal than taste, poetry from several traditions. A book of poetry was included in the curriculum of every grade; each differentiated by the color of its jacket: yellow, green, blue, purple or red. I memorized a poem like a parrot without a complete understanding of events it described.

*“In winter I get up at night
And dress by yellow candlelight.
In summer; it's quite the other way;
I have to go to bed by day.”*

Have to go to bed by day? He was sent to bed by day because that kid was driving his parents crazy. But why did he get up at night and dress? There was only one explanation I could think of; he had wet the bed! Many years later, in Cambridge, on a long autumn day, I was walking back from Newnham College to Whitstead at 8.00 PM. In Ceylon, where I came from, the sun would have set two hours earlier. In Cambridge, the sun was still up in the sky and the buildings, trees, bushes and flowers glowed in the late autumn sunshine. It suddenly dawned on me that if I were twenty years younger, I would be in bed. I did not understand the child's complaint when I first read the poem in Ceylon, where the twenty fours of each day divides almost evenly into day and night throughout the year; but many years later, in Cambridge, during that walk between Newnham and Whitstead, there was a moment of awakening. In the twenty first century the British Empire dwindled but the English language became the language of Western civilization, of science and technology, of world commerce and trade. A huge library of English books

was easily accessible to me, and to those students who were interested it afforded a refuge for silent reading; and it was a storehouse of fictional and real life events to provoke our imagination. “Reading maketh a full man”, declared Sir Francis Bacon and so I read every book I could: romance, mystery, adventure, history, geography, and literature- almost anything I laid my hands on. They brought a lively world of adventure, love, romance, art, songs and dance to my doorstep and I created an even livelier one in my imagination. There was little romance in my life, but what a treasure trove of romance I discovered in those books. I was going to bring those romances into my life and make it more interesting and beautiful. The English language gave me access to people and places that I later visited without feelings of strangeness. I had not left the shores of my island until I was twenty-six years, but no matter where I went thereafter, Sweden, Norway, England, France, or India, I felt I was in familiar territory. Whether I spoke the native language or not, I had the command of English to make myself understood. There was always someone who knew at least a smattering of English to listen and help. The reading habit that Kandy Convent instilled in me at a very young age was the intellectual force that helped my higher English education and opened the door to the world market place during my job search. Many decades later, I recall lying on the floor of our small apartment in Olentangy River Road in Columbus, Ohio one sunny afternoon and pouring over the job announcements in **The Economist**. My husband and I applied for Senior Lecturer positions in Tanzania and we both were pleasantly surprised to be appointed by the University of Dar-Es-Salaam. Because of our consummate English education we were qualified to work almost anywhere in the world. Students of my generation had a good control and command of the English language when there was growing use of it internationally.

I read Lamb’s **Tales of Shakespeare** in the lower grades and the original play, Julius Caesar, in the senior year. A large amount of the changes in my intellect, slowly and unconsciously occurred in those years in grade school with increasing exposure to English literature; and a gradual process of self-improvement followed. When it began to come together within, we wanted everyone to listen to us and see how remarkably knowledgeable we were. I, like some of my friends, was inspired to show-off; I talked Shakespeare to impress listeners and gained great pleasure in the display of my erudition. I ceased to listen to others, I lent them my ears; Treachery was greeted with loud denouncement “Et tu Brute,” and unkind and unfair evaluation brought on “The evil that men do live after them; the good is often interred with the bones.” The literature curriculum also included novels of Jane Austen,

Charles Dickens, Emily and Charlotte Bronte, among others and here again my common speech was sprinkled with quotable tidbits from these authors as well and their characterization found parallels among the people I knew. Anyone who dared to wear a pair of yellow socks was dubbed Malvolio and a sneaky, bad natured guy was a Uriah Heep. I quoted our texts whether the occasion was appropriate or not. When liberated from a task that I found boring, "For this relief much thanks," I gushed. This habit may not have imparted to me real literacy and competence in writing and speaking good English, but it demonstrated to those who were listening that I was kultur, the German for culture. I was not afraid to voice opinions on social theories of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Karl Marx, and converse confidently about Impressionist painters and the Old Masters; I also acquired a taste for western music, even the boring music of the Baroque period. Students whose parents had the means took lessons in piano, violin, cello, clarinet, and harp. One even played bells arranged in size on a stand. How dexterously her little hands rang those bells to keep to the quick tempo of the music! The music room, where the students had their lessons, was on level with the bottom step of the long flight leading to the netball court that I daily climbed. Whenever I heard the sounds of music, especially the music of happy songs with which I was familiar, I would stop to listen for a few moments. How I longed to be in there! But there was not enough money in our household; my parents, of middle class means, could not afford music lessons for three girls. School fees, school uniforms, shoes, socks, ties, ribbons, books, writing material and unexpected expenditure on small things that came up almost on a daily basis were costing them a bundle that they could ill afford. My father was a musician of sorts and although he was unable to do anything worth doing to make more money and give us proper music lesson, he made sure that I became a musician of sorts like him.

There was a serious flaw in the English education I received; it had too much western flair or bias to it. So well did those several Christian denominational educational institutions achieve their incidental purpose, that even today, after more than fifty years of independence from British rule, my people have less knowledge of Indian heritage and culture from which our language, art forms, cuisine and religions derive and much more of the western; less respect for people of our great neighbor to the North than for British. I had not heard of great Indian epics, the Bhagavad Gita and the Mahabharata in those school years. But if you asked me about the Hellenic tradition, the history, language and culture of the ancient Greeks, I could rattle off. Our curriculums included classical languages, so defined to include Greek and Latin, but not Sanskrit and Pali. Until I went to

Cambridge in 1964 and met so many wonderful Indians, Kalpana, Pranab, Sucharita, Chakravarthy, Addy, Snehalatha, among them; so many Gujeratis, Bengalis, Punjabis, Biharis, and Rajputs, I thought all Indians were Tamils!

Eastern philosophy, the source of much western philosophy and religion, was virtually omitted from our curriculum. Eastern music, eastern languages and eastern literature were deliberately sidelined or completely left out to ensure undivided attention to Western culture. I knew so little of my own language, often being told not to speak my mother tongue within the school grounds. I knew more European history than Indian history. I was able to rattle off the dates when Columbus discovered America and the War of Roses was fought in England, but had no knowledge of the reigns of the Mauryas and Emperor Asoka in the land of the great neighbor to the North from whom is inherited every bit of our culture, language, and religion because the indigenous people of Sri Lanka descended from ancient settlers who came from India. I knew that Belgian, among the smallest of Western European countries, was first conquered by Spain, then by Austrian Hapsburgs, then by France and finally formed a union with Holland until 1830; I did not, however, know when the Moslems, Moguls, Portuguese and British went on a rampage on the vast sub-continent of India destroying the Hindu and Buddhist religions and cultures, and how the Moslems wiped out Buddhism in the territories now known as Afghanistan and Pakistan. Every day of the school year, for many years, I learnt more and more about the culture, art and architecture, music, geography and history of the western world and little or nothing of Indian or Chinese culture. In all those years in the Kandy Convent, I never saw or heard a maestro from India play a Sitar. Even Buddhists who comprehended, "Mens sana incorpore sano," would stare hopelessly into my face if I said, "Om Mane Padme Hum".

Despite this huge shortcoming, the education I received from the nuns of the Good Shepherd order was a consummate mentoring and counseling according to Western tradition and Victorian ideas that prevailed then; it sometimes went well with my own conservative background. I learned to respect elders and never addressed someone much older than myself by his or her first name; I am modest in my demeanor because "Good wines need no bush," the nuns often said. Mother's version was even more expressive, "You do not hear the water gurgling in the pot that is full." We were often told not to demonstrate our childhood exuberance because "Ladies should be seen and not heard". There is a blessing in disguise in this ability to listen to what others say; it sometimes favors the improvement of the mind.

Despite immersion in western culture and traditions during those years of my Convent education, I did not forsake my own because mother extended

her hold on my mind by the daily dose of Panchasila, the five precepts of Buddhism, before any lights were turned on in the house, frequent visits to the Maligawa Temple for prayer and meditation, weekly attendance at the Sunday school for Buddhist children, and even observing Ata Sil, the eight precepts, on Poya days. Devotion to the Sangha and care of the poor was the example that mother set for us by participating in regular dhanas (almsgiving). Father hosted musical events according to Indian tradition called Saajya parties. My eldest sister who had a term of contempt for father's hobbies described those as "evenings of Karnatic gargling". Because of father, I was regularly exposed to the Indian musical tradition and a bit of Western music as well. We sang together among other popular western songs,

*You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.
You make me happy when skies are gray.
You'll never know, dear, how much I love you
Please don't take my sunshine away!*

Thus I was slowly transformed into a citizen of the world! The education I received in Ceylon mostly from the Good Shepherd order of Irish nuns was transferred to the United State when I arrived here with a good education and little else. I may add that there are so many others like me in our habitat because the western-oriented education that we inherited from our colonial heritage propagated our kind in large numbers. Later, we became misfits in the native land and fled to four corners of the world.

The sounds of bygone years of my girlhood are returning to me, sometimes they are pleasant memories of the fun times in company of friends, so pleasant and delightful to revisit; but sometimes they are memories that cause pain and anxiety. My sisters and I walked back home from school every day, except when monsoon rains came storming down, and then father picked us up from school in his car, rather reluctantly, of course because the car was polished to a mirrored finish that he disliked to spoil by taking it out on rainy days. He would rather have let his three children walk back home under the dubious shelter of small umbrellas, had mother not insisted that he pick us up whenever it rained heavily. It was nearly the end of the school year and our report cards were in our satchels. My oldest sister commands, "Don't you dare tell mother that we got our report cards!" "How long are you going to hide it from her? And what do we tell her if she asks us whether we got our report cards?" I ask. "You two say nothing and leave the answering to me," she orders.

She had done poorly in the tests. My other sister, in spite of repeated attacks of asthma and absence from school for long periods, always did well. I was again at the top of my class. Caught between our older sister's intransigence and our parents' propensity for strict discipline, I was often unable to enjoy my success. We did what she ordered us to do, but we knew that sooner or later she would have to face mother's wrath. Our parents believed that a good education would provide a bright future for each of their three daughters. Those were days before Dr. Spock and other child psychologists wrote books for parents guiding them in matters of bringing up children, showing them how to motivate a child without destroying his or her self-esteem. My parents' flawed judgment, my unrelenting effort and enthusiasm, and her unwillingness to work harder, made our home an uncomfortable place for all of us.

"Nothing I do is good enough for you, mother. All I hear is how great they are," she savagely complained.

