

# *MEMORIES ON MY MIND*

## *END OF AN ERA*

*BY*

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## END OF AN ERA

I am the youngest of three girls conceived in rapid succession, thirteen months between my two elder sisters, C and S, both now deceased, and nineteen months between my second sister, S, and I. In those days, girls were deeply discounted, especially a third-Me! Whispers abounded. She (mother) has bad karma. She is destined to bear only girls. There were no ultrasounds then to determine whether the third fetus had a penis dangling between the legs and if not, abort. I came to the world crying like all babies, but louder perhaps because the midwife yanked me out in disapprobation when she saw a vagina tail's end. I had one advantage that my two older sisters did not. I was lighter complexioned than either in a country where the dowries of fairer girls are a lighter burden on parents. A few would stare at us, the three unlucky girls, and ask our parents, "How come your two older daughters are dark when neither parent is?" There was condemnation in those inquiries that hurt my sisters' egos. It got to a point where mother would often say, in the presence of all three, "The elder two have sharp features and the youngest only a fair complexion." Perhaps she said so to give confidence to my sisters, but I would stand before a mirror and tweak my nose to make it sharper, push in my chin because "it jutted out". I thought I was the ugly duckling.

My father, a happy-go-lucky and lackadaisical man, lacked the resources to live it up, but his inclinations were always riveted on the fanciful, and a life of ease and comfort. His modest livelihood and elegant lifestyle both contributed to the description of himself, "A gentleman of rank, but with no money in the bank." However, he led a life that the rich would have envied. Being married to mother who was so resourceful in taking care of our needs, so full of energy and initiative in gaining her and our objectives or accomplishing something, and so driven by a frugal mind to succeed even on a tight budget, enabled father to live far above the level dictated by his bank balance- a life of supportable elegance, without giving up one hobby, omitting any of the few vices he indulged in or foregoing any costly habits. Because of his lifestyle and mother's resourcefulness, we grew up in the "Richerello House, an apt description because father's name was Richard.

In the beginning, when they were newly married, mother tried hard, at first with sweet encouragement, and later in her commanding way, to lead father in the pursuit of wealth, but he was not inspired. He heeded not when she complained of his "worthless" occupations and the many hours he spent on them. During more

than sixty years of their life together, she never tired of reminding him of the many golden opportunities that slipped by on a daily basis. He shook off her opinions like the proverbial duck the water on its back. The power mother acquired in her marriage was through father's failure to do things that he was required or expected to do to promote the well-being of our family; power gained by his default and abdication from responsibility than by her deliberate effort or conniving mind to gain control. Mother often complained that he never made sufficient effort to develop his talents and skills for the purpose of making more money. During the many years of their marriage, mother's personality changed utterly with every new challenge that father would not meet. I think that very early in the marriage mother resolved to make up for his lethargy, or rather his indifference to things that mattered most to her. The more complacent father was the more strength and power she acquired. She was ambitious beyond compare, driven, determined, unwavering, courageous and resolute. She was striving, within the limits of father's and her income, to achieve so much for her three girls; to obtain for all three a little of the good life she enjoyed before her marriage: the best food, clothing and a spacious home, if not the bounty from the several estates her father owned. She tried to compensate the lack of dowry money by giving each a good education that was like the installation of a good plumbing system for a shower of gold everyday of our lives. She was smitten by the knowledge and common sense that a good education was our means to a richer and more fulfilling life. She heaped faith on it resolute in her belief that it would augment our status, elevate our standing, improve our visibility and enhance our marketability in marriage. His inability to make more money did not interfere with our social position because she did all she could to make up. Though she had servants, mother could cook meals like none other. Father's cousin, Rosie, owned a milk bar on Ward Street (now Dalada Vidiya), in those days. Mother made some of the savories and sweets in her kitchen that Aunt Rosie sold in the milk bar to the pedestrians that hurried past without time for a sit down meal. Mother's nifty fingers tailored dresses that, when worn, swept us to the center of attention and admiration.

"My, don't you look pretty in that dress," they all said.

She was an expert seamstress. She not only tailored clothes we wore, but also dresses for the children in our neighborhood. She cultivated anthuriums of different colors, mostly red, pink and white and a few of the coveted dark purple variety. The flower is shaped like a hood and borne on a long fleshy stem;

anthuriums were in big demand in those days. She sold anthuriums to a flower vendor in the market place and with the proceeds bought groceries from other vendors. Thus, she did so many profitable things to earn more money and make ends meet.



*Father- First from the left*

Mother would have, if she could, planned our lives through Samsara, richly endowed and free of want. Like a bull tied to a harness, she was tethered to our well-being; a tenacious worker whose efforts, without any regard to her own comfort, were spent on acquiring a name or fame for her three girls that her husband failed to achieve for himself or the family. In her wonderful methodical way, or with calculating reason, she was responsive to every little need in our lives, trying desperately hard to fulfill each and often succeeding to our utter amazement. Did father even wonder how the genteel village girl he married transform into the formidable and unrelenting matriarch, the wife and mother who ruled the family with kind but firm hand? Father did not appear to mind the usurpation of power. It seemed to us, his three daughters that he was glad and relieved to let it go. As long as his wants were attended to, she did not run out of money to put good food on the table, kept the roof over our heads, he had money to dress elegantly, and even indulge in his “trivial pursuits” as mother liked to describe them, he seemed happy and contented in his diminished role; or did he even think it to be a diminished

one? Perhaps he thought of himself as the constitutional monarch in our household who reigned in pomp and style while mother ruled in painstaking discomfort. We often reminded him that none of his friends and relatives enjoyed the quality of life that he did and he was glad of that. He depended on mother to make it even grander, or so it seemed to me at the time I was growing up in the parental home. However, father grabbed the little money that came his way, not investing a cent even if given the ironclad warranty of doubling it within the year. One of the most tight-fisted people he was, looking after his money like the guard who watches over the crown jewels. He probably figured that because he did not go after the many birds in the bush, he had better hold on to the one in his hand. His small savings were deposited in several savings accounts that paid a small and fixed interest rate.

“For your mother’s and my funeral expenses,” he explained.

Vaulting ambitions did not fire father’s search engine. He would not meet challenge and hardly knew how to cope in a crisis. In marriage he transformed his wife into a strong woman who gave confidence to the family, supplied comfort and attended to our anxieties. She plotted, planned and worked indefatigably to protect our life from all that made it insecure.

Recollections of father and mother awaken a series of thoughts in my mind. In somber silence I reflect on their lives and times as though I was performing a solemn service in their memory, contrasting the relative ease with which he spent most of his life and the hardships she had to endure. How splendid and varied his life: fun-filled sport amidst homely comforts! Father and mother, though incompatible in tastes and hobbies, yet so complete a pair between them. Ironically, my parents’ marriage survived with such sweet rapport between them. Many friends and relatives often came to visit because word got around about mother’s hospitality and excellent culinary skills and father’s genial and welcoming personality. We also lived in Kandy, the tourist capital of my country. They, mostly mother’s relatives, came from all over, rich and poor, close relatives, and those not so close. All were royally received. Because of mother’s housekeeping skills, our household financed by limited resources met unlimited ends. We had no competition from Queen’s Hotel, Suisse Hotel or the King’s Hotel. In our home it was free bed and board.

Father favored me because I shared his interests and his “trivial” pursuits. He and I developed a special relationship; I doted on him and he honored me highly. I am

pretty sure I would not have been a high achiever in life if he had not been at my side; encouraging me like no other, and believing in me when no one else did. I told him I was going to be successful someday and I would also have lots of money in the bank. We were united in the mission to reach my vaulting goals. Meanwhile we serviced our dilapidated car together, did gardening, collected stamps, picnicked and hiked together; that's how he celebrated each new day of his long life. We did things that mother said did not make the family any richer; but the two of us had loads of fun!

Fast-forward the reel to thirty years later. I am married and living in the USA. I had a strange dream: I was hiking in some strange place, and did not watch where I was going. Tripping on a stone I fell into a deep grave. Under my feet, the ground felt wet and spongy. Afraid that I might stumble again and sink into the bog to be buried alive this time, my hands reached out to grab whatever was within reach. There was nothing to hold on to- in front, behind or on either side. Nothing! The surrounding was a void of darkness having the gloom and aura of a dungeon, and its stale and moldy smell. If only my horror could find expression! But the fear welling in my chest and rising to the throat came out in a gurgle and not the ear-splitting screech I wanted to let out so that someone above could hear. Looking up, I saw in the distance a blinking light, like a distant star, small but a sign that I was still connected to the outside world. It began to move forward like a flashlight, coming closer and closer, as if to investigate, search and rescue. But hope turned to horror. The light became increasingly glaring, soon packing intensity no less blinding than the total darkness that surrounded me before. I shut my eyes tight to create my own darkness and inviolable space. When barely settled in this posture and mood of tame forbearance, a noise, more oppressive and fearful, threatening and overwhelming, filled the grave and tolled like a bell in a mighty cathedral, again and again. Another, more urgent under-tone seized my ears. It was the telephone!

I cannot remember whether I was relieved or not that the nightmare was over. In my half-dazed, half-petrified, semi-conscious wakefulness, I reached out and flipped the light switch on. Squinting to shield my eyes from the sudden burst of bright light, I reached out and grabbed the phone thinking in a vague sort of way that this was perhaps the lifeline I was hoping for. A dim orange light illuminated the dial of the timepiece on the dresser. It was four-thirty to be exact- the early hour of a late December morning. Who on earth would want to call at this crazy

hour? Mother's voice exploded in my ear,  
"Father's gone!"

"Oh, no!" was all I said by way of response. I stared into space without looking around. Because of the many years of bad, sometimes traumatic, experiences, I had acquired the habit of keeping my emotions bottled up within; not letting anyone or anything arouse me or showing anybody, not even Jey or the children, how badly I felt.

I opened my eyes wider and glanced about to make sure that I was still not under the spell of my nightmare. I turned my head to look at Jey; his voice reached me at the same moment convincing me that I was indeed awake. "Who was it?" he asked. "Did you have a bad dream? You woke me up. You were making strange guttural noises before the phone rang?" His uneasy eyes looked into mine.

"It was mother," I replied, "Father's gone."

Both Jey and I knew what mother meant. He was too old, eighty-nine years to be exact and feeble as well, to abscond from home or go anywhere alone. In the many years it took me to grow up and leave home, he did not run away even when his wife and three daughters drove him to the brink of despair and desertion. Indeed, I remember many of those moments. There was only one place he could go to at this late stage in his life, to Nirvana, although he lived in a way that combined *joie de vivre* with ample self-indulgence. Though much advanced in years and in fair health the last time I saw him, six months ago, somehow his death came as a shock. For someone so old, fair health is satisfactory, or at least good enough to create in me, who wanted him to go on living forever, the impression of many more years of eventful life. He always seemed like a person invulnerable to the ravages of time and to the inexorable power of death; someone who would not die, at least not so soon, because he had a powerful urge to live; he and life seemed inseparable and he celebrated life to the fullest. Facing news of his death was more difficult and unreal for these reasons. It slowly dawned upon me that I would never again see him in this life. His death was my loss. For him it must be a blessed relief to leave it all behind: his decrepit body and the town that had suffered a "sea change into something new and strange." The changes weighed heavily on him. There were more vehicles on the narrow streets taking him longer to wobble embarrassingly across while holding his breath lest a crazy driver bumped into him. His friend, the manager of the Elephant House, was also gone. The new manager did not know him. He drank the glass of milk sitting at a table

all by himself, without a word to anyone, listening to the heavy sounds of screeching vehicles, and the screaming, squabbling, and shouting street vendors. It was not the safe and friendly habitat he knew in days gone by. Before he left the house mother warned him to be careful of muggers and robbers. Perhaps it was time to say goodbye to the town he knew so well and live in a land of dreams: a lake teeming with fish and tortoises, the air sweet with bird song and friends who stopped to chat in the street about this and that; they were never too busy. That era had passed compelling changes in his sedentary lifestyle; his life was trending downward.

