INHERITANCE

JEAN ARASANAYAGAM

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Fiction

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All is Burning
Fragments of a Journey
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Kindura

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JEAN ARASANAYAGAM

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In memory of my parents,

Charlotte Camilla Grenier Jansz

and

Harry Daniel Solomons

Gazing at portraits in family albums,
Wedding days or the well established
Paterfamilias, I read those endless sagas
In my mind, voices long since silenced
By time.

I begin the opening paragraph and then
Keep writing, writing, filling in the blank
Pages that lie before me,

Creating my own poems, my own fictions
Out of those lives which were once lived
And are now historical, fleshed out to
Provide the credibility of a mixed identity.

" FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS"
JEAN ARASANAYAGAM

"Thus those devas and human beings,
Gone for refuge to the Buddha,
On meeting him pay homage to him,
The Great One free from diffidence."

Itivuttaka 112

INHERITANCE

Jean Arasanayagam, the Sri Lankan writer born to a Dutch Burgher family is one of the leading all - English writers in the Island. Her tertiary studies led her to England and Scotland where she obtained an MLitt. in Literary Linguistics from the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. Her work includes poetry, fiction, creative non- fiction and plays. She is also a painter and has exhibited her work in the island as well as abroad, at the Paris Biennale, the Commonwealth Exhibitions in England, the Smithsonian Institute U. S. A. and Singapore.

She has won local and international awards for her writing and has been widely published in Sri Lanka (New Ceylon Writing, Phoenix, Navasilu, New Lankan Review, Channels Options, Voice of Women, Nivedini, Satyn) and abroad in Kunapipi, The Kenyon Review, Wasafiri, Ariel, Cross Currents, the Indian Literary Journal, Journal of Humanities (Nagasaki.) Her work has been translated into German, French, Danish, Swedish, Japanese.

Of her work Jean Arasanayagam says:

" I have all the feelings and emotions I want to express at hand. They are all part of my writing. To write of them is to explore those endless metaphors of life and death that's my exploration. I search for that significant moment, the moment of truth. Writing helps to contend and deal with those agonizing experiences of life and death, love, pain, sorrow, not only of my own, but of others too.

Kunapipi Post- Colonial Women's
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Concluding lines to "The Hour of the Fox" from the Dhammapada 170.

"The Hour of the Fox" has also appeared under the title "Samsara".

Contents

PHOENIX FIRE.

" Mourning has made a warren in spirit"

(Phoenix too Frequent) Christopher Fry.

I had a church wedding. A High Church Anglican wedding, elaborate and ritualistic. Draped in folds of silver lame, decked in my mother's heirloom jewellery. The choir from the choir loft sang in unearthly, angelic voices, the special wedding hymns, a favourite being "The voice that breathed o'er Eden." The priest in all his regalia of white and purple robes embroidered in gold delivered the homily with all its age - old sentiments. The ceremony after its completion gave the sanctions for the opening of that gate into the garden which I would enter for the first time to taste of what had hitherto been delicious forbidden fruit.

I bore in my arms a carefully arranged bouquet of white Arum lilies fresh from the up - country gardens of Nuwara Eliya. A bouquet of the purest, whitest lilies, the petals satiny in texture with an almost transparent sheen. The bouquet had been created by one of the leading florists in Kandy for whom each flower arrangement was a special creation, a work of art. The lilies were

bound with flowing white satin ribbons. The bouquet was a painting out of a Still Life which would last in its enduring canvas for generations to come when I posed for my wedding portrait. The florist's garden had been a place where I loved to wander, a garden filled with fragrant roses imported as he would always say, ' From the Netherlands'. I wanted to fill a wide canvas with those colours which extended beyond the frame in which I lived. A garden without boundaries. I remembered the story books of my childhood with their strange illustrations of leafy- branched trees and flowers, out of which faces peeped out. Hidden faces. Concealed among those leaves and petals. You had to discover them from within that camouflage.

That Burgher gentleman, the florist, was also an artist. He planted flowers that poured their evanescent colours into the green and gold of grass and sunlight. Orange - red gladioli quivered on slender stems. Carnations, bright-red maroon or white petals streaked with brushstrokes of pink; clusters of pale blue and mauve hydrangeas; golden-hearted daisies, webs of delicate ferns creating a magical aura. Colours, textures and fragrances which made me think that another, more mysterious life grew secretly, drinking in the moisture of dews, opening up to light, allowing the sun to lay its wings on their petals. " In the evening" the florist told me, as he stooped to lift the face of a barbeton daisy to the sun, "the fireflies and glow - worms light up my garden. It is a different world then. Only the shadowy shapes of plants, bushes and trees and the fragrances fill the night air. My garden then belongs to me and all the night creatures that come alive in the dark."

The florist was a man who wove magic into his creations. He would order baskets of flowers from up - country, the Arum lilies and Ladies Lace that did not grow in his own garden. They arrived by train in conical-shaped baskets enfolded in moist

wrappings of ferns and fir-sprigs redolent of coniferous forests. The petals of the arum lilies in my bouquet were still crisp, ivory-white. Reminding me of the starched white habit of nuns, visualizing them as they prayed before the statue of the Virgin Mary in hushed murmurous voices, their rosaries pressed into the delicate flesh of their fingers. White habits that never seemed to lose their stiffness and yet I knew that the petals of the arum lilies would wilt and brown at the edges, their fragrance so heady, bear the smells, the odours, of spoiling.

Even plucking them, snipping off their stalks, pressing them so close together, twining them with metal wires, was an act of despoliation. I saw myself too, impersonally, like one of those arum lilies, placed in a cut- glass vase, the stalk disintegrating in the water which turned brownish, discoloured with its gradual disintegration. I looked closely at the pistil of the lily. A sun - dusted golden yellow enveloped in a mantle of pollen. Images of fecundity arose in my mind. How strong, how firm and dominant was the thrust of that pistil embedded in the innermost sheath of the flower. Nectar. Pollen. Dew. Honey. Waxy combs filled with amber honey. Fragrance. Texture. Colour. My body I envisaged as a secret garden with its secret language. A language shared with nature and the elements. Somehow disembodied from the flesh, from those diaphanous garments that covered and concealed the real self.

I touched the petals and pistils of the lilies with the tips of my fingers. Cool, like silk, cool, almost icy yet heating my blood in that tactile contact. Sending a flush to my cheeks. I must be careful not to crush them or leave the imprint of too harsh a touch on those immaculate petals. I had still to carry them down the aisle with my down-cast eyes concealed beneath the modesty of the white tulle bridal veil embroidered with silken threads of white and silver.