I heard our parents' often articulated commendations and frequently uttered admonitions to strive harder and still harder. And through the whole school career mother was there beside us, smoothing our way, insisting that we do our homework, ensuring our school uniforms were regularly washed and pressed, our shoes polished, and our books and school supplies were in our satchels before we set off to school. But my sister's performance in school went down steadily from bad to worse. It was a day I cringed in the shadow of reflected shame. It was recess; a ten-minute break at ten in the morning to allow the more affluent to sip the orange juice or gulp down the glass of milk, they or their ayahs (women servants) brought every day. Mother and father were summoned to school by the principal and were being interviewed by Miss Murtiss to find out why my eldest sister was becoming increasingly incorrigible. She was standing by without a trace of concern or remorse on her face. The curiosity of my friends embarrassed me because I did not like the bad publicity and attention my parents were getting. Giggles and whispers abounded and her bad behavior was rubbing off like chalk on me.

"She seldom does her homework," accused Miss Murtiss.

The furrows on the mother's forehead deepened from either surprise or anger. She did not speak English, but she understood the gist of Miss Murtiss' accusation because it had to do with homework in which she participated daily; father loudly protested,

"How is this possible, Miss Murtiss? She does homework everyday under the mother's careful supervision. We set aside study time for all three girls.

Our other two daughters do not have a problem of undone homework, why she?”

“That’s for you to find out, sir,” Miss Murtiss replied. “All I can do in situations of extreme non-compliance is to bring them to your attention because homework is within your domain. Yesterday I sent her to the principal’s office. You are here today in response to the letter the principal sent you.”

“What do you do with your homework? Do you eat it, child?” father harshly asked.

She looked at him viciously- the same look she gave him when he and I are huddled over our “stupid” stamp collection.

“Child, answer me!” he thundered.

“I lost it,” was her calm response.

“Day after day and week after week?” asked Miss Murtiss, incredulously.

“My other daughters tell us that she gives the homework to a friend, a girl by the name of Kamala,” mother whispered, and father translated what mother said.

She turned an ugly face on mother. Miss Murtiss was visibly angered by these revelations. She had heard enough and her fair face was aflame. She had another delinquent to go after- poor Kamala! Mercifully, the ten - minute recess was over, and they parted company, the parents promising to be more vigilant in the future and do whatever it took to ensure that their daughter’s homework reached Miss Murtiss as her own and not as Kamala’s, and she waiting to get home and let mother and I have a good deal of the anger on her mind.

My parents did not realize on that occasion that their problems with the school had just begun. At meetings between the parents and teachers, which occurred with increasing frequency, my sister stood with defiant look and gait and never said a single word in her defense. It maddened the parents and aroused teachers alike. She laughed on their rage with such delight. Looking back, I can only surmise that she gained delight by displeasing both. It was a time in our young lives when accusations and counter-accusations were rife; threats and vile abuse abounded; we all shrieked and shouted at each other. We were all afraid of her and for her; none within the family was close to her. Therefore, she pursued a solitary course transforming herself into a one-girl army.

The thing that drove the simmering situation concerning her to a boiling point and a dirty crisis was nothing more important than Marianne’s prettily embroidered pink nightgown, lent to her to wear in a classroom play. Out of jealousy or because of a fight that later erupted between Marianne and her,

she cut up Marianne's pretty pink nightgown into ribbons. Marianne's mother, the chorus mistress, stormed the principal's office to complain, dragging behind her a tearful Marianne. Strangely, at the same time, graffiti appeared on the walls of the school toilet, 'Marianne is a snitch!' it screamed in bold red chalk.

The principal had seen and heard enough. On the occasion of that pilgrimage to the Convent, the parents were told that my sister was suspended for a week. After much pleading and supplication, the principal relented and suspended the sentence. However, the debris from it and other incidents like it fell on my family. I do not know how much of my sister's errant behavior in the Convent rubbed off on me to spoil my reputation also. I entered the University at the age of sixteen, but it was not from the Good Shepherd Convent. Two years before, I had transferred to Mahamaya College, Kandy, a school started by a group of concerned Buddhist parents, mine among them, who disapproved of the way the powerful denominational schools aligned with Christian churches across the country imparted English education to their Buddhist children. At that time Mahamaya College was yet a fledgling institution without many students of achievement and scholarship to recommend it. In 1952, I joined Mahamaya College under conditions fraught with risk and uncertainty; only one student had so far entered the University from that school. Therefore, nuns of Kandy Convent, like the administrators of other Christian schools for girls in our town, were empowered and emboldened by the absence of suitable alternatives and therefore the limited choice for Buddhist children. They often treated Buddhist children with brains and little else to recommend them with indifference and even obstructed their effort to achieve a higher education. In 1951, I had taken the Senior School Certificate Examination (SSC), a public examination conducted by the Department of Education for all the schools in the country, an examination designed to ensure that students reached a common standard prior to a government funded university education. Only those who successfully completed the Senior School Certificate (SSC) were allowed to move on to the class above, the Higher School Certificate (HSC) and University Entrance. More than thirty students from the Good Shepherd Convent sat for the SSC examination in 1951, I among them. The examination was in December, but the results were announced about four months later. Meanwhile, in order not to disrupt the progress of those students who were of recognized scholarship to proceed to a higher education, they were provisionally promoted to the class above to prepare for the HSC and the University Entrance. To my extreme dismay I was not among the many who were so promoted. When I sought an

explanation, the Principal, Mother St. Peter, gave a reason that made no sense.

“You are not mature enough to move on; you must stay behind one more year!”

“Even if I pass the SSC?” I asked incredulously.

I saw her breast fill up under the wrap that fell from her head. She let out all that air in one word without even bothering to look at me,

“Yes.”

That was her perfunctory reply before moving on to more important business.

It hit me, that word, right in my eyes; they started to well up, but I refused to let the tears flow. I stood behind her, thunder-stuck, astounded beyond words. How shattered I was in that moment to realize that my efforts to better prospects in life and make my parents proud were gone; snatched by the bad nuns of the Good Shepherd order! To describe my predicament in mother’s colorful language,

“I had drawn water from that well for ten long years in a clay pot; it lay at my feet shattered to bits.”

“Damn them! Damn them! Damn them!” I repeatedly said to myself. How could they do this to me? My indignation was overwhelming; I had never contemplated the possibility that I would be held back. I was far better than most they had promoted and as good as the best among them. The fury unleashed within was pushing me to do what an outcast or fugitive would do- with one sweeping blow, if that were possible, to bring down the whole disrespectable edifice called the Kandy Convent.

When I communicated the bad news to them, Father did not seem to mind. Mother articulated their response,

“Don’t despair, child, and don’t be discouraged! It’s only a year. It will pass by swiftly; and then you can move on.”

But I knew better. An insane and reckless thought invaded my mind. In my hopeless mind there erupted a defiant disregard for the whole darned lot! In that brief moment I realized how my sister felt about the world around her. Upon reflection what seemed to me so bewildering at first became perfectly plain. When Sri Lanka gained her independence from colonial rule in 1948, the pendulum had swung away from powerful colonial cultural heritage that had so far dominated our young lives. The nuns of the Good Shepherd order like the administrators of the other Christian school in the country began to feel the effects of the transfer of political power to the largely Buddhist majority. New legislation was being discussed to correct the injustices perceived by the majority Buddhist community because the educational

system of the country, largely funded by the government, was still controlled by denominational schools with evangelical purpose causing discriminatory outcome. The most far reaching of the legislation was the proposal to get more government control over those educational institutions that were partly funded by the government, but operated wholly by Christian authority. The opposition of Christian colleges sprang from their fear that it would wipe out the aggressive evangelical role they had so far played in education and reduce blatant discrimination against non-Christian children. More government control over the administration of those schools that were subsidized by the government meant that policies detrimental to their purpose and objectives would almost certainly be adopted. Buddhist children in the Christian schools began to hear prejudicial commentary that was perhaps uttered before, but mostly behind closed doors.

“Our Christian schools are here to educate our Christian children.” The implication was obvious.

It was better to have no more expectations from Kandy Convent than weak ones. The nuns were not to be trusted; they would surely find another excuse to hold me back again. What then? It is still painful to think of what happened next. A gutsy idea sprang in my impetuous mind. So, on the following morning, soon after the first bell summoned us to class, I went to meet Mother St Peter, the Principal. I told her that my parents were disappointed that she had not let me proceed to the class above with other students; so disappointed that they wanted me to leave school immediately! I saw jubilation on her face. My father, if he were listening, would have taken serious offense at the mumbled response:

“Tell you parents that our schools are for our Catholic children. We are limited by classroom size and cannot serve children, deserving and undeserving, belonging to other faiths.”

I nodded neither understanding nor caring. Her unkind and thoughtless remarks did not disturb me because I was driven by some inner force to bring my nine-plus year association with Kandy Convent to a swift end. Another idea had just erupted in my mind. I was glad that she did not even pause to examine her response to my next request.

“May I please have the school leaving certificate?” I meekly requested.

She did not look at me, but kept her glance fixed elsewhere as if to avoid an anathema. Her face showed triumphant indifference. So glad she was to be rid of me, in a momentary spasm of joyful impulse, she did not stop to think of the propriety of her response. I was ecstatic!

“Come back at noon and I’ll have it ready for you.” she said.

Her manner stung me like a nettle; not only did there seem to lurk in it disdain, but an intent to also hurt that was wicked considering that I had been a student at the Kandy Convent ever since I was five years old. She was willingly giving me, barely fourteen years old at the time, a school-leaving certificate. My school career at Good Shepherd Convent had lasted for about ten years. After one more afternoon, it was over. I had brought it to a swift conclusion. I had no other feelings except of extreme disgust with surroundings I had previously enjoyed. My predicament was ominous, but I did not care, nor was I afraid. I did not know what the future would bring. I hoped that I would succeed, and if I did not, what then? I saw other students climb the stairs and flood the corridor outside our classrooms. Some were going into their new classrooms and I walked slowly toward mine without listening to what the tumult of voices were telling each other to find out whether I belonged to any of those groups as I might have done at other times. I stood in the doorway and looked into my classroom watching it with indifference as it exploded into movement and chatter. Some were already seated at their desks; others were gathered in front of the class, between rows of desks and chalkboard talking to each other with excitement and expectation. It was the last day of the school year when the austere routine of the curriculum did not enforce a discipline of procedure. The teacher's desk was deserted and the chalkboard bare. I went to my desk in the front row without greeting anyone, and without the least desire to mingle with any. I felt unbounded relief that, for better or worse, it was over. I could now look in the eyes of those lesser students who were lording over me because they had moved on to the class above, while I, "the smart Alec" was held back. The extraordinary outcome of that unfair decision was that lesser students sincerely believed that they were better students, far better than I. They looked at me with pity. I had fallen completely in their opinion and it mattered because they were empowered and emboldened by faulty evaluation.

"What will you do next year?" someone asked.

A slight flush of embarrassment spread over my face, but I declared with triumphant smile,

"I am out of this hell!"

"Where are you going?" she persisted.

"Wait and see," I responded letting her fertile mind speculate and ponder when I had not the slightest idea of my next destination. But my hopes ran high.