Jey looked sideways at me afraid of what would happen next, and saw me sitting up in bed with a stubborn mien: my chin pressed upon the chest and wide-open eyes fixed upon the rumpled sheet that lay across my body, and lips resolutely pressed together. It was that look for which he kept a careful watch! Jey knew that my mind was made up and he dreaded the outcome. Tears of sorrow he expected, but my silence bothered him. Was this my response to grief, he wondered? He knew that I loved my father dearly; that I was his most favored daughter and he, my dearest friend. Jey wondered what he could say or do to alleviate the pain. He had the habit of thinking things to himself and saying nothing unless strongly provoked to do so, and even then, saying as little as possible. This indulgence troubled no one, least of all me. Besides, he did not know exactly how to cope with this situation. Knowing not what else to do, in customary helplessness, he stretched out his hand and stroked my head.

"Don't be sad," he managed to stammer, "Your father lived a full life." After uttering those words, many more than he would have liked to, he lapsed into a mood of silent anxiety. He was afraid to ask because he knew I liked to complicate matters, and his life in the process. This situation was serious- the death of the father I loved so dearly. Endowed with an intuition that further talk would complicate his life in a huge way, he said no more. Still holding the receiver to my ear, I sat in bed listening,

"He died of pneumonia," mother said. "Pneumonia, did you say?" I said incredulously. Mother said in a broken voice, "Aiyoo, child! Just as I said it would happen. Will anyone listen to me? No! He was walking around the house, wearing a light cotton sarong and shirt. It was a very cold and windy day. The cold winds and the wet air were seeping into the house through the grills above the windows." Mother was always right in matters of life and death. Even after all these years of



separation, I was ready to believe implicitly anything she said. There came to me an insane thought at that moment, that I was becoming more and more like mother, both in appearance and behavior. Her manners and characteristics had rubbed off on me, who was so critical of her while growing up. Because they are unrelated, more startling and inexplicable, were the shared character traits of my father and Jey, both lackadaisical and easy-going people, both content with dreaming of success in life rather than striving to achieve it; happy with the bird in hand and not going after two in the bush.

My mind drifted away. The passing away of a parent is like a confrontation with death; children are swept to the forefront of life to wait for their turn. In the shortest spell of time I saw the mutability of life, and the disappearance of a generation into the region of mind called memory. No longer will I be able to hear him, talk to him, touch him or see him. He is consigned to my memory, a storehouse where details tend to get hidden behind the clutter of things and incidents to become vague and only burnished sentiments remain. A strong gust of icy-cold wind blew in through a partially opened window. At the window a few feet away that I reached in a leap, the receiver still in my hand, I saw the wintry scenery outside in deathly pallor against the darkness of pre-dawn not yet dispelled by the faint glow out of the east as the sun drifted closer to our domain. The sky in the east was beginning to catch the shimmer of dawn and the silhouette of objects was faintly defined against it. The heavy fog that had fallen like a white shroud upon the valley the previous day had all but disappeared revealing the deathlike quality of landscape beneath. The picket fence and the trees shivered in the wind that blew with fitful force. Back in bed after shutting the window, my whole thoughts were again riveted to the mother's narrative of how it happened and in assessing my loss.

"Hello! Hello! Are you still there?" mother's voice echoed over the phone.

"I'll call back as soon as I make travel arrangements. Don't do anything; don't finalize funeral arrangements until I call you back," I said gently. I wanted to see my father one more time, to see how he looked in death. I wanted to participate in the final event of his glorious life. I wanted see how death had vanquished the indomitable body that even old age could not completely conquer. I had to see him one last time!

"Are you sure you want to go alone all that way?" Jey asked. Silenced by the withering look I cast in his direction he once again lapsed into silence. He tried to

imagine how his father-in-law's death might complicate his life. I was certain that he dreaded the thought of a week or more of caring for the two girls, the housework and coping with a fulltime job. He had neither the strength of mind nor the power of limb to cope with the housekeeping chores. Indefatigable as I was, I sometimes complained that the work was driving me mad. He tried to persuade me to return as soon as possible, "If you decide to go, don't stay too long, the girls will miss you," he said. Ignoring him, as I often do when I know he is articulating his selfish thoughts, I talked to mother,

"Yes, I will call you back after making flight reservations," I repeated, anxious to terminate the call and begin others. Unable to hold his silence longer, Jey asked again,

"Are you sure you want to go?"

"Of course," I snapped at him, while placing the receiver down, moving up further against the headboard and also giving him a stunning stare. The tone of displeasure and the severe look on my face were most disconcerting, but he would not give up.

"Are you sure?" Jey persisted.

"Yes! Yes!" I replied impatiently. I was answering a plaintive voice from the recent past, from the very edge of existence, even though I knew not then that he would go so soon.

"I will never see you again, my child," it said, "will you come to my funeral?" He had posed the question from the brink of death that he had clearly foreseen. It came to me now as it had many times before that I had seen very little of him in recent years because I lived more than ten thousand miles away. Now it was too late. I could not roll back the clock even if I could somehow come up with the airfare and find the time to go back home. He would not be there to greet me. Jey was annoyed that his life was being complicated by this unforeseen event. Concerned at the sudden turn events had taken, he wondered how he might say what was on his mind without provoking me.

"You can't make travel arrangements to be in time for the funeral. Remember, we are twelve hours behind and you'll be losing half a day going from West to East." It was his trick to appear as if he was truly concerned about my welfare when he was only thinking of his own. I heeded him not, and there was no further conversation between us. I prided myself in the fact that resolute decision-making was my strongest and special attribute. To avoid controversy and confrontation, when any strong opinion took possession of me, after the first sentence or two, I

spoke no more. I did not engage in needless argument. However, on this occasion, a feeling of guilt came over me knowing that Jey was a lousy nurturer and housekeeper. I often complained that he made no effort to help me with the household chores or with the children's homework. He was like a baby who slept soundly as long as its tummy was full and the diaper dry. It was not surprising that as the years went by that Jey should have come to look on me less as a wife than a combination of mother, cook, and caretaker. Occasionally, he picked up the dishcloth to help dry the china or glassware, but halfway through the task, would abandon it on a coffee table or another piece of furniture, lie down on the couch and doze off. Ambivalent desires kept me tied to the harness while I volubly protested about the long hours of labor thrust upon me. Curiously, marriage inspires in women the dread of drudgery and paradoxically, the hope of a fun-filled life. I was in a foreign land in the midst of people who were sometimes racist; I was afraid of what might happen to my two children if I broke up our home. I realized, early on, that I, like my mother, was inextricably attached to the children and through them to the hard work in every new day that this attachment entailed. I was trapped within the family. I have often wondered what impression our exploitative relationship had on our two clever and perceptive daughters. While I wished for my two girls to be married someday, I wondered whether they would. And if they did, I hoped that their husbands were unlike Jey; that they were men who shared the responsibilities of a family with their wives. At this critical moment, when I had to leave them behind to go half way across the world, I secretly resolved to return as soon as possible.

It was obvious that my silence on this occasion made some impression on Jey. He too lapsed into moody reflection of the ordeal he would soon confront, hoping that his resolve not to say another word would communicate to me that which he was afraid to speak out. On this occasion he perhaps wondered, as he had articulated so many times in the past, how the old man, his father-in-law, managed to win and keep my unrelenting affection when he was more like him and quite unlike me. The truth perhaps did not occur to Jey that mother was always present in my childhood and adolescent days to shield me from father's haphazard, easy going and incompetent ways; I enjoyed no such protection now. It was also likely that the strong attraction I felt for Jey when we first met in Cambridge, twenty-some years ago, had much to do with the strong resemblance he bore to the amiable and lackadaisical gentleman, my father, whom I adored. Jey is every bit like father

even though they are unrelated as a pineapple to a peach. Jey was born forty years later to an orthodox Hindu family who lived nearly one hundred miles away, a great distance considering that the island is not much more in length from north to south. However, in both Tamil and Singhalese families, boys were reared, in those days, to become the heads of households, while girls, by tradition, to the humbler, dependent and more arduous role of homemakers. Accustomed from childhood to dependence on their mothers or wives, neither father nor Jey was fired with vaulting ambition; nor did either know how to cope with stress, meet challenge or react in a crisis. In marriage, both transformed their wives, into strong and self-sufficient women who, gave confidence, supplied comfort and eased anxieties of the children they bore. Seeing how incompetent the husbands were, their indulgent nature, and the mess they were likely to create if left unsupervised in an undertaking, I now, and mother then, plotted, planned and worked indefatigably to protect the family from all that made it insecure. Ironically, the role of homemaker suffered no degradation in either marriage. On the contrary, we both assumed powers and privileges that neither of us saw in the most fanciful dreams prior to marriage. As silence settled upon the room, despair welled in my heart from the loss of the dearest member of my family. For a while I sat in bed, staring ahead at the wall and Jey did the same. He stretched his hand out again and stroked my head. In the recollection of childhood days, when recalling parental love, I did not consider the integrity of all the claims I made to illustrate and ornament its presence. Love for my father had the imprint of blind love. I saw it even in words and deeds that may have been unbearable then, but endearing now, after the passage of so many years. I sincerely believed that love abounded and was always present in my childhood settings, forgetting that it sometimes flourished amidst some jealousy, rancor, spite, ill-will, malice, anger and even hate. Now I must forget all the faults, the pain father and mother sometimes inflicted on each other, just as Jey and I were now doing, facets of each character that once repelled me and traces of selfishness I mostly saw in father's relationship with mother. Sometimes I even thought of him as a fair weather bird, amiable, loving, kind and entertaining as long as it suited his purpose and he was also under no physical or emotional stress or discomfort. A fiery nature surfaced and all constraints and composure fled whenever things went wrong. His temper, a rare occurrence, for which we all looked out, was forgiven if not forgotten. In this forgiving mood, I burnished his memory, recalling incidents more exciting for being imagined than

having been real. How can anyone fault me for doing so and thinking mostly about his good when he, unlike any other in my life, thought so highly of me? I bore for him an affection and respect that only those denied of rank, honor and are unjustifiably deprived in later years, feel toward the few who revered and held them in high esteem. My sight became clouded with tears for the disappearance of a man some of whose values I inherited but whose cheerful disposition I did not. In my mind, I saw my parental home high up on the lofty



*His Home*

hillside of Udawattekele, above the historic Temple of the Tooth and the Kandy Lake: a strong two story edifice made of brick and concrete; the large terrace over the car port and the balcony fortified by an iron railing against the full length of the outer wall of the second floor; ornamenting both, an assortment of potted plants, mostly orchids, bougainvillea, begonia, and many varieties of croton that father and C cultivated with sporadic care. The fragrant jasmine, saman pitcha, and a nameless bush with clusters of yellow flowers, resembling the jasmine except in color, are by the makeshift outdoor shrine set up between the house and cliff side on which the house seems to hang when viewed from afar. The cream-colored outer walls of the house, the garden, and the evergreens, glowed in the morning

sun. I was standing on the balcony, leaning on the iron railing and looking down on the valley below through the draping branches of the coconut and banana trees mother planted several decades ago soon after the house was built. My sight went a short distance below our house to the row of small houses where the dhobis (those who did our laundry) lived and from there to the homes of our friends and over there, a short distance away, to Mahamaya College, the school I attended in the last two years of my school career. Every morning, a drum roll rallied students to assembly and prayer. The lake cannot be seen from the house. I let go of the rail and turned slowly around. Where within the home might he be lying? This being the first death in my family, I had no way of knowing that he lay in the large living room upstairs, care taken by mother to ensure that the coffin was so placed that his feet did not point in the direction of the rising sun.