I was weighed down with the weight of the jewellery I wore. So many gold chains. A throatlet clasping my neck encrusted with brilliants, emeralds and rubies. Bracelets of gold. Diamond ear-rings. The engagement ring with its blue sapphire encircled with diamonds. My hair with its blue- black sheen coiled on the nape of my neck. I had until then, braided my hair in a single plait which swung down the length of my back. A dark serpentine coil.

I gazed at myself, metamorphosed from the young, ingenue school girl - in the mirror. My companion from early childhood, my ayah, stood hovering behind my mother and myself. My mother adjusted my veil crowned with its wreath of orange blossoms. I felt cocooned in the sheath of silver, cold, stiff, with its metallic feel about my body. My ayah's face appeared like a mask suspended on a white wall. Her hair was now streaked with white. Her eyes pressed their gaze into my body, a body which she and she alone had known so intimately for all these years.

"Look how slender bebi is. You are like a princess now," she said with pride.

The three of us, my mother, my ayah Cecilia and I gazed at our reflections in the triple mirrors of the dressing table. Cecilia had always been by my side from the time of my birth, caring for me, swaddling me in the strong yet delicate chrysalis of her arms. Her presence gave me a sense of safety, a feeling of security, but as I began to toddle about, never being allowed to stumble or fall, I realized that I was overprotected. I was shielded from the least pain or hurt. I suffered not a single bruise or bump in my childhood.

Cecilia, in spite of the presence of my mother and myself in the room, seemed to dominate the space, spacious as the room was. She was a big-made woman with an ample bosom encased in white cotton, lace- edged jackets. Tall, imposing, yet kindly

and comforting. Her wide lap provided a sheltering hammock for me to slip into, to close my eyes, feel its gentle swing and the deep throb of her life and breath . Sometimes I felt I would smother in that deep - held, close - bosomed and intimate clasp and then I would struggle out, evading her outstretched hand.

My elder sister Sandra too had grown up, protected by Cecilia but an early marriage had helped her to move out of that all-embracing, all- protective love showered on her. Sandra at any rate had always been able to escape into her world of music. She was an accomplished musician adept at playing the piano. From those early days the house was filled with the strains of classical music.

Cecilia's entire life had been spent in caring for us. Her day geared to our school time - table. She carried a basket to school with a bottle of fresh orange juice for the ten o' clock tea interval and for lunch we ate the carefully packed sandwiches of egg and cheese which she had prepared for us. When it was time to go home she would take us back-the house was walking distance from school-shepherding us carefully on the main road. She was solidly built. Almost monumental. A bulwark in our life. Some times her over-protectiveness was stifling. She was a bastion, a fortress in which no chinks had been made. She had a son in the village brought up by the grandmother. She had lost her husband early in marriage. Now, apart from us, she had no other life. I grew up to be a timid child. Hardly allowed to think independently for myself. Always lifted up even before I tripped and fell. Fed, bathed, dressed, put to bed, woken up by Cecilia.

My father was always in the background. My mother was the more dominant of the two. Tall, regal with smooth, satiny complexion, clear-cut feaures, a wide forehead with arched eye- brows. My father, slightly built with a personality muted and restrained. It was a house of women, the two of them, my

mother and Cecilia, overpowering in their presence. We had emerged out of that conventionally arranged marriage, two daughters, whose characters and personalities were struggling to define themselves not so much through speech as from music and painting. In this way we would avoid collision with any opposing ideas that our mother would counter us with. We had to exercise care that we would not overshadow her.

Sandra and I never played games at school like the other girls. Sandra preferred playing the piano to shooting goals on the net-ball pitch. Drill we had to go through in the School Hall. Life in school was structured, disciplined. Strict. And those English Country dances we had to train our bodies to follow. I sometimes felt so gawky. So awkward. I felt that my body was not meant to go through those strange steps. I just liked being quiet with my books and my sketching. In the background Cecilia was a constant, comforting presence while Sandra sat before the key-board lost in her world of scales, arpeggios and sonatas. Yes, I hardly ever got onto the playing fields. Cecilia was afraid I would fall and injure myself. Even later on, when I grew up Cecilia would chaperone me everywhere. She would sit for hours waiting for my painting classes to be over. I could see her through the wide open windows of the Convent where the classes were held, sitting on the steps, solid, unyielding, Monumental. While I sketched, drew, painted, pored over books on painting, she sat there unmoving, hour by hour, ruminating in silence, enwrapped in her own thoughts.

It was at these Art classes that I began to discover my own freedoms, expressing myself in bold lines and colour. My palette was covered with brilliant shades of vermilion, scarlet, crimson, mutations of pink, green, and blue. I avoided the sombre shades of gamboge, yellow- ochre, dun and sepia. I painted landscapes that sprang from my imagination, birds with trailing plumes,

rising in the air with arching wing-span. Fantastical foliage. Faces peering out of leaves. Faces which only I saw, carefully concealing them among the tracery of foliage. "Ah, it looks like the Garden of Eden," my teacher remarked. Adam and Eve walked through the trees and flowers, tasting of the fruit that hung in clusters from the branches. The fruit looked so luscious. So tempting. And yet that serpent twining in the grass..... I had still to learn and interpret those legends, find out how relevant they could be to my whole life. My imagination was fertile, nourished by all the sermons preached on Temptation and Original Sin or even from the memory of those beautiful, luminous bodies in the paintings that hung on the walls of the School Hall. Eve's face, after the Fall, hidden in the shadows. Her body, naked, the flesh pearl- like. Nineteenth century Romantic paintings. A memory embedded in my own mind.

Temptation? I had never had boy-friends like the other girls at school. Nor had I a deep friendship with the other girls in my class. I knew that some of them had really passionate feelings towards each other. Towards individual teachers too. Most of whom were unmarried, devoted to the school and to their work in the only world they knew.

Running after the teacher, running behind the teacher, what strange phrases to describe the early arousal of sexuality, of feelings, emotions, sensations we could hardly define. The delicious thrill of a look, a touch..... hours and hours which trickled through the hourglass of time while the years sped by. Where else could those roles be rehearsed in the atmosphere of a missionary school where hardly any male except the missionary priests entered and when they did it was to preach the gospel of spiritual love. Always agapé. Never eros. All the girls were secretly in love with one very young priest just out from England. When he was transferred to Colombo he fell in love with a ballet dancer in his congregation and married her. The other priests

belonged to a separate world, distant and aloof from the simmering passions of the Senior Girls.

We had no brothers, so we never came in contact with other college boys either. We were smothered in Cecilia's love, all-protecting, all- enveloping. We were her surrogate children for my mother was totally absorbed in giving singing lessons to students, lessons which she gave privately at home.