My parents were surprised, or rather shocked and alarmed, when they saw the school-leaving certificate in my hand. Father was ready to wage a war on

Mother St. Peter. He was furious that an administration that often took pride in strict enforcement of regulations had allowed a fourteen-year old to terminate her school career. According to father, nuns were given custodial rights over me during school hours; my admission to the Convent was a legal contract between administrators of the Convent and them. It could be terminated by either party following informed consent from the other and not by me, barely fourteen years old. The nuns had violated a contract. They had to take me back.

“You’ve got to go back!” mother was shrieking.

However, I was adamant. I did not want to return to the Convent, and I did not want my parents to supplicate on my behalf. I had heard the Principal’s response to my request for the school-leaving certificate; I had seen the indifference on her face as she gave it to me; neither of them had. I recall telling father and mother,

“I’ll rather beg on the streets of Kandy than go back to that lousy school. I cannot stand it any longer.”

That seemed to stagger both because neither said anything for a while.

Father knew I meant every word that I had so impulsively uttered.

Mortified as she was at my impulsive behavior, mother managed to say, “You are so much like your father. Neither can hold on to anything. You both let go of one branch before you grab on to another.”

In mother’s righteous eyes we were both delinquents.

“Aha!” said father with a twinkle in his eye and chuckle of satisfaction. I was his comrade in delinquency. I saw her criticisms as indifference to my plight. Father, with incredible expedition perhaps because I was his soul mate, began the search for another school for me. It was a humbling experience because a teacher from The Girls’ High School we went to see wondered why I was shopping for a school after all those years at the Kandy Convent when her own children were well entrenched in theirs. She even wondered about my scholarship. She told mother that she knew of several students who were held back because they were not prepared to move on. She wondered aloud whether they should look for a vocational school for me that taught classes in typing and secretarial work instead! All the while she and mother were talking over my head I was filled with a great deal of anger, with mother mostly, and felt a strong impulse to rush out through the front door shouting to that woman that I did not want to attend her god-damned school either. I was in such a state of nervous agitation that father and mother started to quarrel, father blaming the mother for my growing despondency and she blaming him for the bad genes I had inherited. When mother saw how unhappy I was, she said very softly, in soothing voice,

“Child, don’t worry. I’ll sell my jewelry and send you to the best fee levying school, perhaps one in Colombo if we can’t find one here.”

The reality however was that they had no choice other than Mahamaya College because Sir Bennett Soysa, my father’s dearest friend, savior and employer, was the benefactor and manager of the school at that time. It was all they could afford. Tears were running down my cheeks. There was nothing mother could say to comfort me. Her assurance was unreal and it did not ease my fears, nor give me any comfort.

Thus, I began my schooling at Mahamaya. It was a much smaller school than Kandy Convent. Despite it being a Buddhist school, the same passionate desire to excel in the western oriented system of education prevailed among the administrators, teachers and students. The principal was Mrs. Gunawardena who ran the school with an iron fist. Students and teachers described her as a terror, albeit an unholy one unlike Mother St. Peter. Because of her ugly visage and mannerisms that were mostly brusque and intimidating, everyone was afraid and subservient to her orders. However, the general public admired her as the most efficient school administrator of the time. The teachers at Mahamaya were mostly young and recent graduates of Ceylon University who excelled in the subjects they taught and their commitment to teaching was also strong. They were as passionate as Miss Murtiss and Miss Angie, but without the bellicosity. There was more camaraderie between them and the students. Even Muniandy, the general factotum, who minded the school buildings and grounds, was highly visible, easily approachable and fallible. It appeared to me that I was released from adolescence to protected adulthood, an important transition to make prior to the start of a university career. I also had the feeling that I was delivered to a more humane domain where there were no Wizards of Oz craftily concealed behind ornate curtains to intimidate the hapless.

However, mother’s despondency was communicated well in one descriptive sentence taken from the colorful collection of Sinhalese idiom that she often espoused:

“Child, others go from the bench to the chair; you’re going in the wrong direction, from the chair to the bench.”

In her opinion, the Kandy Convent with its larger endowment of facilities was more desirable for being so blessed than the only Buddhist school for girls; the reputation of the Kandy Convent as the best girl’s school in town was contested by only one other, The Girl’s High School. No other school in our town came anywhere close to those two.



Mahamaya College

It dawned upon me that she thought something was lost in the transfer from one school to the other, something very valuable, perhaps the reputation of the institution that might have rubbed off from the school onto me. But only for a short time I lived on the recollections of the old school; they were not strong enough to endure or cause regret because I severed connection with it under a dark cloud. I made new friends, Savitri, Chandra, Indrani, and Manel. We bonded so fast, held together by so many common interests that we shared. I was much surprised to find students of such high caliber in my new school as good as or even superior to those I left behind. How scholarly they were, and how emancipated in outlook? It took me several decades to understand that Buddhism nurtures young minds far better than other religions like Catholicism because it proclaims that man is supreme; my redemption was in my own hands. Buddha did not discount enterprise; he urged devotees to embark on right enterprise uncontaminated by greed and deceit. He advocated the noble eightfold path for personal advancement and redemption. My life was in my hands to develop in righteous manner. I learned that I could not trespass and then ask a supreme being for forgiveness. There is no supreme being out there ordering the destiny of this world; its destiny was in the hands of all mankind. Development of the mind, unhampered by allegiance to a supreme being, was the intellectual tradition I was exposed to within the environs of Mahamaya College in two formative years of my life.

My troubles were not yet over. The worst trouble so far began. There were difficulties that I had not foreseen, their outcome neither my parents nor I

could have anticipated. A week into my Mahamaya days I was summoned to the Principal's office. I went with trepidation not knowing what deep trouble for my family and me it would produce. I approached the Principal's desk deferentially wishing her secretary would disappear into thin air. I knew that the Principal was going to say something awful that I did not want an audience. But she was anointed witness to the awful event that followed. "Take careful notes," the Principal said in stern voice to the woman. My legs were ready to buckle beneath me and tears were already welling up in my eyes. As I mentioned attractive woman; her face before Mrs. Gunawardena was not an attractive woman. Her



Back row L to R:- Manel Talwatte, Indrani Samersekera, Amita Amaratunga, Savitri Wijayatilaka, Seated:- Me & Chandra Jayasinghe

face became all the more hideous as she gave utterance to the frightful words that recoiled upon me.

"We have been watching you closely. Some of your teachers think that you do not belong here. Do not return to Mahamaya on Monday. I am sorry, but this our carefully considered opinion." The reason for her prevarication was, in my mind at least, self-evident. I was sure information had reached the

Convent that I had not gone too far- only about three miles to Mahamaya College. It later transpired that Mrs. Gunawardena felt the need to get some feedback from my former school because she was uncomfortable that I had snuck in through the back door. She talked to Mother St. Peter, who opposed my admission. Mrs. Gunawardena said that the Reverend Mother's opposition sprang from her fierce belief, supported by my former teachers, that I was among the most disruptive students in the school. An even more important imperative had guided her decision not to let me go on to a higher education. I was also a mediocre student. Mother St Peter sympathized with Mrs. Gunawardena's predicament. She implied that Kandy Convent was well rid of me! Mrs. Gunawardena, in the Reverend Mother's opinion, had only one course of action to follow to achieve the same result; if she did not, she was bound to have many regrets later on because my parents were rubble rousers; they were also likely to create trouble for the administration! Those were the most blatant and perfidious lies that I had heard so far in my young life; most blatant because their veracity was ordained, decreed, established and preserved behind the sanctity of the habit the Reverend Mother donned and august title of 'Principal'. My first emotions were of sadness and self-pity, but as these emotions grew they turned to fury. Mother St. Peter, the wicked and vindictive principal of the Convent, was out to get me! I saw through her with such disgusting clarity. The enormous authority that lay in her hands she had put to wicked use. It came as a crushing blow to my belief in religious sanctity. I saw her actions as a blatant attempt to deprive me of a higher education. That unexpected collapse of my elevated hopes, the frugal life we led, and the sudden failure of the school career on which I had piled so much hope, provoked in me, so young and immature at the time, to extreme despondency because of my inability to right all that had gone wrong before the end of the day! A sensation amounting to nausea rose in me; my legs shivered and tears sprung in my eyes; tears I had held back when the going had been rougher. I did not want to prolong the agony thrust upon both my parents and me. If I could, I would have raised my hands up to heaven and brought it crashing down on our heads. I was caught in the net of my inexorable karma; I did not know what to do next. I had run out of options; what could I possibly do? Even under conditions of Sir Bennet's unflinching support of my case, further negotiations between him and Mrs. Gunawardena were bound to be hampered and bedeviled by those distortions of truth and the distrust the Reverend Mother had planted in Mrs. Gunawardena's mind. I did not return to the classroom to even pick up my books. I ran out of the gate and all the way home, a distance of over three miles. But I underestimated the will of my parents and the determination of

Sir Bennet and Lady Soysa. When they heard what had happened, they were outraged. They had to act swiftly to save their child. Sir Bennett and father had a long talk that evening during which father brought to Sir Bennet's attention that he had lost his fedora during a tussle over the management of Mahamaya before it passed to Sir Bennett's hands from the Ratwatte's; and for what purpose father asked if he could not even have his daughter admitted to the school he had fought for? His wife, Lady Soysa, who had been my Sunday school teacher couple years ago, was even more irate. She was not one to take even the tiniest insult to her or her husband or any attempt to undermine their authority lightly. She lobbied furiously on my behalf urging him to intervene forcefully and even over-ride Mrs.

Gunawardena's authority if that was what it took to get me re-admitted. Her outrage was mostly directed at Mrs. Gunawardena for overruling a decision that had been mutually agreed upon; it was compounded, she declared, by the foolishness she had demonstrated; consulting a Christian authority about the welfare of a Buddhist child. She argued that the Principal had compromised the dignity of a Buddhist educational institution by her unreasonable behavior. Would the nuns have, under similar circumstances, consulted the Principal of a Buddhist school, she wanted to know? If he would not intervene, she was ready to take matters to her own hands; both Sir Bennett and father feared that threat and outcome.

Sir Bennett was not a meddlesome administrator; he was a prudent, sagacious, and thoughtful man; and a highly respected leader in the Buddhist community. So when he asked Mrs. Gunawardena to take me back, she could not refuse, especially because the intense suspicions that she now had about my family and me were modified somewhat by guarantees and assurances Sir Bennet gave. He informed her that he has known my father since their school days; and me, ever since I was born. I was unlikely to behave in a disruptive manner because he had not observed that characteristic in me, and neither did his wife who was my teacher in the Sunday school. He let her know that he and his wife were in a position to vouch for my good behavior far better than the nuns of Kandy Convent, and he would take personal responsibility for it. But Mrs. Gunawardena's pride and decision making authority was at stake; it was not to be compromised for my sake. Sir Bennett and Mrs. Gunawardena reached an unhappy compromise as far as I was concerned; he would vouch for my good behavior but not for my scholarship. A "mediocre student" as Mother St Peter had described me could not be allowed in the University Entrance class. I was re-admitted to Mahamaya, but only to the SSC; I was demoted! I had not foreseen that humiliating outcome. I was where I had been before I

left Kandy Convent! Mother St Peter ultimately prevailed and her pride assuaged. She showed me her power to affect and spoil my destiny! When I acted so impulsively, I had no idea of how far reaching the Principal's powers were and how prolonged and vindictive the vendetta against a bright non-Catholic student. I had acted impulsively, not knowing the danger of taking on the powerful Principal of Kandy Convent. I was carried away by my inexperience and naiveté. Mother asked, again and yet again, what made me do what I did? What options did I think I had to overcome authority? She said,

“Learn not to challenge when you're not strong enough to defeat your opponent.”