It was a week before Christmas Eve. I was thousands of miles and several time zones away from home. The thought that when I returned to Sri Lanka he will not be there to greet me, to lift up my spirit and make me laugh and sing, brought such vehemence of emotion, such anguish, such a constriction in my heart, that further composure was impossible. The bad news was slowly sinking in, stirring me to the awareness that I had lost one of the dearest things in my life. Shaking off Jey's hand from my head, I wept like a child. His love for me, that had been so inspirational and acted as a spiritual influence of a sort throughout my life, was forever extinguished. Or was it?

“Surely, his spirit will follow me through life holding my hand as I travel through strange and lonely places? Will he not give up the sanctuary of Nirvana to undertake flights of mercy to help his Ruth? Can even death quell his spirit of unrest or his longing for adventure? Will not the breath that fled his earthly body mingle with the breezes to travel across oceans, undeterred by rising airfares and bodily decrepitude, to drop a soft kiss upon my face?”

Broken by the sharp pain of yearning, I lapsed again in to a reverie.

I felt a longing for the sea, the fragile catamarans, the gliding seagulls and the sandy beaches surrounding my beautiful isle; feelings so poignant and so sad that they seemed to be inextricably connected to my loss, to him because it was in his company and through his keen eyes that I became aware of the beauty of our resplendent isle. More than forty years ago, our paths diverged. I realized that in spite of the many intervening years and events that cut the mooring, lifted anchor

and pushed me away, my heart was still pledged to the homeland where I was born and grew up.

The many images that surfaced in my mind at that moment were the surroundings of childhood I shared with him. I was lost to scenes of resplendent white dagobas, the tombs of ancient kings rising majestically above the sandy terrain and against a luminous blue sky up to the golden sun; to visions of stone walls ornamented with kneeling elephants and weird dwarf-like creatures; to sights of men, women and children, most clad in white, praying in quiet monotones before a reclining or meditating Buddha; and to the soothing sounds of ancient pipul trees, that probably saw the construction of the ancient edifices, rustling in the breeze. When I returned to Sri Lanka again, no more picnics and fun-filled journeys to distant places of worship. "Pilgrimages", father called them to get mother's full cooperation. The corridors of our home would never again echo with his laughter and good cheer. Mother, so ready to brood and fret over minor encumbrances- and who can blame her for the trials she went through- would never again be entertained and enlivened by his trivial jokes.

I had but to close my eyes to see him come alive, his soft features, his gentle eyes, and see him smile, laugh, or hear him talk. Six months ago, when I last saw him, he seemed to be in fair health, undiminished in the spirit of impetuous adventure, undaunted by bad experiences, unafraid of taking chances and unwilling as ever before to let mother bully him into compliance. He was walking up and down the hallway with his hands in the pockets of his khaki pants that were secured at the vest with a belt because they were hanging on him, complaining that he was like a dog tethered to a post. He had reached the period of life when the mind was still alert and active but the body was in a steep decline, a sad contrast for someone who led an active life. He was like a caged bird that had lost its voice and could not even sing.

Mother complained,

"He sneaks out of the house to go for walks on his own without letting anyone know where he is going. I have to be vigilant, guard him like a toddler, fearful that he might wander away, fall and hurt himself."

She was trying to weaken his resolve for adventure with anecdotal accounts of perilous encounters. "Why can't he rest in one place?" she asked. "Surely, your father has done enough walking in his life. He is like the dog with no mission but cannot sit still in one place for a few minutes," she said. Father, who had heard the

analogy often, looked at mother with indifference of a man accustomed to doing as he wished and not as he was bid. He could not be fettered; not by any means or threats, could his passion for adventure, big and small, be denied; nor his thirst for travel to far-off places, his many 'serendipities', be quenched by the occasional trip to town by car.

He, who wished to go on walking through the streets of his home town, Kandy, climbing the hills surrounding it or driving to the many picnic places, was only allowed to walk up and down the hallway of his home. For so energetic a person as father, it was not a happy confinement. He would not condition himself to the wholesome discipline to which he was forced to submit. As his body became frail, his fear grew that he may not be allowed to venture outdoors at all.

"I have spent a whole month without setting foot in the town. What kind of life is your mother trying to force on me?" he asked.

When I saw him last, his appetite for food was equally undiminished. Always there was good food in my parents' home. Recollections of those flavorful viands stirred up nostalgia for the wondrous times in my life; for the far away things lodged in memory. Unlike mother who never ate until she made sure that everyone else had a good portion of whatever each liked to eat, he never worried whether others had a share from the appetizing array of foods elegantly served in Fiesta-ware dishes; he dug in and served himself as much as he liked to eat. Mother had no worries about what he ate or how much because he did not suffer from stomach disorders or other gastro-intestinal ailments. He ate heartily; each meal was initiated with a small glass of gin or whiskey mixed with soda. It helped to digest food he explained to his daughter who challenged the habit because it violated the tenets of Buddhism. "A small glass of alcohol helps to digest food," he explained to the querying disbelievers.

"Doesn't our mother also need a small glass of whatever you are drinking to help her digestion? And how about us?" asked C my eldest sister, the frequent challenger.

"Don't talk rubbish, child! Children can digest stones. I've noticed that your stomach is even tougher than most. Your mother's a pious lady who closely observes Pancha Sila, the five precepts ordained by the Buddha for laymen to follow. She's far too devout to even dream of consuming the forbidden stuff. On the other hand, I've come around to the view that life gets too complicated and it isn't worth living if we don't do things in moderation. The Buddha endorsed my



opinion. He also said that you must do things in moderation- he advocated the Middle Path for laymen, Madhyama Prathipadawa, you know.”

The voice that extorted this rambling explanation from father fell silent, perhaps to question her own conscience and reassess its own position on what the Buddha preached and whether a reassessment would serve her purpose at some future time. The dessert was the best part of the grand meals we daily ate; the sweeter, the better: jaggery pudding with cashews sprinkled on top, stewed pears in sugar syrup seasoned with a few cloves, tropical fruit salads occasionally served with a blob of vanilla ice-cream, and bread pudding oozing with rich, yellow custard sauce. He ate more than even C, always took seconds, asked for more, ate that as well, but remained slim. While others developed beer-bellies and heart disease, as they grew older, father didn't. He was only five feet and four inches tall and always weighed about hundred and thirty.

“It’s the "constitutional" that keeps me trim and fit,” father proudly explained, the word he used to describe the daily walk of many miles within his beloved town. The car he left at home and walked more than three miles each day, around the Kandy Lake, under the spreading Mara trees; sometimes he sat down on a bench and gazed across the lake at the Temple of the Tooth as if transfixed by its spiritual power. Only after resting his tired legs did he continue his walk toward the Queen’s Hotel and through the long streets of the small town, stopping by those shops where he had friends and peering in the windows of others where he had none. Nobody in the family could keep up with father because he walked so fast. In my childhood, whenever I went for a walk with him, I trotted alongside and was soon out of breath and several feet behind. At eleven in the morning by his ancient Tudor-Rolex watch that kept perfect time, he sought shelter from the noonday sun at the Elephant House, where his friend, Wije, worked. There, engaged in pleasant social intercourse, he sipped a glass of milk, unhurried and unbothered by the skittering of feet on the sidewalk outside. Re-vitalized by it and the soft breeze that blew across the lake, he walked back home, stopping to listen to the birds twittering in the foliage of the branches above his head. Sometimes, when he felt he had walked enough for the day, he rode by bus as far as it took him, undeterred by the hill he had to also climb to reach home. After the piping hot meal of rice and curry, swiftly spread out on the dining table by a servant, mother fluttering over the ceremony lest a small detail like a pinch of salt in excess hampered his sensitive taste buds, it was time for a cigarette, and then, the afternoon siesta. In the evening,

his attention was riveted, according to mother's tiresome commentary, on more trivial pursuits.

Father was a useful handyman; there was nothing he could not repair in the house, but sometimes his inexperience showed when the problem he set out to correct was compounded. He loved gardening and spent a great deal of time outside planting, haphazardly, the flowers he liked: hollyhocks, phlox, roses, and carnations, not bothering whether any bloomed or not. He had a passion for collecting gadgets and tools, discarded cameras, and wristwatches, screwdrivers, hammers and pliers and all kinds of nails. He had a tool for every occasion and also knew how to use it. His love for music was heightened to a passion by mother's opposition, and the mystic romanticism in his spirit that survived to the very end. All his other hobbies might be dispensed with, but not his music because the pleasure he derived from it was so great, and the joy he had from making or listening to music was not to be extinguished. When too old to make his own entertainment by playing the violin or mandolin because his fingers were too stiff or his feet not energetic enough to pump the bellows of the accordion, he sat in front of the television switching the channels with the dexterity of a schoolboy or listening to old tapes of his own music on the Grundig player that I brought back from Cambridge many years ago. He remembered the birthdays of his children, rejoiced and celebrated with friends and relatives, joked and laughed with them as before, affirming to an incredulous audience that these simple actions were the true joys of life and that he still held life in his hands. He was unwilling to be considered old and frail and independent to the last, a vigorous spirit within his fumbling body not blighted by age.

"The previous night he was watching TV," mother said. "He was enjoying himself so much that it was pleasure enough to sit up with him- past ten. Reminded then that it was past his bedtime, he nodded his head in dull agreement and waddled off to his room complaining,

"You don't let an old man have a little fun."

When he got to the hallway outside, he stood motionless before their wedding portrait on the wall. He seemed rooted to the spot as if spellbound by it, until a sharp admonition from mother that he should not be walking around the house so flimsily clad. The rain had fallen relentlessly during the day. The wind, blowing through the trellis above the windows and doors, carried the cold mountain air into the house. Mother was wrapped in a woolen shawl. The wind seemed directed at

him who was only clad in a cotton shirt and sarong, and there was a deathly purpose in its violent breath.

"You'll catch pneumonia," she had said and indeed he did.

The next day, the cup of tea, a servant left on his bedside table each morning, was untouched. He appeared to be in some discomfort. At first, no one suspected that it was more serious than a bad cold brought on by the bad weather they were having. It was a Tuesday, inauspicious according to tradition-bound Sri Lankans like mother, who do not get married on a Tuesday, or if they can help it, fall ill or die on a Tuesday. Why had father selected a Tuesday for the final and irrevocable event of his life, defying mother to the last in ultimate triumph? With alarming consistency, mother disagreed with his call. When someone proposed that he be taken to the hospital, she said,

"Aney, I won't let you take him to the hospital on a Tuesday,"

Her reasoning was irrefutable.

"Don't you all remember? Mr. P was admitted to hospital on a Tuesday of last year; he did not recover from a mild illness."

Though the gravity of the situation was intuitively felt, no one was willing to contradict her and be held responsible for the outcome; those present were persons of lesser consequence, who would not oppose mother. They believed that the mother had a sixth sense in such matters; they fell silent for a while even though they saw the seriousness of his condition. His condition continued to worsen.