Sometimes I felt Cecilia had never wanted us to grow up. That she had always wanted us to be babies or toddlers, dependent on her care. When I attained puberty it was she who stood beside my mother and the family dhobi when the ritual bath was given me. It was she who held out the white sheet to wrap me in, cocoon me within, leading me into the bedroom to towel-dry my long, waist- length hair and to hand me fresh, new clothes. I felt at ease with Cecilia even in my nakedness. She knew more about my body than even I did. She had cared and nurtured me from the day of my birth, tended me as I grew from babyhood to adolescence. She had watched and waited for the day when I would begin my entrance into womanhood. She had never stopped her watchful care of me even when I could do things for myself. She slept in our shared bedroom, placing her mat in a corner of the room. Her presence filled it, pervading the room with the odours of her warm, comfortable body with the fragrance of coconut oil which she applied on her head everyday, early in the morning. I felt that Cecilia even controlled my dreams. She was up in an instant if ever I made the slightest movement or struggled restlessly in my sleep.

I wasn't really allowed to grow up. To understand that I had feelings of my own. I could now perceive my body growing into womanhood. In the classroom our emotions were trammeled. There was no outlet for our natural urges and needs. The teachers who surrounded us were all women. They were seldom or never

absent from school. Mature woman for the most part. But there too, existed hidden emotions. Our Art teacher fell in love with a young Englishman who was teaching in one of the missionary Colleges. She would invite him to school to play his guitar and sing to us. This was her world of Camelot with her handsome young knight. One day he sailed away in a yacht. There were rumours that it never reached safe harbour and that the yacht was lost in the high seas. Soon afterwards the Art teacher left for England. Perhaps the young knight had really reached home and they met once again and lived together until he left her. Or she, him. Lived in England, grew old and died in a Home for Senior Citizens. England was the Eldorado for Miss Ellen. She had studied painting at the Royal College of Art and even after she returned, hankered to go back. The young Englishman helped her to fulfill her desire. And then there was Olivia who adored her class teacher, Miss Venetia. Everybody knew. Everybody teased her. Nubile young women. Some of them exchanged embraces and kisses in empty classrooms. Had I missed out on all this? I felt an aching void within myself. For me there was no passionate avowal of love, of everlasting friendship, of the mingling of blood as sharp blades nicked the flesh on a tender wrist. Strange consummation in this rehearsal of adult roles in the puritanical atmosphere of our school. I too longed to be part of those small private enclaves. To belong. To feel one with my own kind. I felt drawn towards them, desired to be held in arms that would curve about my body, caress my hair, my limbs. Those were all my secret fantasies fed by the romantic lyrics I read and the songs we sang in the school choir.

My sister Sandra lived in a world apart. She was a brilliant and talented pianist. She would sit for hours before the piano, the sheets of music spread before her and a passionate cascade of notes would flow from the keys over which her fingers skimmed. Beethoven, Liszt, Rachmaninoff..... yes, my sister was the

gifted one. I grew up in her shadow. My mother encouraged her talent. She passed all her music examinations of the Royal College of Music and ultimately gained her L.R. S.M. At school it was always Sandra who gave solo performances on special occasions and even played the hymns for us to sing at morning Assembly. She was tall, full-bosomed with dark lustrous eyes. She was very self-conscious about herself. Shy. Diffident. Never preened herself either. She would lose herself in her music as she sat on that revolving piano stool reading those pages of music as if they were the pages from her own diary or from a volume of poetry or from a novel. Music spoke with a special voice to her. Once she had completed the concerto or sonata she would rise in haste from the piano stool, the carefully pressed pleats of her school uniform all crushed and in disarray and rush off through the back stage to her own privacy. She was shy and reserved. Everybody was aware of those qualities. The teachers. The students. White cotton uniform accentuated her rounded figure. She seemed to chafe at the restrictions of those pleats, collars, pockets, and the tight, narrow belt. Her only freedom expressed in those fluid notes that emerged from those sensitive and skilled fingers. Diminuendo, crescendo 'playing with expression', soft, muted, the notes muffled with the pedals pressed down. Her personality was embodied in her virtuosity. The rest of the time she retreated into silence but was never stubborn or recalcitrant.

As Sandra grew up, she needed the ministrations of Cecilia less and less. She wanted her independence although it was not easy, hemmed in as we were by the conventions of the conservative society we lived in. After we became young women society would take over our lives. There was no escape from that way of life. I could not envisage whom I would marry but when the time came I knew that my parents would find a suitable marriage partner. I had no desire to follow a career, to have a profession. I wanted to be totally immersed in my painting, my drawing. My

portfolio of drawings was growing and it became easier for me to slip into that landscape with those hidden faces that peered out of the trees. Disembodied faces. Faces without bodies.

My sister had grown into a beautiful young woman. Her translucent eyes with their thick, arched eye-brows and sweeping lashes, her inscrutable, sphinx-like expression gave her an enigmatic appearance. She had many admirers. Young men discovered, searched her out, wished to be her escort at parties and dances but my mother insisted on being her chaperone. My sister displayed no emotion. She did not express her feelings about those young men. It was if they did not count to her. She spoke little. Said nothing at times. The only voices she listened to were those of her music. When the time came, Sandra left school and married the man selected for her by our parents. The new clothes, the jewellery meant nothing to her. She expressed neither sadness nor happiness as she left our home with her husband. The enigmatic smile still hovered on her lips as she followed her husband to her new life, one which would take her far away from us all, to another country, never to be seen again. I remained behind, biding my time, inhabiting that garden that extended itself, daily spilling over in drawings in that tightly packed portfolio. My secret life lay there. Soon the garden of my imagination filled with birds, insects, reptiles that went back into the prehistory of my creative imagination. It would be with reluctance that I would emerge into the real world that I knew my mother wanted me to confront. I was aware that Sandra would have preferred to remain as she was, unmarried, all her passion and energy poured into her music. She played superbly I know and yet, novice as I was I felt that there was something lacking in her interpretation of those complex sonatas. It was at times, all technique. Too mechanical. There were no discords in her playing and yet..... my heart did not beat fast or my pulse race when she played. I thought of the orange tree in our garden. The

fruit remained hard and green, the inner segments pale yellow, not a bright, rich gold. The juice was tart, acidic on the tongue. On the other hand there was the mango tree with its laden branches, the fruit honey-sweet. The garden resembled the world we lived in, in which we spent our lives. Full of flowers and fruit and yet ripeness did not always bring the sensuous pleasures of satisfaction when we ate of the fruit. Sometimes within the heart of the mango there would be a lurking grub curled up within a hollow in the flesh or buried within the seed. There was yet another life feeding within and I could neither flush or prise it out. It spoiled my desire for the nectar- filled flesh. I lost that expectation of pleasure. I could cut away that part where the grub enjoyed its secret life but by then, the experience was marred. What I had encountered was deception in that smooth outer- skin. Within the fruit there were jagged routes, faint residual scars radiating like spokes from the central core where the grub had burrowed so deeply, feeding insatiably on those minute particles of golden flesh. Nature must have its way. Why should it not be so? My discovery of that secret niche was a violation of the survival of the grub. Unearthing its abode, disturbing the secret pleasure harmed no one. Yet my desire in itself constituted a violation. I felt half- guilty when those tender slivers touched my lips.