Resentment mixed with self-pity, was how I felt. At that young age when I was naïve, I could not fathom why I supplied the opportunity to those nuns for indulgence of such bitter prejudice that even amounted to unmitigated hatred. The injustice of it got to me. Maddened with despair, I cried long and hard. I could not help feeling that I had been damaged irreparably; but why? Mother's explanation was as good as any I can come up with. My bad karma was acting up!

Nuns like Mother St. Paul were protected from public scrutiny by the thick veneer of expatriate authority. British occupation had enabled them, thus far, to administer the schools in their charge as if they owned the country and its people as well. They were only answerable to Ireland and God and both were so far away! At a very early age, within my native country, I was learning such bitter lessons about colonialism, its power and prejudice. It even seems to me now that it was signaling the fate that awaited me. For someone so young and fresh to the realities of life, so charmed by hopes of a blessed future, what an experience and training that Convent education was! At a very young age, I cultivated stoicism to face the difficulties of life. No matter what harassment comes my way, whether in the workplace, grocery store, airports, schools, universities, from the uneducated or educated, from the far left or far right, from high-powered administrators or ordinary peon in the workplace, I take it in stride; I drew strength of endurance from my early exposure to misguided evangelical purpose.

Discrimination and harassment energized and empowered me, and hardened my resolve to succeed. I believe I prevailed then because I had the steady support of parents. Many years later, when I had established a name and reputation in my profession in Sri Lanka, the Old Girl's Association of Kandy Convent contacted me. They wanted me to join. I owed much to the Convent; however, remembrance of the discrimination I suffered ran

through my mind. I could not associate with my old school; the grievance ran too deep and hurt too much.

Mulling over the many disadvantages that the degrading situation at Mahamaya College presented, for the second time in less than two weeks, mother had the opportunity to softly rebuke,

“Child, it does not matter. Don’t let it bother you. I had a feeling that something like this would happen to you because you are so headstrong and impulsive, just like your father. We can’t do anything about it; we have no options. The year will go by swiftly and then you will be on your way. Unfortunately, you are now sitting on the bench and not in the chair; so you’ll have to struggle a lot harder to get to where you want to be.”

Her remarks induced rage in me, but I controlled it because was right. But it is the way of the world to put blame on the victim. An abused wife brings it upon herself. My father and I are headstrong and impulsive; therefore, we deserve to be punished. I stiffened in my resolve to do well. I had to protect myself from the fate of being crushed under the weight of falsehood. Not only did I resolve to succeed, but an unarticulated feeling of self-reproach also possessed me. I was angry with myself for not foreseeing the difficulties that I encountered. But there was no use crying over spilt milk. I had to take up the challenge and perform as well as I possibly could. Both father and mother, mother especially, had made too many sacrifices on our behalf; payback time had come. Redemption of my character and ability was in my hands. If I did not do well, Mother St. Peter’s propaganda about my mediocrity would prevail. I would not let an act of discrimination stunt my efforts at excellence. Robert Bruce went into battle again after taking his cue, the part he must play in battle, from the web building effort of a lonely spider. I gazed into the future and saw a wonderful life for myself.

I prevailed while those blessed by the nuns failed. The Christian God, so compassionate and wise, moves in mysterious ways! He/She looks down on a world and those eyes do not see labels. If a God does truly exist to correct the injustices beneath should he/she not try to create a setting that has a semblance of fairness? If God is merciful, should he/she not believe in all mortals, Christian or Buddhist, who conduct them selves in an upright manner, who are virtuous and innocent, morally right and fair? Should he/she not intervene to save the innocent from wrath of the malicious, venomous, spiteful and wicked? He or she probably figured that I was, despite my label of Buddhist, more righteous and innocent than the spiteful, perfidious and wicked administrator of Kandy Convent. I opinioned that God’s disapproval of and antagonism to the Reverend Mother was intense because he/she did not share her thinking that she was promoting the cause

of his/her mission by outmaneuvering my effort to do well in life. How pleased I was with his/her divine performance!

In April of the following year, when SSC results were published, they surprised all. Kandy Convent plummeted from its exalted and predominant position among the top performing schools in our town. I was the only student of the Class of 1951 from the Kandy Convent to pass the SSC examination. There were a few who were referred in one subject or another, but I was the only one to get a complete pass! The Almighty also admonished my mother for her metaphoric denouncement and denigration of the only Buddhist school in town. The students of Mahamaya College, the bench upon which I then sat, did far better than those of Kandy Convent, the chair I had vacated approximately six months ago! My thoughts went back to the terrible last days at the Kandy Convent. I had redeemed my reputation!

For me, it was a day of jubilation, celebration and redemption.

“Child, you deserve to be rewarded for your effort,” she gushed.

I shall never forget the shared joy of that moment. Mother laughed and smiled a lot. Father had that look on his face brought on by a couple of whiskies, a sumptuous dinner and good music. There was excitement in his manner, even bordering upon mild hysteria. I was extremely happy to be the cause of their joy.

“Do you know where I want to go with you today?” mother asked in a happy tone of voice I seldom heard her use before. It sounded as though she had won the Galle Gymkhana. I was thinking that I should try harder to afford them many more such moments.

She took me to Moulana, a textile store in town.

As we entered the store she said,

“You can have the best dress length in the shop and I will sew a beautiful dress for you.” I said, “Mother, I like a silk dress in soft shades of mauve and pink with a touch of green, here and there. I saw a girl wear a dress made of such a material; it was stunning! I want a princess neckline and a short apron around a low waistline cut along a bias so that it hangs and moves like waves. The elbow length sleeves must be edged with similar border. And mother, I also want a nice pair of underpants and a pair of high heeled shoes.”

“I don’t know whether I can afford a pair of shoes at this time. You most certainly can have a silk dress. Draw the pattern for me, dear,” she said.

The Almighty had another surprise awaiting us. Mrs. Gunawardena, the Principal of Mahamaya, was inside the same store. Upon seeing the two of us, she hurried over. To my utter amazement she said to mother, “Please

accept my apologies for keeping your daughter behind in the SSC class. The Principal of her former school misled me. Sir Bennett was quite right when he said that our Buddhist children are disadvantaged in Christian schools. I did not believe him then, but now I do.”

She was at pains to point out to mother, as guardedly as possible, that from then on proprieties would be strictly followed in affairs concerning me, whereas earlier she had been misled and was under pressure to terminate my career! The distrust that had spoiled our relationship before would be replaced by goodwill. She was speaking in a tone of voice that sounded sincere, and with so genuine a conviction that I was deeply moved.

I cannot remember mother’s response because she muttered incoherently, but I recall the smile upon her face.

Turning to me, Mrs. Gunawardena added,

“Beginning tomorrow, you’ll be in the HSC. I shall let the class teachers know. You’ve missed about four months of course work, but you’ll be all right. It shouldn’t matter if you take another year to complete the course work because you’re still very young.”

Mother and I were elated, she especially because, in her revised opinion, I was also sitting in a chair. The revision was long in coming, however, I had no doubt in my mind that it would eventually come and in a hurry.

Mahamaya College had done far better than many of the other colleges in our town and I did not let her forget that fact. When I went back to the HSC classroom the following day, every one of my former classmates, Savitri, Chandra, Manil, Rupa, and Indrani, greeted me enthusiastically. Several helped me, on a daily basis, to overcome problems I was having in my struggle to reach their standard. In the beginning, I was getting D grades. But I was neither discouraged nor saddened. The mourning and groaning resulting from the handicap caused by Mother St. Peter’s treachery echoed through our home while I was in the University Entrance form. I worked much harder than the other students to make up for the lost time and to convince my teachers that I was not of mediocre stuff. There was in my case an intensity of commitment that circumstances compelled. By the end of the first year, my hard work had begun to pay off. I was doing as well as the best among my classmates.

Before the university entrance examination I became so gaunt and thin mother worried I would fall ill and not be able to sit for it. But mother’s prayers for divine intervention paid off. She believed in superstition, evil spirits, devils and demons and feared that they might harm her daughters. Every tree that died in the garden, every pimple that erupted on my face, every affliction of cold, cough, fever, aches and pains within the family was

attributed to the indomitable force described as an evil eye. The gods were frequently called upon to protect the home from that scourge. She prayed for our enduring success. She prayed for me to study harder, pass every examination and enjoy the recognition I was bound to receive and the fame and fortune that would soon come my way. She prayed for the day, seeing me thus, she would be ultimately triumphant. Such exalted career I was bound to have, so much success I was bound to achieve and what glory and fame I would bring to our family!

At her instigation, on the eve of every examination, she and I visited the Vishnu and Kataragama temples in our town to pray for my success. In consideration of the few coins she placed in his palm, the priest chanted, *“Lord, hear me! These folk have come a long way to ask for your blessings. This young girl is sitting for an examination tomorrow. Her performance must be as fruitful as that of an elephant with long tusks goading the bark of a sap laden tree, Make her knowledge flow, I beseech you, O, Lord!”*

When the results were announced and published in the national newspaper, I dared not search through the list for my name fearing that I would not find it there. I was holding my breath in fear. “Would I make the cut?” I wondered; and prayed that I would for my parent’s sake. I feared the outcome of the mathematics examination one of four subjects I took. How many times I had, during those waiting months, done and redone each problem in the question papers to obtain relief of mind. To my joy father found my name without much search because it was among the longest, six words to it averaging about eight letters to each word!

So much glory in that year, 1954, both for Mahamaya College and me! I gained direct admission to the Ceylon University. For me, it was the loveliest moment of my life up to that point. I had done so well that I got in without a Viva Voce, an interview, along with several of my classmates, proclaiming to all disbelievers that we were among the brightest students in the island, and Mahamaya College was also among the top-notch schools in the country! Students who did less well at the entrance examination were summoned for a Viva Voce during which grueling process many, especially those who were barely sixteen, were weeded out. There were limited places in the residential University; perhaps three percent of those who sat for the entrance examination were admitted in those tough times. It was such an honor to get direct admission. Nobody said so in my presence, but I am pretty sure that many wondered how I managed to pull it off in about eighteen months. It reassured my parents that I was ready to take on challenges of life. Everybody in my family knew that my resolve, determination and intelligence were all pushed to the limits. I had redeemed

my reputation! Even today, after all these years, I feel threatened by even the sight of a Catholic school because of remembered pain and suffering. I recall the long laborious days of study because of many handicaps and the fear of examinations that gripped me, even polluting my dreams so many decades later. I endured so much for so long that even today I look back on school days with some horror.