Mother realized that this was an emergency that needed immediate medical attention. She telephoned their family doctor, but he was out of town. She fed him a half-boiled egg, wrapped the woolen blanket around his cold feet and put a beaker of brandy to his lips. She probably figured that if anything could, the shot of brandy would revive him. She knew that of all the forbidden alcoholic beverages, he loved brandy the best. He kept a bottle of the good stuff in his cabinet even in the most deprived times in Sri Lanka. Both S and I took back our full liquor quota of brandy after a trip overseas. Even the brandy failed to revive him.

They observed no progress; when by noon he was sinking rapidly, frightened by his precarious condition and convinced that it was no passing illness, someone insisted,

"We must take him to the hospital."

"Let's take him to the Lakeside Medical Center," mother said. With the help of Jamis, the man who often helped to take care of the garden, and another lad who

happened to be there, they lifted him from the bed and carried him downstairs to the waiting car.

“Take care! Support his head!” mother cried in anguish, “Don’t let it drop.”

She could not bear to see his body so limp; like a broken reed it was. Indeed so impaired and disabled and drooping that some influence from deep within, urged her to utter, over and over again,

“O, gods, spare him!”

She knew not that he was already gone. Cradling his wandering and lifeless head in her lap, he was driven to the Medical Center, about 200 yards from their home. He died before a doctor could examine him. Those around him said,

“What a fine way to die, without any pain or suffering.”

In the hope that the sentiment they expressed would restore her broken spirits, those who soon assembled in our house upon hearing news of his demise, offered similar words of consolation to mother,

“He lived like a king and died like a king.” I thought that the crypt statement was an apt commentary on his long life. I knew that they were not referring to a regal lifestyle of pomp, power, wealth and glory; rather, to an elegant life, though unsuccessful in a worldly sense, was mostly filled with happiness. He lived most of the eighty-nine years in comfortable style. He died in a peaceful trance, surrounded by his wife and servants, without pitiful suffering and horror of bodily decrepitude brought on by disease. I hoped mother obtained a little comfort from that utterance, a fitting epitaph for a life of celebration. I thought, that if death must part them, it is better that he goes first while still possessing the ability to perambulate without even the help of a walking stick. During my last trip to Sri Lanka, I observed that mother by the many things she said and did thought so too.

“Should I die before him, and he becomes bed-ridden, C will not take care of him. Both S and you are far away. You have a young family to care for and S is too preoccupied with her job. It is not how grandly you enter this life that truly matters, but how you make the final exit. I am his only protector and guardian. He cannot live without me.” Indeed, father was her fourth child.

In my mind are lasting images that float to the top when the need to travel down memory lane for happiness, security and comfort presented itself. The ones I brought to the surface upset the fragile balance between grief and love, tugging at the heart- strings to bring forth tears. He was more fun loving than any of his three children. In my childhood, I looked forward to Sundays in glorious expectation of

picnics in the beauty spots in and around Kandy that he had a penchant for organizing. He was always elegantly attired in the suit to fit the occasion. His nine fingers tied to perfection the silk bow around his collar, the tenth he had lost in an accident before I was even born. He was unaffected and delightful, with the rare capacity to charm all who came into contact with him, both young and old. It was easy to relax in his company, because a life of dormant ambition and little desire to gain wealth, power, fame and riches threatened no one except mother. He took delight in another's gain because he was not the least avaricious or envious. He is the most trust worthy person I have known in this life. His friends trusted father when they could trust no other. Honesty came naturally to him, just like his simple good nature. He made a fetish of honesty, not bringing home even a pin from his office that mother needed for her sewing. In mother's opinion, "It's only a pin. What difference would it make to anyone?"

His life was one of little ambition, but a happy and eventful one, built around small joys, truthful values and large dreams. Friends and relatives, of whom we had more than our fair share because of mother's gracious hospitality, loved father, although he never moved a muscle to make them even a cup of tea or even pass a tray of goodies around. He did not worry about what they ate, and where they slept. He told stories packed with trivial anecdotes and jokes with such eagerness and flourish that the guests were delighted. His charm made the difference between him and everybody else. It was mother who fretted and worked hard to entertain lavishly their many houseguests, and it was she who cared for their comfort. She slept badly, suffered severe headaches because the guests, with their insatiable appetites and conflicting itineraries did not give her a moment's peace; but father was the life of the party and it was him whom they fondly remembered. I could not avoid a feeling of resentment when mother complained, because I enjoyed father's high-spirited fun and liked to be in his company. Even though my heart sometimes went out to commiserate with my overwrought mother when I saw her exhausted of strength from work that was indispensable to our well-being, in my disdainful ignorance, her company was not as welcome as father's because she was always working herself up to a frenzy worrying about one thing or another. She was an indefatigable workhorse; someone in whose company it was not possible to relax. The phrase that S often used to describe her was, "poor mother." The less father toiled, the more mother did; a tragic character in the vast complexity of life who we all took for granted and even neglected. She was the "obliging woman who was

always pregnant.” Mother’s preoccupation with money that seemed excessive and destructive to the leisurely, happy and joyful life father led, is understandable now that I am so much older and a little bit wiser. It is necessary to have a plentiful supply of money in the bank to pay the many bills that arise in daily life. To enjoy the bounty of life, to satisfy the senses with good sounds and sights, good food, clothing and accommodation, a family must have a great deal of money. No credit cards existed then, when I was growing up, to bump us along the tortuous course of a debt-ridden life. There was always a little bitterness in mother, too often articulated, because, in the beginning, father could not be inspired to go after the wealth that she craved. More bitterness added on in later years, because the two older daughters, C and S were not married, while I married against her wishes without the prestige of a grand wedding to which she could invite relatives and friends. Every time we received a wedding invitation and attendance involved an outlay of money for travel, fine clothes to wear and a present for the newly wedded, she was seized by regrets. Mother never tired of telling the father, “You don’t care enough to see that these girls are married while they are young. There are suitors a plenty if you are more conscious of looking for them and spend less time in making music.”

Poor father had many talents, but not the two she would have wanted him to have: making lots of money and finding two suitable suitors for the still unmarried daughters; he cared little about suitors or money to go after either. Even after the years of waiting and hoping that father would someday make a fortune were behind her, the thought might even have occurred early on that he would not, she did not let go of her dream of wealth so that C, the eldest of her three girls, could be given in marriage with a large dowry and a grand wedding. A drawer full of spent lottery tickets in her dressing table showed the tenacity with which she pursued her goal of great wealth that she did not have the capacity to earn but was going to have someday because an astrologer who, she thought, had uncanny powers of prophecy, had foretold so many decades ago. The system of dowry, so degrading to women, was supported by self-serving men, even educated men because a dowry in a way to get rich quickly. Girls are an encumbrance or a liability that is even lesser than a family cow. A cow can be sold to enrich its owner. In my time, a girl, however talented or extraordinary, was not an asset. She was not even given away, for the term “giving away” implies a free good; she is even lesser than a free good, because the buyer, the groom, had to be enticed with

dowry to take her away. Generally, the less attractive the woman, the larger the dowry; the less attractive woman with small dowry was a hard sell. Just imagine growing up surrounded by relatives who insinuated, on many days of our young and impressionable life, that we were not attractive; therefore, our poor father would have to come up with a large dowry to give us away in marriage!

Parents coaxed the sons to study hard and become top professionals like engineers, doctors, and government agents for, in marriage, they commanded large dowries, a source of wealth unlinked to their earning power, and the girls? Well, the girls did not need a good education, only a pretty face, vital processes for having sex and bearing children, and a large dowry. Even young educated men in my workplace, friends whom I considered to be knowledgeable and enlightened in other ways, deliberated in such ugly manner concerning the wealth and status of the brides they were seeking during their weekend exploits. Driven by greed they went searching for the large windfall of a dowry; wealth unrelated to their earnings in the workplace. They were searching for rich wives who were mostly uneducated, hardly their companions in marriage, or fitting tutors and counselors of children they would someday sire. Upon seeing them so crudely and single-mindedly focused, I asked myself, how their children could look up to their mothers, and how the husbands converse intelligibly with the wives in the long years ahead? If subservience to their authority and command was what these men were seeking, I have not seen it in these marriages. Such wives, because of the insecurity that little learning brings, oftentimes transformed into “dragon ladies” who kept their husbands in tow, subservient to their command and tethered to the command post. But perhaps the events that I have described here happened in my time; they were the days before women outperformed men in the classroom and workplace. With what pride, decades later, father declared to Vijay, “You are a lucky man, Vijay. You won the Galle Gymkhana!” He was referring to the Power Ball of Sri Lanka! Only my father would make such a elevating comparison. I was elated!

Once when we, then three young girls, were spending our summer holidays with maternal grandparents, one of mother’s many brothers resenting our presence asked, “So the kajja’s three daughters are going to be here for a while?”

I did not know then that “kajja” meant “nincompoop”. The literal meaning of the word is “cashew nut.” I smiled and hung my head in shame because I knew that he was referring to my father and that it was a derogatory reference. I wanted to yell out that my father did not look like a cashew nut and he is a “gentleman of rank.”

The insult pierced my ego like the blade of a sharp knife. Mother, when she heard about the incident, brushed it aside as the talk of a lunatic and butt-head; but I saw the hurt on father's face. Buddhist folklore makes reference to the three daughters of Maraya- Death, who danced voluptuously before the meditating Buddha to distract and swerve him from the path to Nirvana. Likewise, in my uncle's crude, twisted, perverted and warped mind, kajja's three daughters were on a mission from hell. He could not have said anything more corrosive; it inflicted much pain on a young and sensitive mind. . Had we been three boys instead, how welcomed the three in any home in those days when we had not yet proven Mother, no ordinary woman, and a cut above the uncouth and unsightly man who was her brother, scarcely seemed to notice our gender, absorbed as she was in an unforgettable mission of giving each of the three daughters the best possible education, confident that we would redeem ourselves someday by its power, Within my family, despite the hopeless pressure of tradition, neither parent seemed to care that we were girls; but outside it we were sometimes hurt.

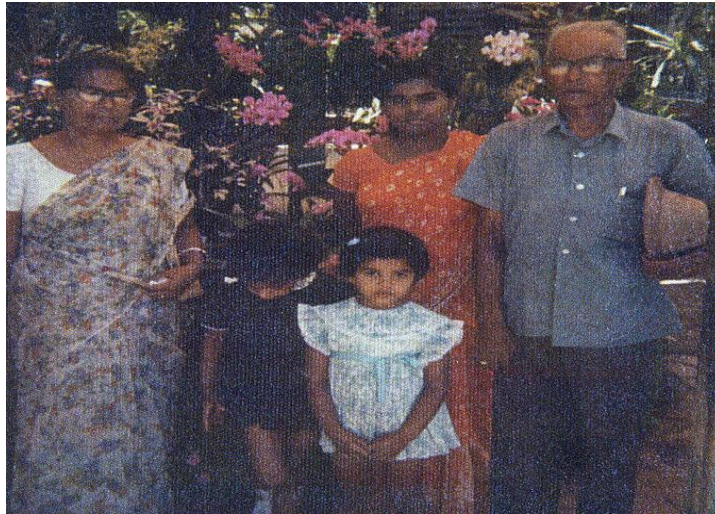
I had successfully circumnavigated those treacherous waters and those days seemed now so distant. I was not young anymore. In the summer of 1986, C wrote to me: "I am waiting for you to come home to send Alice to a home. We must get her admitted while she is able to walk. They do not take the infirm and disabled. I cannot look after her. Mother is barely able to look after father; the older he gets the more demanding he is. It is my bad karma that I have to spend the prime of life in the company of three old stooges. Mother is unbearable. She treats me like a child. If I am away from home for even a day, upon my return I must tell her where I have been and what I did during that time. I cannot entertain a visitor without her prying to find the person's antecedents, and establish his or her caste, creed and community! We need to get a cook because Alice is too weak to do the work in the kitchen. Instead of hiring a permanent cook, she has arranged with Mrs. P to send her servant, Mabel, every evening to cook for us. Mother thinks that I should be able to do that. Mother thinks that I should be able to cook for the three of us with a little help from Alice and Mabel. Just fancy that! I don't know whether you are aware that Punchie Menika passed away. If we send Alice away to a home, mother might agree to a new cook."