My mother meanwhile was growing anxious about my future. I had no fixed ambition to be anything or anyone. No profession or career in mind. Still dependent on my home, my mother, Cecilia, more so now that my sister was no longer here. Sandra had been married off, settled according to my parents' wishes. My father had grown aged, detached from the concerns of everyday life, retreating into his study and re-reading his leather-bound editions of the Classics. My sister's departure had left an emptiness in his life. Eventually she had gone abroad. To America. She had had no children so far. Perhaps she had never

found the time to have them because music had been her all- absorbing passion. She had accepted the suitor chosen for her without protest, packed her music books and left. No one would ask awkward questions about her childlessness in another country.

I had hitherto never felt anything towards a man. After I left school the only change was that my uniforms, starched, white, were folded and put away forever in the almirah. I had metamorphosed into a young woman with a certain farouche charm but I knew nothing of the world. The innocence and naivety of my unknowingness clung to me like the soft bloom on one of those upcountry peaches. The peaches from the orchards of Nuwara Eliya. Small, greenish, touched with crimson and purple. The juice tart, the rough seeds a deep maroon embedded within the flesh. One of my few diversions was going to the Anglican Church on Sunday with my parents. Comfortably leaning back in one of the pews closing my eyes, half- listening to the chanting of the litanies, singing the canticles and hymns, receiving communion. Following the elaborate High Church rituals of Anglicanism. Adjoining the church was the great temple of the Tooth. While the streams of the organ peeled from the loft, the drums and flutes would sound from the temple. It was at that moment that I felt myself denied. Wanting to belong to that other life too. Feeling the stirrings of that archaic memory of my ancestors who had been proselytised by the Anglican missionaries. Throttling what little life force I possessed. My mother too wanted me married. What else could she do with this daughter of hers? She wanted to create a safe and secure alliance for me. I had had no romantic attachments with anyone. Never fallen in love. Society ordained that I should marry at a certain age or else with my temperament I would end up a spinster and my parents blamed for not making a suitable match. The older relations persisted in asking my mother why I was still not engaged to be

married. "Keeping a young girl like that at home. Growing older day by day. Is it that you do not want to part with her? There are so many suitable proposals. Good families. Men of means who can support her. Think of one of them," my aunts advised my mother.

A cousin of my mother's living in Colombo brought a proposal from a well established family in the city. The proposed suitor was both an architect as well as a landed proprietor with extensive properties, tea, rubber and coconut estates. Houses given out on rent in Colombo and a palatial mansion which he occupied. He had married sisters but appeared to have postponed marriage himself. He was a man of maturity, my mother was told. Much older than myself. My mother thought that someone almost fatherly would be kind and protective towards me. "You've never been trained for a career. You won't have to go out into the wide world and work. And you can paint and draw during your hours of leisure. He is, I am told, kind, understanding and of course socially acceptable in every way,educated in a leading Public School in Colombo, has been abroad for his architectural studies and belongs to the same religious creed as ourselves. He's supposed to be quite well off too, doesn't have to depend on his profession alone, but don't forget you belong to a very good family yourself. Your forefathers were chieftains, you won't go empty handed either. You will be given your share of the family heirlooms, but my daughter, more than all that wealth and all those possessions I want to see you settled, take your place in society.

"Will Cecilia come with me? I asked.

"No, your future husband will have his own servants. Cedric might object to a stranger entering his abode. At any rate, you must now stop being so dependent on your ayah. You will have a new companion in your husband. He will want you to keep a beautiful home, entertain his friends and devote your time to

his needs. You have your own uncles and aunts and cousins in Colombo too. No, you won't feel lonely."

I will have to live in a house of only men. My husband will be a long- standing bachelor set in his ways. Will he make a blue print for life as well? Create a structure which will enclose and imprison me? Perhaps he will create a separate living space for me for I know it won't be easy for him to make room in his life for a virtual stranger like myself. We were both strangers to each other. Why hadn't he married all these years, I wondered. Were there others who had brought pressure, social pressures, to bear on his life too? A man of his social status, with education, wealth and professional qualifications, not a recluse, not a hermit, a much travelled man. Was it a sudden feeling of loneliness? Did he really want someone like myself, someone not worldly wise? Who wouldn't ask too many questions and probe into his past?

I remembered the day my parents arranged a meeting with my future husband. He was invited to tea one afternoon and had driven up to Kandy in his car. I was dressed up for the occasion in a soft blue Kandyan-style saree with a narrow edging of silver and my hair was knotted at the nape of my neck. And one of my mother's silver Matara diamond-studded konde kooras pierced through the tightly bound swathes. Cecilia fluttered in the background supervising the preparations for the tea. My father promised that he would emerge out of his study when the time came. My mother would impress my suitor of course. She possessed that regal bearing and poise that I, an ingenue had yet to cultivate. We were descended from a line of Kandyan aristocrats and our names were in the history books, figuring prominently in the Island during the period of the British rule. My mother was fully aware of the advantages that our name still presented. I must confess that my mother had a strong will, stronger than my father's. I offered no resistance to the plans. I

had no other alternative nor could I remain a burden on my parents' hands as they grew older.

We heard the car coming up the drive. Stopping at the entrance beneath the old fashioned portico. I waited inside the room until I was summoned to meet him. My parents greeted him on the threshold as he alighted from the car. He was welcomed into the drawing room and sat at ease in one of our single upholstered armchairs. I observed him covertly from behind the curtain of my room, awaiting my mother's summons to join the gathering.

He was tall, in his late thirties or perhaps even in his early forties. A wide forehead. High cheekbones. A slight smile touched the corners of his lips. As if he were surprised at himself fitting into an unaccustomed setting. Yet he had a sense of aplomb. His eyes were concealed behind spectacles with strong dark frames. I would have loved to have seen the expression in his eyes-my own, amber coloured could not conceal their transparency. A wing of hair, stranded with gray, fell over his forehead. He was attired in a full charcoal- gray suit. Gold cuff links flashed in his shirt sleeves. His shirt was an immaculate white. Gold watch. Gold tie pin. Shining, well- polished English leather shoes. Gray-blue hose. A signet ring on one of his fingers. With my parents his voice was low, muted. His manner extremely polite. His tones courteous.