To honor my effort, at the annual prize giving, I was awarded the prize for Perseverance; the prize was donated to the school by none other than Sir Bennet Soysa, one of the finest gentlemen I have met in this long life. He was a man of remarkable ability, a deep thinker, and resourceful individual. Mother, often said,

“He is noble man. If someone is in need and deserving, he will help generously; however, he will not broadcast it to the world. His right hand does not know what his left hand does in such cases.”

Those characteristics gave him, at all times, a grandeur that is uncommon in political leaders of Sri Lanka. The value of perseverance was proved beyond a shadow of doubt in my case; he could not but admire the perseverance I had demonstrated, and he recognized the fact. My thoughts were carried back to the day when he intervened on my behalf to provide assurances to Mrs. Gunawardena to have me re-admitted to Mahamaya. How indebted I was to that fine man. I had redeemed my debt!

I was the only student from the Senior Class of 1951 of the Good Shepherd Convent who gained admission to the University in 1954; only one student followed me a few years later. Therefore, the others are in my mind as youthful as when I last saw them in 1951.

What a prestigious milestone, gaining admission to the University was in my young life, the youngest in our family of three! What a success story for a student the nuns had described as ‘mediocre’! Not even in my dreams had I seen the joyous moment, and when it came, I was agitated by conflicting emotions: irrepressible fear at the thought of venturing out alone into the real world, an experience so far denied by my traditional upbringing, and exhilaration from expectation of a bright future I was sure to have because of my commitment and resolve to do well. Life was wonderful, marvelous and so full of promise! Had I not availed myself of every opportunity my parents provided to achieve goals? Did I not have an indefatigable mother to thank for those opportunities? I was certain that the will to succeed derived force from mother. My sister followed me to the University two years later because she was often in poor health. I had intelligence and good health and I rarely wavered from mother’s goals. While being entertained by father’s pursuit of music, philately and gardening, I was never far from mother’s

dreams and hopes for worldly success. I was fully committed to the singleness of purpose I daily saw and by which mother's conduct was solely motivated. Glad I was that I did not consider father's ways and mother's as mutually exclusive. Mother's frequent derision of his hobbies merely embarrassed me, but only temporarily; it did not prejudice my young mind to create a bias against him. Each parent played an important role in shaping my life. Had I pursued mother's quest for a professional career without father's love for more enduring things in life, I might not have had power to move on when that career came to a standstill in a foreign land.

I was sixteen at the time I entered Ceylon University. Success, so far, I entertained in my imagination, yearned for when I saw others achieve great heights, and prayed that it would also come to me. A university education was indeed the first step in the direction of a successful future; a crucial milestone along a rugged path toward a high professional goal that loomed before me. It was bound to shape my outlook, experiences, opinions and priorities and prepare me for a bright professional career. A place at the top suddenly



University of Ceylon, Peradeniya

became a possibility, nay a certainty. At the same time, there was sadness at the thought of leaving the shelter of home. On the other hand, I was eager for that day I walk into one of the hallowed halls of residence that I had previously seen as a visitor to start the next four years of my university career. So hallowed a place in my mind that I previously sought any opportunity to meet and get to know someone who was already resident. I saw on the face of mother a reflection of my joy, although her joy was for

other reasons as well. When my sister entered the University two years later, both of us had leveled mother's playing field, putting her on equal footing with her many cousins, sisters, brothers and all those other relatives who sympathized and trivialized her status and sighed that she was not blessed with even one son. One even implied that perhaps some bad karma was acting up in this life, because she had brought into the world three girls. She had proven to all that her girls were high achievers to be envied rather than denounced, deprecated and disparaged. No longer was she compelled to silence while they bragged about the accomplishments of their many sons. She now had the prestige of two university-attending daughters to recommend her, to make her feel even pleasantly superior to them. My sister and I were mother's passports to the world of privilege and exclusivity. Looking back it seems to me that those four years in the University of Ceylon were the best years of my life. The beauty of our University in those days is never completely out of my mind because in the darkest of days I pull me out of a sullen mood by harking back to that breathtaking world of natural beauty where my intellect flourished. It is a place that has grown sweeter in my thoughts because of events, associations and friends so wonderful to recall. The last British Vice Chancellor, Sir Ivor Jennings, who later became the Vice Chancellor of Cambridge University, designed the campus and was also responsible for its location in its idyllic setting. How fortunate we were that he had an instinct for beauty that matched that of the ancient rulers of Sri Lanka.

Peradeniya, the setting of the University, nestles within the central mountains that rise sharply above the coastal plains of our resplendent isle known as Serendip to ancient Arab traders from which the word serendipity derives. More than half of the coastline is surrounded by oceans free and clear of landmass for hundreds of miles. If the central mountains were high enough for an unobstructed view and the human vision more far reaching, perhaps one could see all the way eastward across the Bay of Bengal to the continent of Australia, westward across the Indian Ocean to Africa, and Southward to the

Antarctica. It is truly a beautiful setting for an ivory tower of learning, where I found so many things of such exquisite beauty, things that I had not gone there to seek. The Mahaweli zigzags between those hills and ridges. Trees, scrubs and grass, dense and tangled, grow thickly on the slopes that from afar the wilderness seems impenetrable. But those of us who ventured in those hills know that there are well-trodden paths winding upwards to lonely bungalows nestled within. The one best remembered is the Bachelor's Quarters where all the eligible lecturers and professors resided. Further

down the slopes are the many halls of residence. At one extremity of an open ridge, hemmed in by the green hills is Mars Hall; Arunachalam, Jayatilleka and James Peiris follow; each separated from the other by driveways curving upwards. On an isolated outcrop is my hall of residence, Sanghamitta, flanked below on either side by Ramanathan for men and Hilda Obeysekera for women. For some distance the grand Arts Theatre, Library and the Administration Building follow the steeply banked Mahaveli River. A lovers' lane threads its way beneath the dark shadows of the Administration Building, a venue for lovers when the hub of student activity ceases after sun down. During the four years of my residency, there were prolonged wet and dry spells causing inconvenience or disaster. The Mahaveli is a mighty river in flood, but I recall a time when a prolonged drought affected the water supply on campus. Water was rationed, and denied even for imperative use like the daily shower some of us were accustomed to having. My friends and I went down to the Mahaveli to bathe, but there was very little water even there. The river did not flow and lay in pools scattered in the gravel bed. We bathed by squatting around the largest pool in the dry riverbed and scooping water in small tin pans to pour over our heads. One year the South West Monsoon was a deluge; the river overflowed the steep bank, the floodwaters even swirled against the stilts upon which the Administration Building stands, designed thus to prevent this building being flooded.

The whole campus was designed to delight our senses and inspire search for knowledge in a tranquil setting. The buildings avoid obtrusion on the surrounding verdure. Evidence of careful planning is evident in the centrifugal assembly, a clever adaptation of location to function. The many residential halls are almost equidistant from the lecture halls and the administration building; those allotted to the men located further away. Sometimes I cycled over, across the Peradeniya Bridge to the other side of the river. It was usually a fine evening when the air was crisp, cool and invigorating. There were many such days because Peradeniya, nestling within the hill country, just like my hometown Kandy barely four miles to the east, has a mild climate. I went alone because in the midst of company, especially boys, I would frivolously manage to lose the experience of being connected in some divine way to scenery on the other side. Watching the beautiful campus grounds in the quiet evening from across the river, I felt great pleasure knowing that I lived in its midst. It provided the assurance that I was linked to a reverential and elevated purpose of a university education. I wished that I could go on living there for as long as I lived, a wish that translated into the hope that I would be a lecturer someday. The setting sun was bright; the residence halls nestling beneath the Hantane hills

shone golden amidst lush green gardens, their red roofs burnished by its rays. The hills of Hantane and the buildings amidst were all wonderfully distinct in the glow of sunset; the trees, bushes and grass highlighted in golden green. While I stood watching, the sun went down; but the beauty of the campus from across the Mahaveli was still visible in its waning light



University Gardens

Below James Peiris Hall the Hindagala Road meanders beneath ancient trees, their barks the habitat of moss and lichens. In season creepers bearing yellow flowers cascade from the lofty branches overhead. There, the road curves scenically and loops into a reverse curve around a glen thick with tropical vegetation, mostly of philodendrons and exotic ferns. Who but the most imaginative and ingenious would have conceived the idea of converting that glen into an open-air theater for the premier performance of Maname? It was a Sinhala opera written and produced by Dr Sarathchandra, the story line borrowed from Sinhalese folklore. What a smashing hit it was and how well the vegetation in the glen simulated the appearance of a wild beast-infested jungle, the habitat of the aboriginal tribe led by Maname? More exposure to world-class theater followed when Ashley Halpe produced, The Insect Play, under the expert direction of Jubal, an East European hired by the University to direct the budding theatrical talent on our campus. And more grand performances followed when a Steinway Grand Piano was rolled into the common room of Sanghamitta, my hall of residence. It was inaugurated amidst pomp, with a grand performance of a Beethoven Concerto played by Chitra Malalasekera, an accomplished pianist in those days. Occasionally, a world-class performance was staged on our campus. Marian Anderson's recital was a night to remember because it was staged in the only building large enough to house the huge attendance that

was anticipated- the indoor sports arena with galvanized roof. Outside the building thunder was rolling, lightning crashed and the torrential rain was pouring off the tin roof. How she battled to sing louder than the boom of intermittent thunder and sound of rain that fell on the roof like the crack of a thousand whips. Her songs poured down heavily from the stage as if they descended from heavens to the accompaniment of thunder, rain and lightning; they filled the hall and then rose upward reverberating from the tin roof in peculiar harmony. How the audience in the full house below applauded her effort each time she finished a song! We



Opera singer Marian Anderson

were also treated to special screenings of internationally acclaimed movies at the Art Theater on campus. For only a buck we saw the best that the world had to offer.

One of the great attractions of that University for me was the ease with which I could venture into the green hills surrounding our campus. From Hindagala Road several minor roads led to halls of residence alongside it, and a few wound upward to Hantana. The tarred roads soon became remote mountain trails and dirt-paths meandered between wooded slopes or plains of elephant grass. It was a strange landscape in which we found ourselves. Before us stood the mighty rock surface and we stood before a sea of high grass. The habitat of huge pythons, the men in the Hindagala boutique warned before we set out on our first excursion into the hills. When the trail ended, we beat a track in the grass with long sticks we carried for our protection and crawled through without fear as only the foolhardy would. We stalked like cats in the knee-high grass, sniffing at the air and scenting the smell of something unfamiliar and unpleasant in the breeze. We climbed

without stopping except for the briefest of moments to catch our breath and sip a little water; the sun was way up in the sky, the heat was unbearable and the humidity very high. Far above the tree line, there was nothing to see except more grass, a thick, dark, and impenetrable wilderness on either side. Amidst the sea of grass, we sat wherever we could, Aurasie, Usha, Laksmi and I. We ate the sandwiches we had in our sacks and drank the tea in our small flasks. We even smoked a cigarette or two unhurriedly, our faces flushed with the glow of daring youth, the inhalation of forbidden smoke and the pride of conquest. After the meal, we became cautious and it was well that we did because the afternoon was beginning to fade into a cool evening. We started the descent and came back to Sanghamitta as the sun went down behind the hills on the other side, and the heat and humidity of the day was spent. We were exhausted but delighted at having conquered our Everest! Now I try to remember those adventures and recall the joy of living within that beautiful campus.