The letter opened a storage room in the memory where my other life once so important to me had been stashed away. It came as a shock that the unit I described as my parental family was coming apart at the seams. Suddenly it became a



compunctious time in my life; I was torn between families- the one I was born into now aging and mostly decrepit and the one I created. The latter took up all of my time because I was a working mother: meals to prepare, the house to clean, lectures to prepare for the next day in the classroom, clothes to mend, wash and iron, grocery shopping, the children's homework to supervise and the list went on and on. I lived from one moment to the next, never worrying about problems that were out of my sight. I had hoped to go back home someday and take care of father and mother. But the family I had created took too long to grow up. I could not leave my two daughters in so critical a stage of their young lives in the care of my husband who did not know how to care for himself. Punchie Menika's death came as a shock. Mother had relied on her for care and comfort. There was not much I could do now except keep mother, father and Alice together. I could not allow C to deprive them of each other's company. I was horrified at the idea of forsaking Alice in her old age. Alice was a member of my family. If Alice was sent away to live out the remainder of her life among strangers, she would surely leave behind the grinding thought in my mind that it would soon be father's turn and a few years' later, mother's. "She has a point," said Jey, "how can C look after all those old people. It'll drive her insane."

"Look after them?" I retorted. "As far as I know, the three old stooges look after her. C does not clean her room or toilet. Pools of worn and discarded clothing litter the floor of her bedroom; the furniture in there is never dusted. You can write your name on the layers of dust on the windowsill. When mother can't bear to put up with the mess any longer, she sends Banda or Alice to dust, sweep and clean up." I knew that C was proposing to send Alice to a home run by some charity where they do not charge for board and lodging. They are not comfortable abodes for the old and helpless. Those who manage them are sometimes cold and unfeeling. I wanted C to let Alice stay in their parents' home for a few more years. I dangled "Please don't send Alice to a home. Someday soon I'll relieve you of the burden that Alice now imposes on you. I'll send S the interest income from a bank account I have in Sri Lanka. I am writing to the Bank immediately to send the money to S and I'll be writing to S to give the money to you for Alice's upkeep. Remember that Alice gave the best years of her life to us. It's true that we looked after her when she didn't have a family of her own. I don't like those homes for the aged. She will be spending the last years of her life in the company of strangers perhaps amidst squalor. Will she not wonder why those who knew her best abandoned her?"



*Mother, father, sister & my two daughters*

Don't you feel for Alice? "Barely a year later, in the summer of 1987, I received a letter from mother telling me that the father's departure from this world was imminent. He was 89 years old. An uncle, Rex Dharmakirti, father's first cousin, an astrologer of sorts had read father's horoscope. He told mother that father would not live until his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday on February 8, 1988. During the summer vacation, Jey and I went back to Sri Lanka to see him, leaving behind Suri and Manju in the care of friends. Both parents showed signs of aging; more gray in their hair, more wrinkles on their faces, bags under their eyes, and feeble of gait than when I saw them three years ago. Father was very thin; only a thin layer of flesh between skin and bone; otherwise, there was little evidence of impending death. "He took a shower this morning all by himself and he used a little more powder and cream on his face," C chuckled before going to her room.

He was beaming because Jey and I gone to see him; we were all seated in the upstairs living room; father in his favorite cane chair.

"Why didn't you bring the girls?" he asked Jey. "Both are taking summer classes," I answered. Jey was dozing in his chair.

"The two girls have better things to do with their time than fly out twelve thousand miles to visit an old grandpa," C said rather viciously.

Mother said, "It isn't true. You ought to be ashamed of yourself for saying such things! Those two girls love their grandparents. Last week Manju sent me a letter saying how sorry they both are to miss all the fun and excitement of meeting us again. Both are studying hard, she wrote." Father added in subdued voice, "Now you can see for yourself what we have to put up with. No matter! We have to stick by her because she is our child." Until then, I had been sitting calmly, my thoughts

expressed in one word: joyful; but the angry exchange among three people who were a large part of my life, alerted me to the need for caution. It was a verbal exchange in which I did not want to participate. I lapsed into a wakeful watch. The peaceful companionship that parents wish to have with their children someday was not present in my parental home. The conflict between C and the parents had not diminished over the years because C was staying at home with them; she was not married, which surely made her feel more inadequate, especially in my presence. Mother, desiring to terminate the conflict, rose abruptly from the chair and walked toward the kitchen, her haven in times of stress. With her departure, the tension eased like a fire that burns out without the steady supply of fuel. But C's anger was not totally spent. "What do you have to put up with?" challenged C, "It seems to me that you are having a good time lording over all with ruthless assertion of your rights and privileges."

"Ungrateful and foolish child," said father with escalating passion, "if you respect nothing else, at least be grateful for the protection you have under my roof."

"Oh, yes," responded, C savagely. "Some protection I get under this roof! Do you call this abuse, day in and day out, protection?"

Jey awakening with a start, asked,

"Have I missed anything?"

Jey is generally untouched by extremes of human emotion and will never get drawn into a quarrel unless it concerns his life. He stared in disbelief at the unfolding drama. After a moment of helpless staring, probably thinking that he had heard enough, he rose from the chair and hurried through the side door out to the terrace where the shrine room was. I was thankful for his departure, thinking that the twist that C was likely to give to her arguments will soon be unfit for his ears. I was afraid to leave father but sat at his side without saying a word. Even though I had resolved not to get drawn into that conflict, feelings of indignation were overwhelming kinder feelings toward C. I could not feel sorry for her without endangering the tender feelings for father. How sad not to be on better terms with the eldest sister, I thought; but sadder it is for the parents who must live with a child so contentious and bitter. To prevent further entanglement, I veered the moment away from the crisis by asking about the new neighbors.

"A quiet family," father said, with sudden softness of voice. "The man owns a factory or a store. The woman is a daughter of a wealthy merchant. They are the people who have the money to buy a house and property in this neighborhood."

Property values have sky-rocketed. They have seven -year old and five-year old boys. Do you remember the songs you sang long ago? I taught them those songs. You should listen to the five-year old sing!” he said chuckling quietly. Our holiday in Sri Lanka lasted but two weeks, like a sip of water to quench a great thirst. During its brief tenure, I tried to resurrect the experiences of the holidays together when, as a child, I visited many places of pilgrimage as well the splendid tourist spots of Sri Lanka in father’s company. To capture the times of celebration for both him and me, we drove around the Kandy town, visited our favorite haunts like the Wace Park, and saw the places that were dear to both. We drove up to the Wace Park, atop the ridge that stands above the lake, and looked down on the town that he knew so well. He stood on a grassy ledge for a long times, gazing at the scenery near and afar, perhaps recalling those times when he used to walk the streets below. Standing there beside him, I had the yearning to move back in time and take, as we often did then, one more walk around the Kandy Lake. I saw him as he was then in a light-colored bush-shirt long enough to hide the neatly repaired tear in the seat of the gray flannel pants; his head and brow concealed beneath a faded but stylish tartan cap, his feet encased in black oxford shoes gleaming from frequent polishing. He used to walk so fast that no one could keep up with him; not even I, who hopped, skipped and ran alongside. The slowest of the five, mother, trailed far behind. When several lengths ahead, he sat on a bench, resting his folded hands on the walking stick he carried for style rather than support, and gazed upon the placid waters of the lake until the slow pokes caught up with him.

In those days, the lake was teeming with fish and tortoises. We threw popped rice to lure them to the surface. The water rippled and shimmered from shoals of fish surging to the surface, slipping and sliding on the backs of the slower moving tortoises. No more! Not one tortoise lives in a lake that harbored so many since the times of the ancient kings. They have fallen prey to the hungry and destitute laborers driven from the estates when sentiment against Indian labor ran high. There are also those who believe that tortoise meat is an aphrodisiac and eat it surreptitiously to enhance their virility. One by one, the tortoises slipped down the gullets of people who have the propensity to break breeding records even without tortoise meat to arouse their sexual appetite. No endangered species act existed to prevent the steady depletion of the tortoises that lived in the Kandy Lake in my time. I hoped that I could return someday to restore this wasted habitat of fish and tortoise to what it used to be.

From where I stood, above the Kandy Lake, the streets of the town below looked short and easily navigable. I wondered whether father thought so too. I hoped that he would not be misled by appearance. He turned to me, his eyes fixed on my face with the determination to make me succumb to his wishes. “Child,” he said, “I like to go to Colombo one last time. Your mother will not let me go. Let us go together. She may agree, if you ask her.”

The same evening, when we were seated in the living room, waiting for dinner to be served, I asked mother, but she said, “He can’t take the heat or the humidity of the coast. The car does not have air conditioning. Even if you rent a van, I don’t think he has the strength to endure a trip as exacting as the seventy-two mile drive from here to Colombo; the roads are so bad; they are rutted and heavily trafficked.” Though venturesome by nature especially in affairs that concern him, on that occasion I did not spring forward to take the initiative. My eyes rest fondly on his face. I saw the soft blue-gray eyes, the thin layer of snow-white hair and tightly set lips. I did not see any signs of faltering in that body. It sat erect in the chair. He looked irritably at mother.

“You don’t know what you are talking about. I know that I can do it. It is this sort of desire that gives a person the will to live. I don’t want to live the life of an invalid”

His response inspired me to try. I had not watched father aging or witnessed the nature of his sporadic illness. I did not see him as a frail old man blighted by illness. I wanted to do the crazy things that he and I once did to celebrate our togetherness: service the car, fix old clocks, replace washers in dripping faucets, repair furniture, plant carnations, sweet Williams, hollyhocks, coleus, roses and mums; collect stamps and play music and sing songs together; all those things that mother said did not make one richer. How could father whose enormous vitality and relentless energy provoked mother to often remark that he was like a restless dog without a mission or purpose forever circling around to catch his tail, metamorphose into this old man now slumped in an easy chair? How could a man of such vitality now quest for a trip to Colombo to give life a purpose? Why could he not be outdoors, hands in the pockets of his khaki shorts, whistling a tune and taking purposeful pride in the few roses that bloomed on the unkempt bushes he planted so long ago

I asked,

“How are you feeling, papa?”

“Fit as a fiddle,” was his resolute reply.

“Never felt better in my life! It is your mother who thinks I am ill. She does not let me leave the house or even walk about in the garden. The barber comes to the house to give me a haircut. What’s the matter with her? What kind of a life is this? I feel like a caged bird. I am glad you and Jey came. Perhaps you two can put some sense into her head. I want to go to Colombo, one last time.”

I smiled sympathetically. Mother’s rejoinder sounded cruel in my ears,

“What nonsense you say! Don’t you recall the fainting spells? A person in good health, won’t drop to the ground without warning? I am following the doctor’s orders. Two weeks ago he passed out while walking inside the house. He fell and hit his head on the cement floor. Two stitches were needed to close the wound on his forehead. These blackouts recur, the doctor said.”