My mother entered my bedroom. An air of excitation made her face look flushed. Was her approval tantamount to persuading me to comply, to accept? But then, what alternatives did I have?

"Come my dear and be introduced to Cedric. He appears to be a pleasant man. Gentle. You will not dislike him. Don't feel nervous. You won't be called upon to make too much conversation."

I came out of my room with both curiosity and reserve. He rose to his feet as soon as I appeared. Bowed slightly. We regarded each other with curious but guarded looks. Perhaps he had already prepared the blueprint to accommodate me in his life. I would want many windows to let in the light and air. And a view from those windows - to look upon life, humanity, a view hitherto denied me. My mother watched us closely. Her eyes darting from face to face. I read her unspoken thoughts. " Will this daughter of mine walk away? Will Cedric meet with her approval? Her mind, still so unformed, will need to know how to begin reading his life story."

The conversation was formal. I felt myself hemmed in by Cedric and my parents. I knew that I could refuse nothing. My marriage appeared to be an almost pre-arranged affair by the two of them.

" Cedric doesn't want a long engagement," my mother told me. A simple church ceremony and a reception at home for a few good friends and relatives. It won't take long to prepare the trousseau. I have a wardrobe filled with chiffons and georgettes, Kashmir sarees,silks. I 'll give you your share of the jewellery too."

After the wedding, Cedric and I went upcountry on our honeymoon, to the Hotel Imperial, one of those old traditional hotels built during the colonial era. This was the first time in my life that I would share a bedroom with a man who was after all, a total stranger to me. We had met, had tea together, gone to parties but always chaperoned by my mother, now that my sister was married and living her own life. Cecilia too was now going to be locked out of my life. I would have to fend for myself.

This was a new beginning for me. My first footsteps would be tentative, even uncertain. The hotel room was filled with dark, heavy furniture, ornate and carved. The dressing table with its

tall mirrors, and many drawers with brass handles, the wardrobe which looked monumental, a writing desk and Grindlington chairs. The floor was carpeted and the double bed laid out with such precision, smoothed down with starched white sheets, fleecy English blankets, quilted eiderdowns - an elaborate bier in which I would be expected to lower my body, exhausted as it was, at the end of the day. But I would not lie alone in it. There would be a companion beside me. I did not even know what a real flesh and blood man's body was like. I had of course avidly gazed at the perfectly proportioned torsos of Greek sculptures and imagined what they were like, always regretting that they belonged to older times, other centuries. My father had always been dressed in European style clothes. Pyjamas at night. A dressing gown. He had his own dressing room too. But Cedric I couldn't envisage without his formal clothes, always attired in his silk shirts and flannels for casual wear or his tailored dress suits. In my suitcase, carefully packed by my mother were those specially designed, hand-sewn clothes that were part of my trousseau. Fine silk nightdresses with smocked yokes, silk lingerie with feather stitch, a Chinese kimono embroidered with dragons, crysanthemums and peonies in gold thread. There were French chiffons, embossed satins, floral georgettes and an ankle length evening gown of burgundy taffeta. In my jewel case I carried a pearl necklace and gold bracelets.

Looking at my husband as he began to unpack his clothes I felt as if his life was being revealed bit by bit to me. He looked up at me with a faint rather quizzical smile on his lips - regarded me as if I were... what? A child? "You don't regret our marriage do you? We'll get to know each other in time. Just accept me as I am. I will be careful not to disturb you overmuch. You are an artist aren't you - you can spend as much time as you want painting - even go to England or to Munich to study painting or sculpture. I hope I won't disappoint you - I will need to spend

much of my time with my blue- prints and with my clients". Instead of feeling a sense of relief, I felt a shiver of apprehension run through my body. Cedric's smile was enigmatic. I could interpret it as I wished. Yet he had charm. There was nothing harsh about his manner. His voice was gentle. Tender. We went down to dine at 8 o' clock. I felt the chill of the upcountry weather and draped a Kashmir shawl with a paisley design on it around my shoulders. It belonged to my mother. The dining hall was a vast, cavernous room. A fire burnt in the grate. The mantlepiece was covered with pewter jugs. Toby jugs. It all looked very English. Very colonial. The waiters served us, attired in liveried suits, white coat and cloth, silver buttons, cummerbunds. Cedric chose the food we should eat from the stiff, gold-bordered menu. When would I be able to make my own choices? We had consomme, roast chicken with Duchess potatoes, glazed carrots, cauliflower baked in cheese sauce, apple tart and coffee. Cedric ordered liqueurs and cognac too. I loved the orange - flower flavour of Cointreau.

Cedric made polite conversation and described the history of the British Raj when the planters from the surrounding tea estates had held their banquets here. I felt a sense of oppression, the weight of history, the presence, ghosts of those past guests clothed in the fashions of that era. The waiters were unobtrusive. One of them, a young man stood at Cedric's elbow, serving us from platters of food. Cedric smiled up at him and looked searchingly at his face. I observed the two faces covertly. Imagined. What if the two of them changed places. Fanciful ideas. He was good looking, the young waiter but somehow his attire seemed slightly incongruous, out of place as if he were taking part in some costume drama. He had very light eyes, gray-amber. A tawny complexion. Thick, arched black eyebrows. A golden pollen - dusted skin, luminous with youth. His lips were full, with a slight rather melancholy droop at the corners. What

would he look like, garbed in my husband's western attire? The double-breasted pearl-gray suit he had worn for the wedding ceremony or with a silk shirt, a white cravat round his neck, gold tie-pin, cuff links. The waiter's hair glittered with oil. A faint smell of coconut oil reached my nostrils. I liked it. I imagined him bare bodied bathing in the ice-cold water or the upcountry waterfalls. That was the first time I had observed a young man so closely. I felt a kind of intimacy created by his proximity to us. I could almost feel the blood coursing through his body, an imperceptible quiver in the supple length of his limbs beneath the double folds of the cloth wrapped round his waist.

Cedric smiled up at him. A smile very different to that which he bestowed on me. It was a languorous kind of smile. A smile that created an aura of intimacy between the two males. I felt a sense of unease, even pique. I felt excluded. The young man was unperturbed. Honeymoon guests were to be cosseted, their whims and fancies catered to. The couples were generally in a mellow mood.

Are you from these parts? Cedric asked him.

No sir, I am from a village in Matale.

You like this job? Waiting on people?