Our learning experience demanded a great deal of reading. It was similar to that in Cambridge where the reading list given to students at the beginning of each semester was even longer. Some professors, during class time, had a predilection to talk about things that had only a vague connection to subject matter described in the syllabus. We were entertained with jokes and politics. We loved those professors who used the podium for jolly purpose or politicking. It entertained us to indulge in an hour's fun talk about trivialities; but those reference books in the reading list given to us at the beginning of semester had to be read before the examinations. Questions were often lifted out of them; question papers were mostly subordinated to a careful and detailed study of nearly every book in that list. When I came to the United States with a PhD from Cambridge where I was exposed to more of the same, it took me a while to get used to the classroom of students who did not care to read; wanted knowledge to resemble instant coffee crystals to simply stir in hot water and drink! If I had given those students a reading list at the beginning of the semester, entertained them brilliantly during class hours, whereas the periodic examinations I gave were not wholly based on the entertainment I had provided during class time, their term end evaluation of my performance would have been a scathingly brutal indictment. How unusual the practice of evaluating a guru, who is revered according to Indian tradition because the guru's mission is god-ordained!

I have often harked back to the ancient Indian story of Guttila and Musila, the former the master violinist and the latter, his brilliant student. The student's talent soon excelled that of his teacher. A competition between the two was organized by the community to determine who was the more

accomplished. On the fateful day, hours before the event, the gods intervened to prevent the inevitable outcome; Guttala was struck blind. The competition was cancelled; the evaluation never took place. In the Indian tradition, students do not evaluate teachers; rather, venerate them. How audacious, even according to the British tradition that prevailed when we were young, to evaluate our gurus!

Back then in the University of Ceylon, I had to be well read in order to survive the rigor of the British system of higher education. It has served me well, not in the sense of allowing me move up rapidly in my profession; rather, to move on with confidence and adopt a care less attitude because it sponsored creativity, resourcefulness, ingenuity, initiative and a solitary way of life, so necessary for contemplative thought and personal improvement. A feeling of indifference has come upon me; a feeling of almost superiority and disregard for other's biased opinions even when they wielded so much power over my destiny.

Within the confines of our University, I taught myself to speak confidently on most subjects that I knew and to arrive at a quick understanding of those I did not. I liked to debate and argue. In the beginning it was with servants and the workers hired by the mother or father to do odd jobs around the house. Because they all knew that I was a university student and there were so few in our time, I was held in high esteem. It was not as if I felt any superior to those who served us, for the new education put ideas of social equality into my head enabling me to judge poorly the injustice of our feudal system based upon master and servant with detachment and distaste. I disapproved of my mother! I put some distance between my parents who were responsible for its perpetuation and myself. During the term, I rarely went home; but father and mother came almost every weekend to visit bringing with them a tiffin carrier full of biryani rice and curry that my friends and I liked. We, like most young people who lived in boarding houses, had no stomach for the food served daily in the dining room of Sanghamitta. We complained that the meals served in the residential halls were not fit for human consumption. Parents of those who lived close by, like mine, made frequent pilgrimages bearing with them lunches and dinners for their sons and daughters and their friends. The warden of Sanghamitta Hall, Dr. Ram Aluvihara, was a Cambridge qualified medical doctor. She discoursed aptly with anyone willing to give her an ear of the great trouble she took to plan the daily menu of nutritious and tasty foods. Although she claimed to have worked tirelessly with the matron in charge of the kitchen to satisfy our fastidious taste buds, we contrived to find fault and remained defiant and unappreciative. Students were poised in permanent opposition to anything

and everything the administrators designed and implemented; we scoffed her because, in our jaundiced eyes, she was a representative of our enemy. The Peradeniya University transformed me. In our qualifying year, inspired by professors, like Drs. Vanden Driesen, Doric De Sousa, and H. A. De S. Gunasekera, who I most admired because of their formidable reputations as intellectual heavyweights, I acquired, in addition to the one of obtaining a bachelor's degree, another mission, objective and purpose in life; transforming Ceylon's decadent feudal society characterized by so many social injustices into the best of all possible societies- a socialist one so that each man, woman and child could live happily ever after, unbothered and unhampered or diminished by poverty. Several professors who students idealized were either conducting or participating in Marxist study groups. Those professors put new ideas of social equality and encouraged me to judge the social injustices that prevailed in Ceylon with indignation. Because I admired the intellect, dress and the "devil may care" attitude of those who expounded those ideas, and who, by their example, provided guidance to my young mind, I followed their call. For many of us, it was the excitement of participation in a huge international cause more than the socialist doctrine itself, which became the attraction in our mundane lives. We were delighted to champion the cause of the poor and disadvantaged. How empowered I felt and what confidence it gave to me, then a young girl who was barely seventeen at the time. I do not doubt that my commitment to socialism in those impressionable years was an impulsive decision made on the basis of hero worship. It was a stage in my life when my perspective and outlook lacked the balance of reality and the inability to reject the visionary. I was encouraged by those professors I hero-worshipped to oppose three isms: capitalism, imperialism, and fascism. They made a huge impression on me because some of them were not much older than I but in ranks where I wanted to be. They set the dress code, moral and ethical codes, and social code for wistful and impressionable young people like me who were inspired to think that they had the power to change the world. . We hero-worshipped them for their compassion and selflessness; the socialism they promoted sounded not only feasible but also desirable. Some of my friends ridiculed our cause and burst into fits of laughter when I talked about it. "Impractical and foolish", they denounced. But we had genuine feelings for the deprived and disadvantaged, even though we lived within the confines of an ivory tower. Perhaps I was lacking a firmly grounded and balanced ideological perspective, and thought of socialism as a doable democratic goal to pursue, one that accorded well with my Buddhist background. Indeed it was an awesome goal for me to adopt considering that the country was a fledgling

democracy, unused to even basic democratic principles such as one man, one vote. I knew for a fact that the poor sold their votes to the highest bidder. At Marxist study circles, the process of transforming our country from feudalism to socialism was discussed and described with great passion. We were fired by the description of struggle and warfare between classes. We united behind the socialist professors with an extravagance of enthusiasm that even they lacked. We wanted a Utopian society where everyone according to his ability, with selfless concern and good will toward all, provided for everybody according to his need. Our political immaturity showed in the firmness of our resolve never to let the small indigenous capitalist class take a powerful grip on the economy. We had to dislodge them before it was too late. If we waited too long, the struggle would be far greater because they, the new capitalist class, would become too deeply entrenched, too formidable and powerful to overthrow. We showed our remarkable ignorance of the realities of the process that brought about fundamental social changes, and also of human nature. There was no doubt in my mind that each man according to his ability would work and provide for each according to his need; that a classless society could be created and I was absolute in my resolve to bring it about. I wanted to see those changes happen in the four years of my University career! Because time was limited, in order to keep myself energized and committed, I never softened the rhetoric. I believed passionately then that we could create the best of all possible societies in Ceylon if we all came together under the socialist umbrella. How empowered I felt by the mere thought that the future of my country rested in my hands, and that I could make the difference. How exciting it was to be on a collision course with so many feudal and capitalist societies around the world!

My friend Nesta and I joined the socialist movement on the campus. Trapped in that ivory tower of learning, without contact with the real world outside, and also knowing that entry to the University could not be gained by the intellectually weak, we were fortified by a passport that distinguished us from everyone else outside. We assumed powers that we did not really have; we were ready to transform the world into a resplendent Utopia.

I also acquired a taste for the Bohemian. The walls of my room were plastered with Impressionist paintings, and on the windowsill above the writing table were smaller prints, in wooden frames, of Marx, Trotsky Lenin, and Rosa Luxemburg. Conspicuously placed on the bookshelf were the three volumes of *Das Kapital*.

At the University my sister and I were both successful. Although she was frequently ill, she made up for the lost time due to illness by applying herself

assiduously to work whenever she was able. She was also more level headed than I, and she, unlike me, never deviated from mother's goal of getting a degree and getting a good job. She told our parents that my concerns for working class and poor, like my taste for the Bohemian, were all put on. She told them that it was fashionable among intellectuals on the campus to declare allegiance to socialist ideologies. I got our highs, she said, by trafficking in other people's poverty and misery and living an unconventional and non-conforming life. My involvement, she said, was more a thing of fashion than passion. Though she too saw the same injustices and sympathized with the lot of the poor, she did not undertake the huge task of transforming our society believing it to be a futile one bound to end in frustration. I, on the other hand, always impetuous and indiscreet, graduated swiftly to a radical philosophy propounded by those whom I admired most.

Inspired by my close friend in the socialist movement, Nesta, I began campaigning for socialist causes. Nesta's good looks and non-conforming ideas, casual dress, talents, opinions and vigor in debate attracted admiring followers. She was a leader of all men and women, especially those with revolutionary zest. How I envied her for the poise and assurance with which she led! She had the ear and attention of the most respected of the radical professors. Because of my friendship with Nesta, some of her glory rubbed off on me bringing me into more than ordinary contact with important people on the campus. Instead of writing the weekly tutorial, I chose to surround myself with the comrades in whose company Nesta frequented the cafeteria, the place where we often congregated. The facile notion of a worker uprising as the cure for all social and economic problems took hold of all our discussions. In the cafeteria, eyeing each other across a table on which the tea we routinely ordered was turning cold, we led each other into discussions on the class struggle or ad-libbing from the Communist Manifesto, chanting its slogans in unison and with passionate conviction. Our youthful minds translated the socialist doctrines taught by our professors into even bolder version, and we never for a moment doubted our enduring commitment to it. Those sessions often ended with solemn promise to go on with the class struggle until the end of time.

Nesta joined many nondescript societies who were happy to welcome the aroma of her presence and she immersed herself in their activities. At odd times Nesta was spotted down the riverside on the arms of another comrade whose face was covered with a black beard, trimmed mustache and sideburns, or strolling with him along Lover's Lane, as the winding pathway between the Mara trees and overgrown shrubbery was then called. More

time she and I spent at socialist meetings and in the milk distribution center than the classrooms or library. The Milk Distribution Center was based on the generous supply of Care milk powder donated by the United States; but we preached the gospel of socialism to the hapless women who came there on Sundays for the small ration of milk cuddling a baby in the arms and trailing a couple of little ones behind. We were not allowed to give out cans of dry milk powder to those mothers to take away. We mixed the milk powder with water for mothers and their children. They drank as much as they could and took away a day's supply in the bottle they brought along. But how could a poor woman nurture the baby at her dry breast for the rest of the week? One mother told me that she fed the baby the juice of spinach leaves from her garden. From my small allowance I bought her a can of dry milk powder to feed her baby until the following week, applauding myself greatly for the sacrifice, and regretting that I could not afford to give one each to the other women who stood outside.