I looked at father for contradiction; but turned away irritably. His feet groped the floor beneath the chair for the slippers. I knew that he was about to leave the room. I winked at him to lighten the mood of frustration, but he did not respond with the twinkle in his eye; it was not the same as before. In those days, when he was younger and physically able, the wink and twinkle meant we would do what we had in mind regardless of mother’s wishes. In those days when mother tried to thwart his purpose, he could leave the house and return only after the fresh air and encounters with people outside had cooled his temper. Now he was trapped within. “It is your mother who makes me ill,” he said in a quiet voice. “All I want to do is see the ocean, go to the restaurants I used to haunt and stroll on the Galle Face Green. The heat will warm up my body; Kandy is so cold.”

It was so softly said, almost in a tone of resignation. I was aroused. Father’s last wishes must be accommodated; but I had so little time with him. He wanted to go on living as before; within the house when it suited him and out when it did not. He stared at the mother in anger. He shuffled his feet again into the slippers beneath the chair, readying to flee from her sight; but he did not budge because he had nowhere to go, and also because Jey and I were there. He wanted to be where he could see us, and he did not want to miss our talk, to see our concern, hear our ideas and watch our faces. I decided to do whatever I could to help. Like most great journeys that I embarked on without thinking, escorting father to his favorite haunts became my mission in the next few days. I was too excited to be aware of the dangers that lay ahead; too eager to plunge into adventure; and too determined to take him to Colombo also. There was so much to see and do down there, in

Colombo. The warmer air and the sea breeze might even make him stronger, I thought. He thought that he was safe in my care. I thought I could transport energy from me to him. Missionary zeal overcame my good judgment. I failed to see that his faculties were too impaired and beyond repair. No use to tell me that he was frail. I cast a scornful look at Jey who said softly that I should listen to mother. I did not want his advice on a matter so personal and on a subject I thought I knew so much. I remarked that he appeared to be in pretty good shape. Not wishing to start another argument between my parents, I said with sudden animation, "We'll have a trial run. Why don't we drive around the Kandy Lake. Let's go to the Royal Botanical Gardens tomorrow and then drive up to Hantana.

If we can do all this without a mishap, Colombo here we come!" Father was like a child who had been told that the present he coveted is under the Christmas tree; as happy as he was during our school holidays when we talked about going to distant places and planned to the last detail the trip we were about to take, mostly pilgrimages to the ancient cities of Sri Lanka where the glories of former dynasties are prudently resurrected in park-like grounds of temples so that restless men, listless children and the devout women, all have a purpose for visitation. Thus, our family was able to mingle pleasure with pilgrimage. Father and we refused to sit quietly in front of reclining or samadhi Buddhas praying for our deliverance from the tribulations of this life from which we sheltered, while mother was totally immersed in religious activities. During those subsequent long minutes that seemed to drag out into hours, mother recited so many Pali verses to earn sufficient merit to promote the well being of her three daughters and husband and for her long journey through Samsara in ease and comfort. We finished our communion with the gods in a few words while the mother sat eulogizing for hours. Mother knelt with a handful of flowers meditating upon her pain and suffering, while father and the three of us who had the attention span of puppies, trotted around the dagoba. We were thinking of ways to prevent mother from further communion with her gods. For him as well as for us the joy was the long drive to those places of pilgrimage and the picnics that followed when her prayers were over.

In the small car, there was a picnic basket full of goodies to eat on the way or at the sites we visited. Father drove for miles until he came to a suitable rest area, a grove of trees alongside the deserted road. A woven mat was unrolled for a picnic that was long awaited. Mother, thankful that she was on a merit-gathering trip for the early termination of a long journey through Samsara, provided a feast fit for

royalty. The moment mother took out the large tiffin carrier stuffed with string hoppers and curry we forgot how weary we were. It was ceremoniously opened and portions lavished on the banana leaves held in the eager palms of the salivating four; father receiving the first share because he complained of exhaustion from the driving ordeal. It was also mother's custom to serve the head of the household before the children. A tea ceremony followed. There was even some firewood in the trunk of the car to boil water for the refreshing and "ultimate pleasure giving" cup of tea. The air was hot but a fire was lit and the kettle mounted on the three bricks that mother brought out from the trunk of the car. The afternoon wore on while we waited for the kettle and bricks to cool. It was almost evening when mother decided it was time to go; but father was in no hurry because he had less than ten miles to the relative's home where we were going to spend the night. Jey and I went back to Sri Lanka because I wanted to celebrate our togetherness one last time. The next day, after a hearty breakfast of milk rice and treacle, we left for the Royal Botanical Gardens, which is about five miles from their home. Mother opted to stay behind on the pretext that she had a slight headache and needed to rest. I knew that there were other reasons; the need to organize three square meals we would be eating during the day and the small matter of realizing that the car could not accommodate all of us. For as long as I can remember, mother sacrificed: she did not eat the piece of cake, buy new clothes, or go on trips when there was no room in the car. On this occasion, however, sadness gave way to relief that mother was unable to go because she was bound to spoil father's terminal pleasures by nagging concerns over his health. A brilliant morning; cool and fresh as it often is in the mountains; not even a speck of cloud in the blue sky. The beauty of the Royal Botanical Gardens is quite unlike any I have seen elsewhere in the world because childhood memories are entwined like creepers on trees, shrubs, and palms. Flowers bloom profusely in the mild climate that is so nurturing. Our first visit was to the Orchid House to see the trailing sprays of Wanda Orchids of brilliant purple and pink that he had once propagated in his own garden.. We wandered through the gardens, pausing frequently to sit on the park benches, toward the fountain fronting an ivy-covered green house; inside it, the fabulous collection of bromeliads. The water from the spout in the central spire of the fountain dating back to early British times, rose for more than a foot in the air and fell back in a large spray of diamonds into the small basin below and



overflowed to the large pond at the base; giant water lily pads cover the aquatic surface of the pond.

“Everything, including the lily pads, looks so much smaller,” he observed.

I agreed even though I thought otherwise. We both agreed that there were a fewer flowers now than in those days. What a gorgeous spectacle it was then: so many beds of dahlias each bloom as huge as a dinner plate, bar burtons and red and purple salvia, and roses of every color. In difficult fiscal times drastic reductions were made to allocations for the maintenance of public gardens; the only outdoor color and splash was from the omnipresent bougainvillea vines that bloomed in profusion and in a variety of color. The Royal Botanical Gardens used to be a pride of the Central Province; it had changed for the worse like so many other things in the resplendent isle.

Jayaratna, our driver, stayed close to father to give him a helping hand along the meandering paths of the maze where tall trees and lichen twine overhead to form an almost impenetrable canopy creating a tropical rain forest environment below. I walked slowly beside him watching over him like a toddler, not allowing him to stray too far from us. We were all soothed by the cool air and heard the songs of unseen birds in the branches of the overhanging trees. We saw, though a break in the wall of the trees, a small wooden bridge spanning a dry creek in the Japanese Garden. We stepped out of the maze and walked onward along a path lined with coleus, and under pergolas and arbors where honey suckle and lady’s slippers cascaded upon our heads. In pursuit of those lovely pleasures and from the rediscovery of familiar sights and sounds, I renewed my resolve to also drive him down to Colombo before I returned to the States. I had so much to show and share with father, and all at once. In my enthusiasm to show him everything one last time, I disregarded Jey’s advice to “cool it off” and mother’s “to be careful”. I did not want to believe that he was incurably weak. I thought that wholesome sights and the fragrance of flowers would resurrect his strength.

Father walked slowly stopping occasionally to take in the beauty of a rose, to marvel at the girth of a tree, to admire the intricate weave of color on a coleus leaf and the variety of croton of such loveliness and splendor. He was treading, ever so slowly and carefully in and out of miniature gardens, along pebble-strewn paths, and on flagstone. We entered the maze again and saw Jey reposing on a bench. The sun was too bright outside and father was also tired, He sat down beside Jey.

We were long distance from the car and surrounded by a deep verdure of trees and lianas in all shades of green from the lightest to the darkest, depending on the exposure to the sun. Father said in a barely audible voice,

“The doctor has told me to drink a glass of milk every morning, around this time.”

The simple sentence uttered so softly was loud enough to end my fantasy and the enthusiasm to show him more sights; it awakened in me the terrifying reality. My watch showed that it is twenty minutes past ten.

“Let’s go to the restaurant,” I said looking fearfully at the sagging body that Jey was supporting. Hoping for a miraculous resurrection from a glass of milk, I sent Jayaratna to bring the car as quickly and as close to where we were. Jey’s repeated admonishments drove terror into my heart,

“I told you that this isn’t a terribly good idea; bringing him here against your mother’s wishes.”

C was standing a distance away, unconcerned about the crisis that had suddenly descended upon us; she wanted no part in it. After sending Jayaratna to bring the car, I sat beside father; he leaned on me, resting his head on my shoulder. I held his hand, and his fingers were icy cold. His eyes were shut; I felt the increasing weight of his slender body on mine. He had passed out or was on the verge of doing so. I stroked his head softly; his hair was wet with perspiration. I cried out for help, “Jey and C, help me! Quick” Together we reclined his helpless body across my lap.

“Whatever happened to you better judgment and good sense?” C asked.

I was angry that C was sarcastic in that moment of crisis. While waiting for Jayaratna to come back with the car, I silently prayed to my gods to get me out of the mess that enthusiasm and devotion got me into. We had to get him the milk without further delay. Jayaratna was so late in coming back, that when he finally drove up to the curb, not too far from where they were seated, father had recovered; the rest had brought a little color to his face restoring my hopes and certitudes.

Holding him gently by each elbow, Jey and I urged him on, step by step, to the waiting car. When he was seated inside I breathed a huge sigh of relief unaware that the worst was yet to come. We drove to the restaurant, and at the site, my luck came to a standstill. It was perched atop a mound and a long flight of steps had to be negotiated to reach the front door. It was hardly the place to take a patient with

a weak heart who had just suffered an attack. Advice came pouring in, mostly from Jey.

“Let Jayaratna run up and bring him a glass of milk,” he wisely suggested.

I agreed, but father would have none of it. By then, he had come to his senses, and would not consent to making a spectacle of himself; Beside, he did not wish to show Jey and me how feeble he was, thinking that the trip to Colombo was in jeopardy. He insisted upon walking up the steps. He proudly declared

“This heart is strong; these legs have carried me to greater heights, along meandering pathways across fields and beyond into the distant hills of Hantana.”

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained,” I thought in my foolish mind. So, in spite of some doubt about his physical condition, I consented to help him up those steps to the restaurant where he could sit in dignity and comfort and enjoy the outing over a glass of cool milk. Once again, Jay and I supported him on each side, helped him up, one step at a time, with small words of encouragement and caution to “take it easy,” just as we would a child who was just beginning to walk. Between the two of us, we literally carried him up the steps; he weighed heavy on my mind.

Eventually, we made it to the front door and went inside amidst inquiring stares of strangers. He sat at a table near the door, his legs stretched out under and I sat by his side. Jey went to seek out a waiter to order the life-nurturing glass of milk.

“Now you look as fit as your fiddle,” I said.

When the milk finally arrived, thinking that he has fully recovered, I left him in Mitra’s and Jey’s care and wandered off to a display of picture postcards on a revolving stand. Amidst the stir of so many things at that rush hour, father was forgotten. Before I had made a selection, Jey rushed to my side, excited and all astir,

“Your father has passed out again,” he shouted.