Sir, my father has property, spices, pepper, cardamom, cloves on his land but what work would I get in the village?

Well, If ever you come to Colombo and need my help, I'll give you my address. I might be able to get you a billet with one of my friends. I am an architect, I design buildings. I come in contact with many people, my clients, who are on the look out for promising young men like yourself.

Sir, thank you..... please give me your address. I will write to you.

Cedric was paying so much attention to the young waiter. It surprised me. I found it unusual that he should ask personal questions of anyone. He had shown little curiosity about my own life, my school days, my interests, especially my love of painting. I was too exhausted by the events of the day to think deeply of anything except our approaching moments. Of a continued intimacy in that impersonal hotel bedroom haunted by the ghosts of the past. Thoughts of other lovers, other lives.

We went up the carpeted stairway to the room. Cedric yawned.

"Tired." He said, " The climate makes you sleepy here. You too must be quite exhausted. Your face looks pale. Have a hot bath. The sheets look cold." He drew the curtains apart. "A heavy mist. Blots out the landscape completely. I think I 'll go down-stairs and have a nightcap before we turn in."

I felt a sense of relief. Cedric, I hoped could spend as long as he liked in the lounge below. Smoke his pipe. Have some cognac. I unpacked my clothes, rather clumsily laid out my night things. I was so totally unused to doing anything for myself. I unconsciously looked round for Cecilia. I went into the lofty bathroom with its enormous enamelled bath and silver taps. The tiles I noticed had a geometric pattern. So did the walls. I wished I could metamorphoze into some watersprite. I watched the water swirling in the bath. Emptied crystals of bath salts which clouded and foamed in the water. The hot and cold water mingled in the bath as it filled up. I touched it with my hand swirling the water, waiting until it reached the temperature I desired. I removed my kimono and stepped in, lowering my body in the clouds of foam. My skin tingled. The spray touched my hair as I splashed about in the bath. How deliciously sensuous the sensation of the hot fragrant water was. Thoughts of Aphrodite rising from the waves. I loved the privacy, the feeling of

isolation, sinking into my own dreams. Cecilia's presence suddenly insinuated itself into the room. It was she who had always touched my body. Her touch was always a caress as she soaped it gently, pressing her hands into every secret crevice, massaging my scalp until all those tingling sensations enveloped me. What pleasure those baths were. I had felt that only she could understand my body, it's secret needs and desires. She touched me in the same way as my sister Sandra did when she played the complex movements of the sonatas with all their variations. Cecilia's hands foamy with soap crept under my armpits, between my thighs. She had always knelt and pressed the soles of my feet, gently massaging between each toe, pressing each toe. We had secrets, Cecilia and I, games, rituals, that continued from childhood to womanhood. I could have lived with her for the rest of my life. At peace with myself but then there were the traditions of my family, of society. Unwritten laws and decrees which I could not escape from. Nor my parents either. I had to be given in marriage, unprepared as I was for living with a man for the rest of my life. I would never be able to let any man touch my body so naturally, with so much unreserve as Cecilia had. My body was like a map, with the landmarks already established by her. She knew instinctively where those erogenous zones lay, which by the measured and skilled caressing of her hands, so gently awoke those erotic sensations. After all, we had spent years together. Taken and given comfort to each other. But now Cedric had inserted his presence into the fragile glass castle in which I had lived for so long. His shadow loomed everywhere.

I soaked for a long time in the bath my thoughts drifting with the iridescent flecks of foam that inundated me. Finally, I stepped out, standing before the mirror, towelling myself, my image first a vague shape in the blurred glass and then as I wiped the surface with the tip of my towel, seeing myself with both curiosity and

delight. I put on my kimono and felt the crepe silk frozen stiff. In the room I slipped the night gown over my head. It slid down against my body. I felt as if I were a fish, a fresh water fish from a mountain stream, my body so chill yet smooth. I began to brush my hair . There was a knock on the door. Ah, it must be Cedric.

" Cedric ?" I called out.

"Yes, it's me."

I walked up to the door and turned the heavy brass lock. He entered the room, pipe in hand, laid it on the bureau, sat on the bed, began to remove his shoes and socks. He flexed his toes.

"Mmm, icy cold", he murmured.

Gradually he began to remove the rest of his clothes. Coat and shirt. Undid the tie. Stepped out of his trousers. He was now in vest and undershorts.

"Come", he said, and drew me to bed to lie beside him. The odours of his body swept over me, alien smells, strong musk of crushed spices, of pipe tobacco, of whisky. My female odours were swamped by his. My personality still so unformed and immature, would I know take long to assert itself against that overwhelming sense of power he exuded. I felt the strong pressure of his body against mine. I thought to myself, I am the labyrinth he has entered, searching his way through.

I dreamed that night that I was lost in the maze of the park. I did not want to find my way out. The narrow passages between the tall yew hedges shut out my view of the outside world. It had easy enough to enter but soon I found myself imprisoned between those thickly growing screens that seemed to edge closer and closer together. And I began to feel that I would prefer to remain there, willed myself not to find that narrow opening which led into yet another narrow corridor. I would have to find

that aperture which led into the open. My childhood days were finally over.

We left for Colombo a few days later. The young waiter was always by our side, serving us. Cedric always looked around for him, sought him out.

Cedric's house was a palatial one set in a sprawling garden filled with cascades of bourgainvillaea and gnarled old plumeria trees. The wide green lawns were trimmed, the grass rippling with a platinum sheen where the sun fell on it. There were two gateways that led to the house. At the gate stood the gardener who was expecting our arrival. The gates closed behind the car as we drove up to the portico. Cedric sounded the horn. A slender young man, clean shaven, in white shirt and white sarong came forward to open the car door.

"Siri", Cedric greeted him. "I have returned at last." Turning to me he said,

"Siri has been looking after me all these years. He was a little boy when his parents brought him to be my companion and playmate. He is like a younger brother to me. I hope you won't miss not having an older woman in the house. Siri cooks too and keeps my house in order, don't you Siri?"He touched him on his shoulder, his arm sweeping round wing - like in almost a half-embrace. I felt excluded from that enchanted circle.

I followed him into the house. Siri apparently did not even notice me. The two men were glad to be reunited, to resume their old and accustomed lifestyle. This was a home they had created together. There would be nothing for me to do. I would not try to alter the decor in any way. I was a stranger, an intruder, not part of their close companionship.

Cedric heaved a sigh of relief. "Home," he said. "Home," he repeated. Siri is a part of this home. I do not know how I could have survived without him all these years. He knows my ways so well. Let us go into the drawing room. Siri will bring us tea. Tired?" he asked me gently.