I resented the advice of parents, both of whom I judged from my lofty position as an emancipated woman. All of a sudden, it seemed to my astonished parents, that I had developed an intense dislike for their concerns and their "oppressive" ways. My sister, "so docile and so ready to please mother, was in cohort with the enemy".

"How will it all end?" she wondered. She tried to instill some sense by urging me to use my intelligence and continue to excel in studies and make our parents proud. She argued that they had no greater joy than to see us successful; and if we were successful, they would die in peace knowing we would not be destitute someday after they were gone. She told me that it was I who would gain most from my success; but I would not listen to any of it. I was so overcome by an intense dislike of conventional respectability, and with deliberate intent that infuriated her I played the part to perfection of an emancipated woman who was trying to shed the shackles of overprotective and overbearing parents.

"The capitalist system is doomed," I declared echoing the slogans of those radical professors, "because of the self-destructive mechanisms unleashed by it. John Maynard Keynes, the Cambridge economist, gave capitalism a new lease on life during the Great Depression when it was about to self-destruct by advocating government expenditure to make up for the deficit in private investment; however, as more and more unemployment is created by a system that tends to over-production, the workers would awaken, in country after country, to deal capitalism a fatal blow." A frequently articulated slogan was taken from the Manifesto of the Communist Party, "Workers of the world unite; you have nothing to lose but your chains." Poorer students

of whom were many, thanks to free education from grade school to the university, also let their anger rise against the establishment; we were strengthened in our mission by the allegiance and following of so many. Soon I become well versed in the doctrine of Marxism because I had read bits of Das Kapital, Volumes I, II and III, when I should have be studying. The servants in our home and the daily help that mother frequently employed were my easy converts. On the subject of exploitation of the underclass, I was voluble. Mother did not like her authority undermined by what she described as “communist rubbish”; father was indulgent, but he often laughed at me perhaps because I sounded ridiculous enough to him thinking that I could change the social structure of our country. He never took me seriously. One day, I overheard him tell mother, “She is still a child. Don’t upset yourself.”

Mother replied,

“I wouldn’t if I didn’t believe that her participation in this communist rubbish will interfere with her studies.”

He advised mother to ignore what he described as a passing phase in the lives of many young intellectuals. He kept his sanity while mother worried herself sick about the damage to my brain from the infusion of these fiery socialist ideas. He had read or heard somewhere that, “If you are not a socialist at age twenty, you have no heart, but if you are one at age thirty, you have no head.” He wisely decided to wait for me to grow up and out of what he figured were pubescent ideas that I was sure to discard like an old dress. He was even proud of my participation in the political process because I drew attention to him as the father of a university student even though it was often bad publicity that rubbed off, the father of a dissident. The manager of the Wembly Theater, a friend of his, called him one day to complain that he had spotted me with a group of striking picketers outside his theater.

Not realizing that religion was vital to a servant’s mental welfare, I contradicted their blind faith in Karmic intervention as totally misguided. It did not occur to me, at the time, that faith in Karma was important for their emotional wellness and sanity and that it may even have helped them to rationalize the iniquitous society they served. If a member of the family fell ill, it was often a servant who kept vigil at the bedside. Servants mostly wore clothes that the family had earlier worn and discarded; blouses many sizes too big and sleeves that hung loosely on thin arms; shirts without buttons and jackets with torn seams held together by safety pins; women servants wore saris that the women in the household no longer wore. Servants were the first to get up, often rising before break of dawn to cook a full breakfast

of string hoppers, kiribath, appa, roti or pittu and one or more curries or sambols to accompany. They were the last to retire at night, and only after dishes, pots and pans were washed, wiped and put away and the house swept, cleaned and tidied. I scoffed their simple thinking that they served in this life because of bad karma in a previous life. I argued vehemently with each servant,

“This is the only life you and I will live. When we die, it is all over! You suffer because you were born to a poor family. Destiny is not driven by our actions in previous births. Karma and rebirth pacify those who suffer in this life because they have no one to blame for their predicaments but themselves. Christianity also pacifies the poor because it is more difficult, it says, for the rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. What a formula it is for social stability! Every religion has a consolation prize for the poor. We can take charge of our lives and our destiny because the sins of some previous birth do not over-ride. The poor and those deprived must fight for their rights and freedom. When the struggle is won, then there will be social justice. If all those who are oppressed will only get together and have the courage to shake the oppressors off their backs, they will be free,”

My declaration of independence and freedom had no meaning for the poor servants who had nowhere else to go and nothing else to do. Servants were part of every middle class family in those days; often they dared not say aloud how they felt; they were afraid to retort to the impertinence of their masters or remonstrate at their unfair commands. As bad as the terms of servitude were, the conditions in their homes were far worse; they had no recourse to their own families.

There were many students from central schools, government funded and operated high schools in Ceylon, on the campus of our residential University. How would they know to use the many items of cutlery, the soup spoon, dessert spoon and fork, and the other paraphernalia that stared menacingly at them every time they sat down for a meal? Special orientations sessions were held for all to attend and learn how to use those fancy toilets that were equipped with flushable toilets and bidets. A discreet sign posted within every toilet read,

“These toilets function on the septic tank principle. Articles such as razor blades, toothbrushes etc. should not be placed in the water closets.”

Well, to come to the point, how novel and challenging an experience it was for those who came from humble rural settings? They were being rushed by their educational achievements along a course that hitherto only the more

privileged pursued and how indignant the privileged were when compelled to share their exclusive habitat?.

For the first time in their lives, students from those schools were in the company of wealthy students, vibrating with pride, self-confidence and assurance that came naturally to them because they were from affluent homes and had received their education within the cloisters of private preparatory schools like St Thomas' and Ladies College. I suppose, neither liked being in the company of the other. The class struggle among students erupted on campus over nothing more contentious than a pair of sneakers! It was a good illustration of tensions that ran below the surface of a campus serving a multi-social community. A girl from Ladies College, one who resembled an European because her mother was English, allegedly snickered at another from a central school who wore a pair of sneakers with her evening attire, and all hell broke loose. Her European appearance perhaps led the socially deprived and disadvantaged to see her as an agent of colonialism and capitalism. Those from central schools expressed fiery feelings about the incident; their emotions ran high. The outpouring of anger and resentment verged on paranoia. It was not who was snickered at, but those who later surrounded her that were most affronted. Encouraged by them, she became the central character in the social struggle and unfolding drama. That trivial incident erupted into a serious and sustained political crisis and uprising within campus, culminating in a general strike, sponsored by socialists; it crippled the University for a whole week. Newspaper reporters and camera crews were drawn to the campus to write about the saga. Nesta, by then the President of the Student Union on campus and at the forefront of the socialist movement spearheaded the conflict. She was also in the forefront of subsequent negotiations to bring it to a peaceful resolution. The large majority of students on campus who evinced no interest in politics and did not take even a spasmodic interest in the event, were delighted at the outcome; the strike crippled classes. When that class crisis was resolved after media attention and intervention by the Vice Chancellor, as if to confirm my growing anxieties about the direction our socialist movement was taking, other crises, triggered by even more innocuous, inconsequential and mundane things re-ignited class war.

I was becoming disillusioned with the movement because I saw the selfish motives of those who spearheaded it. My disappointment was aggravated by the fact that the hapless poor were often forgotten; students let their anger over trivialities express in demonstrations against the administration. They boycotted classes and marched along the winding road chanting slogans, 'Workers of the world unite!' when the food served in the residence halls

was bad or when it was served too hot or too cold. When water was rationed because of a prolonged drought, it was the same; they boycotted classes to show their sympathy for few government workers who were on strike in some faraway town. There was always a grievance to espouse and a hurt to tend, and grand socialist slogans obscured the worthlessness of causes that rioting students supported.

As my revolutionary zeal abated, I slowly drifted away from the cause. Some were scornful of what they described as my traitorous decision. The ultimate break happened late in the first year in the University. Thus far in life I had managed, because of my unflinching effort, to pass from class to class, without a single failure along the way, and always at the top of the class. But in that misguided first year in the University my luck ran out because I slacked in effort and commitment. I was referred in the subject I liked best of all, English Literature. I had not submitted a single tutorial during the whole year! Within my family, I lost my reputation as a super-intelligent person who did not need to cram for examinations. Those who were watching me closely and who earlier declared I was very intelligent, were now having second thoughts. Mother asked, ‘What happened to you, child? All your friends passed. How did you get referred? One of your friends told me that only fools failed that examination.’”

For someone who had not experienced failure before, it was most demeaning. My reputation had plummeted. The friends I made in the University did not know me as a high school student where my skills as a high achiever were amply demonstrated. As it dawned on me that they would think that I am a fool, I decided to change the course of my life to regain and defend my reputation. I had failed because I thought that I would succeed without much effort. The wound was self-inflicted; the cure was in my hands. A very remorseful me set out to redeem my tarnished reputation. Privately, I was also becoming disillusioned about the vainglorious attitudes of Nesta and her comrades. They appeared to ignore a fact that seemed so obvious to me that no matter how hard we tried we would never resolve the complex problems and issues concerning political and social conditions in our country because we were unable to garner the whole-hearted support of the poor at large. I had observed that the large disparities in wealth within the country did not appear to concern the poor; their sight seemed to be obscured or clouded by an inexplicable inertia concerning their plight; aroused instead by observed differences in caste, community and creed. Ignoring their economic plight and predicament that I was focused upon, they were exercising the ballot to oust those of disadvantaged communities

or castes. People even laughingly said secret ballot enabled them to sell their vote to the highest bidder and then vote for whomever they like. They did not appear to want redemption from the poverty that characterized their daily lives. In those circumstances, the illusions I harbored about social and political change and prospects for socialist ideals like “every man according to his ability to every man according to his need” were visionary; my judgment and aspirations were seriously flawed. It appeared to me that our political aspirations were untimely and also beyond reason. The socialist movement on campus, glorified by the students to make it look huge and sophisticated by fastening it on to the international Trotskyite Movement, was really a pathetic affair that was mostly motivated by trivial events like the sneaker affair.

No one saw or heard from me for the next two months, neither the comrades nor Nesta because I was disillusioned with the socialist movement on campus and intended, rather hesitantly at first, to distance myself from it. I spent two months of that summer vacation at home closely guarded by mother who would not let those “horrible friends” anywhere near her daughter.

Late at night, during vacations away from the University, I studied, while Alice, the woman who came to our household as a servant when she was barely ten years old, sat on the cement floor with only the wall for support, her weary head drooping on her small chest. I went nowhere even when mother or father pressured me to accompany them on social calls or father’s many “pilgrimages” to fun places. I was mostly seated at my desk, a memento from school days, getting up from the chair only to stretch out or at mealtime. In the night I was then the last to go to sleep whereas formerly, it used to be Alice or one of the other servants.