I rushed back to the table to see him slumped in his chair, salivating milk, his face gone awry, his mouth open, his white hair pasted on his head as if he had just come out of the shower, and the glass of milk on the table with not more than a quarter gone. I saw him as I had not seen him before, feeble and vulnerable; perhaps even on the brink of passing away from me, forever, his motionless pose so suggestive of death. Jey was too engaged in blaming me to be worth an appeal for help; he stood nearby, his hands clasped in front, like a statue in despair. The scare of seeing father lifeless for the second time within the hour had knocked the last bit of wit out of Jey. C seemed so far away from the calamity. It was extraordinary how

she had changed in recent years. She went through life as if she was looking at her surroundings with her eyes shut, especially in matters that concerned the father. I touched his body and it was so cold. I, who only a day ago had enthusiastically arranged the outing and commanded its progress so far, was suddenly overcome by a feeling of anxiety and hopelessness. I was fearful that he might pass away under my watch. A feeling of numbness took over as if the whole world was smitten by a fainting illness. Prudently, and without getting wildly excited by the calamity, I scrambled around, helplessly at first, and then with gathering alertness. I wiped his chin and face and held the glass of milk to his lips softly urging,

“Papa, Papa! Wake up! Here is the milk! Drink it! This is what the doctor ordered. Open your eyes a wee bit! Please, Papa, Please. I can’t let you go; no, not now.

There is so much to see and do. We haven’t even made the trip to Colombo.”

While saying so, I thought otherwise. C stood by watching the proceedings, speechless anxiety showing on her face. She seemed to be saying, “Father is gone. It is her rash judgment and disregard for the advice of those who know better that killed him.”

But I was not ready to let him go. My desperate voice rang through the restaurant alerting those at nearby tables to the presence of an emergency. A sudden hush descended over the place; only the sound of cutlery and crockery in a far off kitchen was to be heard above the muffled voices of concern and advice.

Everybody gathered around to watch the crisis unfold. I urged him to snap back into consciousness as he did before. I promised myself that I would not contest mother’s good sense and judgment. In some women fear does not hold back the impulse of energy to act in crises. Though there was little certitude that I could straighten things out once again, I persisted. I held the glass of milk to his lips. I tried to coax him to come back to me. I leaned to his ear and whispered that if he would take a little sip, all would be well.

In the blurred light within the restaurant, I saw a flutter of an eyelid. Was it real or imagined? I scrutinized his face without blinking my eyes. I saw again the flutter of the eyelids and a small movement of his frail body. As I watched in apprehension, the sunken cheeks begin to tremble, followed by a movement of the chin and lips as if he was now ready to suck up the life-sustaining potion that I held in my hand. I placed my trembling hand in his and those fingers stirred without strength to close over mine. I was not finished with my pleas. I pleaded with him, again and again, to hold on and not let go. His head moved ever so slightly. Amidst

the commotion of voices, I heard an attenuated sigh that was like a desperate response to my urgings. From his throats there issued a rumble as if some obstruction was being cleared and his chest expanded and contracted. I had brought him back to life! It was a sight and event that I will never forget. Gradually, the fainting fit wore out completely as it had done before, and a warm moistness was felt to my touch of his face. His unhappy eyes opened, looked at me and then turned aside to avoid my face. Minutes later, he had recovered completely; he twisted his body slowly in his seat to face the people who were standing behind him to tell them that it only happened when he did not take the glass of milk in a timely fashion.

“It’s here, the milk! A few more sips and you’ll feel even better,” I said.

I held the glass to his lips trying to make him drink all of it in small sips. Without a word to me, he straightened his body to a higher position in the chair to facilitate my task. He drank it, sip by sip and drained it to the last drop.

“Take it easy!” I said. “There is no need to hurry” and wiped the chin with the serviette.

The silence that had taken over the tearoom broke out into a loud commentary. Even Jey and C looked for ways to offer help and the chance to participate in the recovery that seemed pretty certain.

“Why don’t you run off and buy those cards; I’ll take of him,” Jey said.

But I did not budge from father’s side. Belatedly, it dawned on me that mother’s warnings, that I had irreverently set aside, must be heeded. Indeed, he was in frail health; but his illness had neither broken his will nor bent his spirit. Everyone else in the family knew about the seriousness of his illness because they had witnessed the sporadic symptoms; Jey and I had only heard them described. To see it happen during that short trial run was defining its precarious nature. I realized that he was unhappy at the timing of the incident. The trip to Colombo was expunged forever from my mind; but for that unfortunate occurrence, there was no doubt in my mind that I would have arranged the trip to Colombo to father’s delight.

On the way back home, we hatched a conspiracy; not a word to mother about the day’s drama, the day’s events, about the things that happened, about the events that validated her concerns about father, of his illness and how close he came to death, not once but twice. Growing up under mother’s close supervision, we had learnt many strategies, especially the art of deflecting unwanted questions. When asked how things went, we described things we saw, talking all at once, to drown her out

with high volume. If mother wondered why the subject of taking father to Colombo did not arise in my speech or why he did not broach it himself, she sought no clarification, probably figuring that his memory was also failing. It was also foolish, she probably thought, to awaken the other sleeping dogs. Silence was sometimes the best way of protecting her family from their many follies.

Even in his frail health, father was seeking adventure like a plant searching for the sun. I said and did things to make him smile. Thinking that he would get some pleasure from shorter trips, I took him to all the safe places. But in the last few days that father and I spent together, he was unusually quiet and reflective. There was less laughter from him and he didn't talk much. He was so mellow, just like an over-ripe fruit about to fall from the tree. Together, we watched our town, the town we loved so much, from the road that meanders above the lake. The setting sun cast a golden glow on the rooftops of the little houses below and on the lake in their midst; and the gilt roof of the Temple of the Tooth shone brilliantly. I hoped that he was getting more pleasure from those familiar scenes than he would from a fatiguing trip to Colombo. How unfortunate that the adventurous spirit that remained throughout his long life until the very end, could not be further celebrated by that trip to Colombo!

A week later, we left for the Katunayake Airport for the flight back to the United States at the ungodly hour of 2 a.m. Because of tight airport security, we were advised to check in at midnight. On that occasion, for the first time, father could not accompany us. I recalled earlier occasions, when he stood steadfast in the visitor's gallery waving goodbye as we disappeared into the passenger lounge. The last time I saw him alive, he was left behind with the mother who stayed with him to ease the pain of parting. Even when, in due course, after many good byes and hugs, and kneeling before the parents, to receive their blessings, we climbed into the van to drive away, he stood there in the balcony, all alone, peering over the banister to catch a last glimpse of the daughter he would not see again. He was glued to the spot and his eyes to the van below, his ears straining to catch snippets of conversation. Seeing him up there all by himself, my heart cried out for another brief contact. I got down from the van and ran upstairs to wish him goodbye again. Hugging me close, he whispered,

"I will never see again, my child. Will you come to my funeral?"

The question aroused my anxiety as no previous episode, including his fainting fits.

“Papa,” I impatiently replied, “You look as fit as your fiddles. You’ll be here when I return in the summer. Wait for us! Don’t go anywhere! I’ll bring the girls with me. We’ll all go to Colombo then and have dinner at the Mount Lavinia Hotel.” Above the trauma of that sweet-sorrow, I heard Jey’s impatient voice hailing me, “If you don’t come down soon, we’ll miss the flight.” I ran downstairs to the waiting van, climbed back inside and drove away into the night. The light on the wall above cast a jaundiced glow on his face and on the thin hands that grasped the iron railing. He gaped blankly into the space where the van was. I fancied that he longed to be with us, that he did not want to be so forsaken, and left behind. It was the final assault upon his desire to live. The end had already come; it crept upon him slowly during the last two weeks: during the walk through the Botanical Gardens, the spectacle in the restaurant, the unspoken denial of the last trip to Colombo, and now, the most painful of all, our departure. He wanted to sleep; to sleep forever; he raised his eyes and looked up at the sky. A cold wind was stirring the fronds of the palm trees. The voice behind him admonished, “Come inside. If you stay out there much longer, you’ll catch a cold. I’ll lock up after you.” It was mother, forever concerned and forever caring about him in sickness and in health; his companion of fifty-five years.

But he did not budge because he still felt our presence and still heard us laughing and talking.

As the van rounded the corner, I turned back for the last time and saw his small figure silhouetted in the faint glow of the light from above. That was the last sighting of father alive; a silhouette and a shadow and no more. As the van raced forward, it too vanished from my sight. Through the dark night, we moved forward at gathering speed, mile after mile, until we came to the edge of the town, when even the few street lights disappeared; the darkness was complete. I was on my way to the future where a vital link with my past was lost forever.

Seventy-two hours have passed since I heard news of father’s death. He passed away in Sri Lanka on a Tuesday afternoon. I flew into Frankfurt on Thursday night, and lay down on a couch in a deserted airport awaiting the arrival and departure of the Air Ceylon flight to Colombo. Days and nights had come and gone but I did not see the rising or the setting sun. I was flying from west to east halfway around the world in a state of limbo. It was 4.a.m. on Saturday morning when the Air Ceylon flight touched down at Katunayaka and the cremation was scheduled

for 4.p.m on the same day. I pursued my way as fast as my feet would carry me to the shortest line at the Immigration.

He flipped through the few pages of my passport and asked,

“You were here only six months ago. Why have you come back so soon?”

“Six months ago I came to see my father; he was alive then. Today at 4.p.m he’s going to be cremated in Kandy. Please hurry.”

He was in no hurry. He asked me how long I had lived abroad. As politely as I could in order not to provoke his anger, I said in a faint voice that I was exhausted after the ordeal of flying since Tuesday more than halfway across the world. He lifted a rubber stamp and brought it down with a bang on a blank sheet and scribbled his initial. I was on my way to the Customs. Time was not the only thing I had lost in the travel from west to east. The baggage carousel emptied swiftly. Passengers from my flight picked up their baggage and left; only a bale of cloth was slowly circling around, unclaimed. My bag was not on that carousel. Because of the many connections I had to make, my baggage probably went on another flight and was lying abandoned on a carousel in some distant airport, circling around unclaimed like that bale of cloth. I did not have even a change of clothing, but that was the least of my concerns. I reported the loss and made haste to the entrance lest those who came to meet me at the airport would leave thinking I did not make the flight. But as I passed through the door and looked ahead, I beheld my cousin and the driver, Jayaratna, waving their hands in summons.

They had been waiting for a long time and feared it was all in vain because I tarried. I said,

“I made the flight but my baggage didn’t. When you have so many connections it’s easy to be separated from your baggage. I was reporting its loss to the airlines; that’s what delayed my exit.”

Finding out that I did not have any baggage, my cousin said,

“In that case let’s drive to Kandy as fast as we can.’

Jayaratna, turned around and started to walk to the car; my cousin and I followed walking side by side.

It was pre-dawn and the sky was still dark, not even a faint glow out of the east. It was the coolest month of the year and yet the air around the airport was still hot and humid. Kandy was about three automobile hours away. Jayaratna drove at a frantic speed because there was nothing on the road at that unearthly hour to obstruct his progress. By his driving skill, he showed that he knew that road very



well. Far away in the dark sky overhead stars twinkled but as we sped along the dark and unlit roads, I could not make out even the ubiquitous coconut tree alongside the road; a black undifferentiated mass closed in on either side and hung down from above. Darkness parted as the headlights beamed and closed behind as the car sped through. Behind us the black road vanished and the headlights brought into view a new stretch in front. Occasionally, the headlights uncovered for a blink of an eye a sleeping cow, but not another vehicle or human at that ungodly hour. Even the ubiquitous pariah dogs that father called the 'rice hounds' a familiar sight on every island road were no where to be seen. No humans, no animals, no activity, no life; we were driving into doom and darkness. The depth of the gloom on either side invaded the car; we rode in silence. We felt the ruts in the road before Jayaratna saw them, and even if he did, he could do little to avoid them, there was no good road to spare on either side. The car did not have air conditioning. We rode in discomfort, the winds blasting through the rolled down windows and whistling past my ears sounding like a sorrowful dirge. My thoughts were of the many times I had been on this road, to or from the airport and the excitement of those trips. Then father was alive and there were jokes to enliven those trips, and fun and food at journey's end.