"No not tired but....." How could I tell him that I felt I would never belong here. The feeling that this would never be my home.

"Yes, tea, please. I would like a cup of tea."

Siri returned with a tray, two cups and saucers of fine porcelain, a silver tea pot, cream jug and sugar bowl. He poured out the tea for us in silence, his face averted from Cedric's, yet with a half-concealed expression of pleasure at his return. That look so secret. When you do not want anyone else to know how much you care for a person and the only way to show it was to pretend that the other person did not even exist. Siri must have felt very lonely in this large house while Cedric was away.

"Siri, I have brought strawberries for you. Take them out of the basket carefully. I hope they are not crushed.

Strawberries? For Siri?

"Do you remember how once we went to the hills on that holiday? You loved strawberries, didn't you, Siri?"

Why was he talking in this fashion, as if he wanted to mollify the young man? I sipped my tea which was hot but felt my limbs growing chill, my cheeks icy. My lips trembled. Where would I find space here overpowered by the presence of these two men? Cedric spoke in a language which seemed to bear meaning only for Siri. I began to feel tortured by this sense of intimacy between the two of them as if I were watching two people who were in love. Cedric's tones were tender. Full of innuendo. Siri's silence appeared to be accepted as Cedric gently teased him. After tea, Cedric said,

"Come, I will show you your room. Your suitcases are already there. Here is the key of the wardrobe. You can unpack your things at leisure."

The room led off from a corridor. On either side there were two other rooms, curtained but locked. Cedric opened the door.

"This was once my mother's room," he said. "Nothing has been changed since her death but it is yours now. You will live in it as you please. I shall occupy another room with my study adjoining it. I work at my blueprints late into the night."

This would be the beginning of a new life for me. The two men would merely tolerate my presence, its slight intrusion. I would not be expected to disturb the settled order of their lives. Cedric did not show me his room nor the way to it. He just moved away with his arm resting lightly on Siri's shoulder. They disappeared from my sight. I was not to see either of them until the dinner gong sounded and we sat down at the oval shaped mahogany dining table that night. We were seated, Cedric at the head, myself beside him, served by Siri who brought in the steaming tureen of soup and the roast chicken.

" I missed your food, " Cedric told him. Siri merely smiled . Again I felt left out.

"Did you take the strawberries?" Cedric asked him.

"Would you like me to bring some..... for her?" Siri indicated me with a slight inclination of his head.

"That won't be necessary. We had our fill of strawberries and cream at the hotel, didn't we?" Cedric looked at me and smiled. I nodded. If he had offered me the fruit from the garden of Paradise or even the golden apples of the Hesperides I would not be tempted. But I had to understand. I had no desire to usurp Cedric's affection for Siri or Siri's for him. We knew too little of

each other. Knowledge would only serve to separate us further. Cedric was offering me my freedom. I longed to be back in that maze. Being a prisoner. That was where safety lay for me. Freedom was something I would have to accustom myself to. To learn how to enjoy being by myself. Free to be myself.

After dinner Cedric rose from the table. He was polite. Concerned. He expected nothing of me.

"Would you like to rest after the journey? There are lots of books on those shelves in your room. My mother read a great deal. Romantic fiction, most of which is out of date but it will help to while away the time. I shall be working in my study. Siri, please bring me my coffee at the usual time. You can unpack my clothes later. I 'll call you when I need you. Good night," he said to me. Don't worry about my movements. I come and go at different times. Arrange a programme for yourself as you please. There is a car at your disposal if you want to go shopping. Call one of my sisters who will accompany you. And there's that radiogramme with a good collection of long playing records, classical music, which you can listen to..... you like painting. I'll bring you canvases. Brushes Paints.

I went into my room. Entered its silence. It was a silence that would enwrap me within the confines of those walls for the rest of my stay. Yet I did not feel unhappy. Perhaps what I really desired was to be left alone, inviolate with my own thoughts. With my paintings. I began to feel so free. Cedric never entered my room again. A tacit undertanding had been established between us. Each of us had our own lives to live. Siri would be the catalyst between us. I could never breach the bond between the two of them. Siri was free to go in and out of Cedric's room at will. Sometimes, at night, the door would close on the two of them. I was left to my own devices day after day. Through my open window I could see Siri with the gardener. Siri was always

in spotless white clothes, his skin youthful, unblemished, clean shaven. His hair thick and dark, long at the nape of his neck. He alone ran the house, attended to my few needs. We were growing accustomed to each other There wasn't the slightest feeling of tension between us. It was only at night when we sat, Cedric and I at the mahogany dining table that Cedric began talking more to me. We were at ease with each other. We were becoming friends but I could see that Siri and he were close, bonded as it were. I tried to understand what was happening. I sometimes felt a sense of envy. We seemed ideally matched in the eyes of society. How ironic! Was it so easy to delude those onlookers? Is that what society wanted? That we should assume roles which were unlike our true selves? I discovered that I liked being with my thoughts. I started painting again. I read a great deal. Fitted myself into the great house settling in like one of the framed portraits that had a niche in those walls. I recalled my childhood. My adolescence. I had no will of my own to assert myself, to make demands, to compel attention. I never consciously had to make choices. The stronger personalities made them for me. Even in my marriage in which I had had no say. I had no friends in Colombo. Cedric's relatives, after the first formal visits where we entertained them and they us, left us alone thinking that I wanted for nothing, that I was perfectly satisfied with my comfortable life in the family mansion.

One day a telegram arrived.

"Cecilia expired. Come." Signed by my mother.

My husband sounded relieved that I was going home to Kandy.

"Stay as long as you like.", he said. "I'll drop you at the station and inform your parents to meet you when the train arrives in Kandy."

We understand each other. I never expected anything of you. Yet you understand. Siri and I are lovers. You have the right to ask me why I married you. Society expected it of me, just as society expected me to have heirs to inherit my properties which as you know are extensive. You are now going away. I know you will never want to return. You have your freedom. I know your desire is to have our own studio. To paint. To live the way you want to. If you need me, I will be there. If you never come back and I cannot compel you to, I may have to re- marry. I lack the courage that you perhaps have, to tell the truth. Perhaps the time is not yet ripe. The rumours are corrosive. They hurt me but what alternative have I? What blueprint have I got for my own life?

We parted as friends. I took nothing with me except my paintings. That would be the starting point in my new life.

I too must rid myself of my lethargy, my lack of will to do anything for myself. I would make my decisions with the passing of the days.