“Alice, why are you awake? Go, lie down and sleep! You have to get up early and start breakfast,” I ordered.

“Aney hamu , how can I sleep when you stay wake? It is very late. Why don’t you go to bed?” Alice replied.

“ I have so much more to read. See all these books on the table and those on the floor? I must read them all and learn them well before the examination that is only one week away. How I envy you, Alice!” I said with a sigh.

“Why torture yourself everyday? You have been at home almost one week. You haven’t gone out or even eaten a proper meal. If you fall ill, who is going to take the examination?” asked Alice appearing stressed at the thought of my falling ill.

The good times we shared together when I was much younger inclined Alice to believe that happiness was not to be found between the covers of those

books. And even it was, I was unlikely to find it at that late hour of night. The room was dark except for the jaundiced light cast by a table lamp that did not reach far. She was also weary. She lifted her small arms above her head and gave out a deep sigh. In spite of being tired after a long day's work, concern for my welfare made her seek an opportunity to serve me—even at that late hour.

“Can I bring you a glass of chocolate milk?” she asked in a hopeless voice. “Why, of course, Alisso! But you will have to light the fire again,” I replied knowing how fatigued she must be from the many activities of the day.

“I am not going to light the fire. I'll boil the milk on the stove,” Alice said and ambled away on her short legs. I rested my head on the edge of the desk and awaited her return.

“Here, drink this and go to bed,” commanded Alice handing me the cup of hot chocolate.

“How swiftly you made it, Alisso! Someday when I pass all these exams and get a big job, I shall give you all the fine things in life. Someday I shall take good care of you as you are now doing,”

I felt the need to let Alice know that I will never forget her. I was inspired to study even harder to take care of the people dear to me, and would be dependent on me someday, Alice ranking high among them. Since I left home, I had seen less and less of Alice, but when I came home during vacations, the other servants I used to know were long gone, and sometimes even mother to visit her ancestral home; but the house was always in Alice's good hands. She knew where the money was, and where mother had hidden keys to cabinets and wardrobes she kept locked. She was always there to give our household the sense of continuity. In my biased mind, Alice was a member of our family; the surrogate mother to whom I went for guidance and help when mother was not around. And who would have guessed at that time Alice would outlive mother, father and two sisters? Who can tell she might even outlive me?

I sat for the English test again and passed. Soon after, I said “goodbye” to my comrades. I withdrew from the socialist circle, made new friends, discarded the portraits of Trotsky et al, and gifted my collection of socialist books and photographs- all at the same time. Humiliation and contrition added years of wisdom to my young life. I came to a selfish resolution: to live for myself and leave politicking to the more zealous believers in social justice.

For sometime thereafter, there remained in me a feeling of emptiness, dissatisfaction with the intellectual pursuits in particular and with life in general. I grumbled about mundane things like the bland food I was daily

served, or the hill I had to climb several times a day to get back to the residence after daily lectures. No longer fired by the large mission of changing history, I dribbled my bad feelings worrying about my immediate surroundings. It was yet another passing phase in my young life. I got over that phase much faster than I did my flirtation with socialism. I was too astute and sensible to let bad thoughts about trivial incidents affect my resolve to excel. I did not know then how blessed our generation of university students were. In those days, very few students were admitted because each student had to be accommodated in his or her own furnished room; admission was therefore limited by availability of accommodation. There was less pressure on the resources in lecture rooms, libraries, Halls of residence, walkways, bicycle paths, cafeteria, movie-theater and playgrounds. I did not know enough to appreciate the comforts, beauty, splendor and conveniences then, but was taken aback at the huge discrepancy in living conditions on the campus in our time and when I visited the campus about ten years later. Many more students were being admitted and those same facilities we had enjoyed were shared in ways that I thought were harsh and insufferable. Instead of expanding the available accommodation to take in more students, as they would have done here in the United State, students had to shrink in size and expectation to fit the available accommodation. How ugly our beautiful campus looked in its overcrowded state! The students, however, appeared to be far more contented than we were because, at the same time, profound changes had occurred in the country at large because of population pressure, availability of space and resources. Those changes had lowered expectations of the people in general and successive generation of students in particular. The pursuit of a university education and the many activities related to it occupied my attention in the next three years. It almost seemed that I had become a different person. I thought I knew who I was and was confident in the discovery. I was now able to hold my own in my own little world and had no need to tack myself on to another or to any ism to derive comfort and intellectual support. I found little time to engage in too many extra-curricular activities, and spent more time in those activities that promoted quiet and contemplative thought.

There were plenty of lesser hills surrounding the campus that I occasionally climbed in the company of new friends. It was up there, when we were walking together that Savitri and I saw the first performance of a sexual act. It was the day before our last day on that beautiful campus after four years of thorough immersion in all kinds of self thought and demonstrated

knowledge. One year had passed and then another and so swiftly the four years had gone by.

Savitri and I, even though we did not admit to each other, were utterly dismayed that it was over and we were about to venture out into a future of uncertainty and perhaps even risk.



Hantane

We had to break the gloom by getting out of Sanghamitta to walk up in the hills of Hantane one last time and recapture, just for a short time, some bygone pleasure; to go where we had once wandered with excitement and great happiness. It was a hot and humid afternoon when we would ordinarily have sought shelter from the unrelenting sun that was most ferocious at that time of day; but we did not mind the discomfort of the long climb for the sake of the last climb. The pain of parting from my beloved campus was dulled if not wholly wiped out by the sight of my beloved hills. So we went forth, our limbs stiff even with the accustomed trudge uphill, climbing warily on that hot sunny afternoon. There was not the slightest breeze, so the heat felt more oppressive. Ahead of us, along the lonely and winding road we saw a parked car. I noticed it enough to see that there were two people, a man and woman, inside for which we were thankful because it was a deserted area where foot traffic was seldom seen. We were on the verge of turning back, but seeing that there was company, decided to keep walking; the pain in our legs and feet diverted attention from the pain in our hearts that our sheltered living within that ivory tower was no more. Suddenly, the car started to vibrate as if the people inside were suffering from epileptic fits.

“O, no!” I cried out and started out in a sprint. I truly thought that the couple were overcome by heat and needed urgent help. Savitri caught up with me and pulled me back, but not before I had caught a good look of the activity within: a man atop a woman pounding away with so much vigor and brutal force. So deeply engaged in a blissful activity, they were oblivious to our intrusive presence. Savitri whispered in my ear and we both had to cover our mouths with our hands to stop from convulsive laughter at my stupidity as we ran away from the site at as fast a pace as our tired limbs could muster. The couple in there had clinched the experience of the last day on that beautiful campus with an act of ultimate togetherness!

How fondly I now recall the many bus trips to far away resorts singing bailas, the spirited music we inherited from Portuguese; the many times we ordered picnic luncheons and rode the Hindagla bus to the Royal Botanical Garden, about two miles away, to walk among the gorgeous flower beds in which dahlias of gorgeous colors, as large as dinner plates, bloomed; or along the avenues of the Royal Palm trees or gaze upon the multi-colored Cattleyas in the Orchid House and the many species of Bromeliads in another Green House covered with ivy. I recall the many occasions we saw award winning movies in the university cinema, remembering well the Trilogy of Satyajit Ray, and how alluringly we dressed up to entice those of the opposite sex or draw the envy of our own; how we sat in study circles that my friends and I organized, debating and arguing about the pro and cons of world events that stirred our imagination. I recall fondly even that silly but favorite pastime of lounging in the small reclining chairs within the partially enclosed corridor outside our rooms fronting Dr. Sarathchandra’s home and keeping track of cars that came and went from his house, especially Dr. Vandendriesen’s, affectionately known as Vandy. In our time Vandy happened to be the heartthrob of a friend whose last name was Cook. Vandy became Cook’s Joy, the popular cooking medium in our time! Even those professors who were severe and demanding seem endearing now: Mayhead, Passe, De Sousa, Jayatilleke, Thambiah Pillai, Sarkar and the list goes on.

In my time a university education was not a kind of mass production; it was relatively exclusive and the memory that lingers in my mind is that it was a beautiful experience. It was a residential university that provided room for only the top two or three per cent of students. I felt privileged to be in the company of so many distinguished students in an atmosphere of youthful excitement. I was challenged by their scholarship. As I matured within that habitat, I was neither too solitary nor too sociable, resorting to company only when I wished to be entertained, and giving myself up to solitude whenever

I wished to study and contemplate. I was not entirely to myself, and not entirely at the service of others. I began to see the wisdom of “Madhyama Prathipadawa” or the middle way. I had matured!

Looking back it seems to me that our generation, among the last few to be educated in the English medium, was well immersed in Western culture. Because of it, how easy it was for those of us to move to the West when the climate within the island became too hostile, and when its politicians, in an effort to woo the votes of the many who were inspired by a xenophobic nationalism that even excluded our allegiance to Indian culture from which our own descended, put policies in place that made us foreigners in our own land. They made our beloved country more insular, vulnerable and its people prone to violence. If only we had inherited, after our Independence, sagacious statesmen like Nehru and Gandhi who knew how to weld the great divisions and bring people of various groups together! After Independence, the pendulum swung to the other extreme, from English to Sinhala only. However, we had acquired, in those long years of our exposure to the British-style education, an advantage that those who came later did not share. My education prepared me to serve the world, even far better than those who grew up in the West because I was the inheritor of two world-class cultures: the European and Indian.

How swiftly, in retrospect, those years of my girlhood went by. There is no satisfaction to be had from comparing what I was then to what I have become. How joyous those days of high hopes and expectation are to look back upon and what a hoard of events to recall! Merely in dreaming about the future there was joy then. Faith I had aplenty that my future would be radiant because the sun was shining on my life. Empowered by an unflagging perseverance and encouraged by doting parents, I believed that my future was sure to be radiant. I dreamt of a mansion with large bay windows overlooking an immaculate lawn with borders of colorful flowers and in the midst beautiful rose-garden. From the house came the sweet melody of a song floating toward me as if on wings. To hear it better, I walked toward the gracious house; but with each step I took, the house and the song receded, faded away and slowly disappeared. I woke up to a feeling of huge loss. For a long time thereafter, I closed my eyes each night hoping to summon the house and its garden back into existence; to walk in the garden and see beyond the hedge to what lay there, to touch the roses, smell their fragrance and listen to the song, over and over again, until it was fixed in mind to hum or sing upon awakening. The dream that gave vigor to my ambitions, I never saw again, but I hoped to discover it and its sweet sensations in real life someday. But my friends and I who wandered



My dream home

round the world in search of a better life are destined to keep on dreaming. We have a natural resiliency perhaps inherited from our nomadic ancestors, Vijay and his clan, who drifted down to the shores of Sri Lanka from somewhere in North India. We have formed friendships, not nearly as binding as those to the nuclear family that we left behind when we cut our moorings and drifted away.