We drove into the central highlands and straight into the little daylight appearing over the hills and sweeping across the valley, outlining in its wake the paddy fields in the valley floor and more terraced fields on the hillside. And beyond in that open space, where the clouds were stirring, stood the massive granite monolith called the Bible Rock, so called by the British because they thought it bore a resemblance to a bible, a likeness that I did not see. We passed the tunnel at the end of a hairpin bend and it brought memories of the day when father drove the Hillman in reverse gear from there all the way to the Kadugannawa Police Station, while mother wondered rather wearily if in the course of the reverse drive we might get hit by an astounded vehicle coming down the hill on the other side of the narrow road. "There was nothing to worry about. I am exercising the utmost care; the gas level has sunk too low and the engine is unable to draw the gasoline from the tank," father explained.

"It happens to Hillmans. Sir, have at least half tank of gas before you begin the climb, the policeman advised.

A rush of irritation against father for not checking the gas level before the climb affected mother, and we cried in unison that the name Hillman is a misnomer if the

car after much faltering at the foot of a hill, eventually climbs it, butt forward, in reverse gear!

I remembered other occasions when the radiator heated spewing black smoke through the hood soon after the Kadugannawa climb began. We stopped where spring water trickled down the granite precipice into a bamboo spout, cooled the engine and filled the water tank. On every trip to and from Colombo, I wondered rather irritably if the car would crunch to a halt and leave us stranded. Memories of fractured axles, severed fan belts and hoses, flooded carburetors, broken springs, and flat tires are returning without that stab of pain or anger I felt in my childhood. On a deserted jungle road on the way to Tissamaharamaya the car developed a curious wobble. The road was deserted; the jungle on either side was deep and frightening. Mother sat bolt upright in the front seat saying things that she has said before under similar circumstances and had made no difference. Father jacked up the car and crawled under. A spring was broken, he said. He tied the sheath of springs with a rope and the crippled car crawled at snail's speed to the nearest wayside repair shop where the broken spring was welded and the next scary stage of the journey began.

Poignant are the memories of the scolding he got from mother for not keeping the car in better condition,

“You and your untrained mechanics have ruined this car. Take it to the dealers when it is in need of repairs!”

In the growing dusk we were on a lonely stretch of road to Anuradhapura. The car came to a stop and the engine died. I was thinking that the car had run out of gas or engine oil or some other lubricant that drives it. Without getting wildly excited as I might have done, he said prudently and in a matter of fact tone,

“Don't make a noise! An elephant is crossing the road. No chance if it's an enraged rogue elephant. We're finished!”

In that vacant stretch of road ahead, in the deepening gloom, an elephant loomed larger than life before my startled eyes blotting the road and the trees - a gigantic bluish silhouette of the behemoth sauntering from one side of its domain to the other. Mother's piety surged in the presence of the impending disaster. Hugging herself into the folds of her sari in terror, she began to pray to her many gods to deliver us from extinction. Like the wings of a humming bird in motion, her lips were trembling in unheard prayer. Without even a glance in our direction, the beast crashed its way through a grove of trees and disappeared from view. But father was

in no hurry; he waited for a long time before resuming the journey, and mother did not say a word; for once in her life she was speechless. I think we all sat on the edge of our seats until journey's end. Images of that hair-raising experience grew dim; receded until they were no more.

I was back in the rear seat of the car moving fast toward Kandy. The car sped along the bridge that spanned the Mahaveli, between the grove of flowering trees and shrubs of the Royal Botanical Gardens and the Rest House- so many memories and associations with both, whizzed past Kingswood College, the Aramaya- the hermitage of Buddhist priestesses, Bede's Lodge, a house he owned and where we lived for several years. We passed the Kandy Convent, the grade school I attended; outside those shuttered gates he would wait for us in the car on rainy days. Over there is the Wembley Theater and just beyond the Police Station and onward past the bus station, the Clock Tower and soon we sped past the Elephant House, a favorite haunt of his in those days, and then Cargills, one of two department stores in our town where he shopped to satiate his craving for walnuts or a shot of Drambuie. We were minutes from home. We swerved to the right at Queens Hotel and started our drive around the lake he loved. The still water of the lake was like a sheet of luminous glass reflecting the pale blue sky and the trees drooping over the shoreline. Over there, by the boathouse, there was a vendor who sold vadas, the savory hot cakes we loved. The narrow road twisted and turned past the Malwatte Temple and the turnoff to Suisse Hotel. The climb to our home began; it entered my field of vision framed within trees and shrubs that mother and father planted when it was built more than two decades ago. There under the porch was his car that once belonged to me- the blue Austin Cambridge. My gaze shifted past known and unknown faces to the Bougainvillea creepers trailing over the half-wall of the balcony on the second floor where I last saw him alive. I climbed the stairs and the powerful fragrance of Cologne assailed my nostrils.

"They are here", someone shouted.

Many pairs of weary eyes were fixed on me. They were all weary of waiting for nearly a week. The sight of death brings on suffering that cannot be endured for long. The funeral had been scheduled and re-scheduled several times to coincide with my arrival. I had wanted to see him one more time and there he was: lying so inert in a casket. I had put my family, relatives and friends through a lot. My ears are ringing with echoes from six months ago.

"I will not see you again, my child. Will you come for my funeral?"

If he were present he might have asked in a jocular tone of voice,  
 “And who showed you the way?”

Seeing the tears flowing down my face, someone said,  
 “Death is a blessed relief for someone as old as your father. Don’t cry. He lived a good life.”

Yes! I shall always remember the broad forehead and the head covered with soft white hair, the slender figure that never in those eighty nine years put on fat, the kind blue-gray eyes that sparkled with childlike delight when he played practical jokes on friends and relatives or regularly on his stoic and reticent wife, the carefully manicured toe and finger nails kept clean despite his propensity to “fix things”, the missing thumb in his left hand- a minor accident in his youth that he never talked about, and the face contorted with emotion when he sang those songs about shapely damsels, flowing streams, squirting fountains, water lilies and graceful swans while accompanying himself on the mandolin or violin. I remembered well the soft spot in his heart for me.

Mother came to my side.

“He has left me,” she cried. They had been married for over sixty years! She looked weary from so many days of grieving. I wondered how she would get along without him. Mother was a woman of strong religious beliefs. She was likely to derive comfort from Buddhism. She was conditioned from a young age to the doctrine that the pleasures and pains of this world are transient. Each night before going to bed, she whispered, “Anichawattqa Sankara.”- All living things are transitory and her phenomenal world exploded into trivia. Even so, experiences and events of We both stood there for a long time looking at his outstretched body lying in the mahogany casket padded with satin flounces. It was open all the way to reveal his whole body from the top of his head to the tip of his white sixty years are bound to diehard. With my arm around her slender shoulder, we stood before his remains. Her arm around my waist was thin but it still felt like a band of steel. stocking feet. Around the casket were several wreaths of red roses and Anthuriums. He was clad in the deep brown suit I brought back from England many years ago. It was now a trifle too big. He was much too thin. If he was living he might have said, “This suit is far too big; I won’t be caught dead in it.” His hands were concealed in white kid gloves and folded over his chest; the eyes shut tight are sunk in the sockets, the bony chin and the thin white hair on his head



*Mother & I*

brought back memories of the pair of tweezers he used in his prime to yank the few white ones. His face was shriveled to skin and bone; the bony chin and the thin white hair on his head brought back memories of the pair of tweezers he used in his prime to yank the few white ones. His face was shriveled to skin and bone. He looked withered and much darker- like a dried fruit. My fingers touched his face; it felt so cold. Mother and I stood there. I had not come so close to death before; father provided me with a new experience- the touch of death. But I did not want to store these death scenes in my mind. I wanted the abiding memories of him to be of the fun-loving joyful person who celebrated life.

I wished I had spent more time with him in the last few years. I remembered his unfulfilled wish to go down to Colombo one last time. Nothing I did could reshape events or restore him so that I could set things right. He left on a journey of no return, all by himself; with no one by his side to hold his hand, to wipe the dribble from his face, to hold the glass of milk to his mouth and coax him to take one more sip. I hoped that his spirit, soaring above the earth could see Colombo as it should be seen, from afar! I knelt down by the casket and worshipped his remains as was our custom,

“Father, I did not think you would go so soon. I did not foresee your mortality? I thought you were invincible. You shared my joys like none other. I owed you much, but repaid little. I can’t let your memory be the albatross around my neck. It must not oppress me with guilt for not being with you in your hour of need. I have come a long way to your funeral to ask your forgiveness. Forgive me, father for my

lapses! I beg your pardon! Your memory is all that remains and it must be celebrated and I will celebrate it.”

As the day wore on the sky glowed with brilliant sunshine. Many people came and went and some stayed behind to accompany the funeral cortege to Mahiyawa cemetery. Shortly before the appointed hour to close the casket, a strange transformation occurred. Over those hills that surrounded our house, dark clouds appeared. I watched the sky with apprehension thinking it would rain on the funeral procession. It began to rain and those waiting outside unfurled umbrellas. I took one last look at father's shriveled face before the mahogany lid was put in place. His physical remains vanished from my sight. My apprehension over the rain turned out to be needless. By the time the hearse pulled up to the house, the wind had died down, the clouds had rolled away and not even a sprinkle fell from the sky. The setting sun glowed in the clear blue sky over our beloved town. It was my first visit to a crematorium- a concrete structure in the midst of a rectangular space strewn with white sand. The surrounding garden was carefully tended. Bougainvillea vines laden with red, pink, yellow, orange and purple blooms splashed the garden of death with exuberant color. He would have loved the setting because it was beautiful to the eye without the appearance of immaculate order. His coffin was placed on a white slab and gently rolled inside a hollow passage until it disappeared from my sight into the gloom beyond. We walked in single file around the crematorium three times our lips moving in singsong prayers. I too walked around muttering over and over again, "May he attain Nirvana!" We then stood back to look skyward at the specter like chimney in the center. What was I expecting to see- his spirit materializing into his familiar human shape like the genii from the bottle? I sought comfort in Buddhism. Declaration of eternal love, expression of feelings that never die, ceaseless effort, lasting peace, and inexhaustible strength are but figurative speech. Every word, thought, feeling, hope and desire of human existence ends with death. Suddenly I became aware of mother standing at my side and my thoughts were immediately oppressed by her mortality. Someday soon, she will also pass into a dimension beyond my reach. Thereafter, ties to my homeland would surely weaken. I reached out and hugged mother and we wept on each other's shoulders, each not knowing the other's innermost thoughts in that moment of grieving. The setting sun cast a glow over those engaged in meditative prayer, and speckled the crimson and yellow of the trailing bougainvillea vines. The boundless blue sky

showed through the branches of the silhouetted trees. The fragrance of the Araliya flowers perfumed the air sweetly. In those restful surroundings we kept our vigil. At first, a wisp of smoke rose from the chimney and floated away like a feather in the breeze. A few minutes later smoke billowed from the chimney like layer upon layer of cumulus clouds and they rose higher and higher to meet the blue sky. The secret of life evolved before my steady gaze. There is no end and there is no beginning; no finish line and no return to dust. He vaporized and floated away into the glorious tropical evening- into another existence.