I felt Cecilia's loss greatly. Part of my childhood, even my womanhood which had been so closely bonded with her life was now lost. I had been too pampered by her. Over- protected. To allow myself to be so protected was also a kind of submission on my part, I realized. It was this submissiveness which had taken me into a marriage I had neither willed nor desired. I was now perfectly aware that Cedric would feel neither love nor passion for me. It was only Siri who meant anything to him. It was his weakness too that made him submit to his family's persuasion to marry. I was the ideal foil. I felt no hatred towards him. No, I felt boundless sympathy for him even. Awareness gave me a new strength as well as a sense of freedom. I would survive. Cedric was more vulnerable. I found I belonged to no one. I was no one's possession. That was the freedom I had been searching for. It was a freedom which I now gripped firmly and held tight onto.

My mother began to turn her attention to me now. She too was beginning to feel alone with only the presence of my ageing father. My sister had settled down with her husband permanently in America. What she did with her life was a mystery. She never became a concert pianist with all her talent but remained a music teacher in a private school.

My mother found it strange that I was preparing to stay indefinitely. She could not understand why I did not want to return to Cedric. She admired him greatly.

"He has such lovely manners," she would boast to her friends. "A perfect gentleman. Very polite. Courteous and attentive to me. Stands up whenever I enter a room, opens the door for me, asks after my health. My daugher was so fortunate to have made such a favourable match."

She would turn to me and say, " I can't understand you, my daughter. Cedric has given you everything. He told me he was going to give you some very valuable pieces of his mother's jewellery. Heirlooms. His sisters are generous. They think their brother too should have his share. They are all so wealthy. Cedric is a leading architect. Think of that palatial mansion you live in. You don't have to go out and work either. Well.... don't give up all that now rightfully belongs to you too. Cedric is a man of standing, respected in society, a pillar of the church. Perhaps he's older than you but you need a mature man who'll make decisions for you. "You led such a protected life at home."

What my mother did not know was that Cedric had already given me my freedom. I could now walk out of the maze in which I had always felt imprisoned, explore the garden at will. I felt more at home in that world I inhabited as a painter where words, utterances were unnecessary, words that did not convey the meaning I wanted them to have. There were those strange

inscrutable faces hidden among the leaves. That was the camouflage I needed. Yet she would not leave me alone, this mother of mine. Her concern for my future. The loneliness she envisaged I would have to face made her anxious. She became a dark shadow that haunted my days, a presence from which I wanted to escape. Fire, the purgation of fire would release me. Flames that wrapped me in a mantle and drew me into the heart of a blinding darkness. One day did I consciously set myself alight with the candle I lit in that heavy silver sconce, that ornate relic from the past ? It was so tempting to watch that flame first lick with its tiny tongue, the edge of my silk nightgown and then spread, the silk, my flesh, the fire become one in that consummation of death.

It was my mother who rushed in to put out the flames. "You appeared like some strange, radiant apparition to me," she said. "As if you were standing alone in a garden with the red-gold flames illuminating the leaves. Everything was still. The fire rustled like leaves shaken in a gust of wind."

There would be scars I knew, even after healing but I would learn to live with them. The pain I felt made my senses come alive, gradually.

Would I spend the rest of my life with my mother? No, I would move out, support myself with my painting. Find an apartment where I would have my studio. I ceased to be self conscious about my scars. I did not ask for pity. I did not need it. I merged into the anonymity of the dust, the noise, the crowds in the wide world outside.

I had made my own funeral pyre like that of the fabled sacred bird of Egypt. I felt myself re-born out of the ashes. I would live out my life in my own freedom, move out of that

terrible claustraphobic prison of submission to the will of others. I could now make my own choices in that vast silence of my paintings. The faces concealed in those leafy branches welcomed me. Why had I not recognized all these years that my face belonged here, that no one would discern me unless the eyes of children sought out those hidden mysteries?

THE CINNAMON STONE

She said, as she sat beside me in the drawing room, " I must show you something", while her husband echoed her words, saying, "Yes, show her the ring." Helen stretched out her left hand. Her second finger was encircled by a gold ring with a single, deep red-brown stone. "Grace gave in to me when I met her in 1980. Sixteen years ago. I wonder whom it belonged to. " James must have given it to her. Perhaps it was his", Richard continued.

A gift to a daughter-in law whom Grace could never openly acknowledge. Her English daughter - in - law. Her natural son's wife. Richard's second wife.

"What's this stone?" Sybil queried. Is it a garnet? A topaz? " I 've never seen one this colour before."

"No, said Helen and Richard together. "It's neither a topaz nor a garnet. It's a cinnamon stone."

Perhaps that was what Grace had named it. When had it come into her possession? Was it an inherited heirloom gifted to her by her mother? The setting was old fashioned, the gold heavy.

" I think it must have been a gift to her from James." Richard seemed to will it to belong to James for what other reminder formed that tenuous bond throughout the years? The most profound loss and sorrow had been, for years and years, the result of a lost love. Richard too had a stake in the possession of that ring. It belonged to Grace. Grace was the mother he had discovered after he had himself attained maturity. They had been kept apart in that arid desert of time. Soon after his birth he had become the foster child of another family. Richard wanted to believe that the ring was something tangible that the father whom he had never seen, never known, who had never even acknowledged him, had given Grace. This was all that Grace had so carefully preserved throughout the years.

It was the most precious gift given to Richard and Helen. The invisible bond existed but it had to be maintained in secrecy. To openly acknowledge the relationship would destroy so many lives. Grace had had to live with this secret. The family was loyal. Not a word was breathed by a single one of them. No one knew. Through years and years of silence. Grace had sacrificed everything. Her son. Her grandson. Her great grandchild. She was well into her nineties. And James? Who knew when he had died? His wife had died too. His legitimate children and grandchildren lived in another country. They had emigrated to Canada many years earlier.

Their mother Millicent had maintained contact with her sisters. With Grace, Alicia, Letty. Until her death by which time forgiveness had softened the terrible shock of what had taken place in their youth.

As for James, no one would ever know what his feelings were like. Was he ever to know of the birth of that son, or was the fact concealed from him? Was he allowed to go scot-free, his conscience untroubled, while the rest of the family suffered?

Even if they knew, James never made any sign that he did so. Not a letter to his son. Never to find out what had become of him. Not a photograph. No reminders.

Sybil could only think over and over again in her mind of the astonishment she felt when Richard had walked into her home for the first time and uttered the words: " Do you know who Grace, your mother's cousin, is? She is my mother."

"Your mother?" Sybil could hardly believe her ears. "I would never have dreamed..... I always thought she was..... a conventional spinster." Surely, nothing untoward could ever have happened in that strait-laced family. Grace to have had a child ? A love child and Sybil's mother never breathed a word either. There were so many closely guarded family secrets. What did Grace feel when she discovered, at the age of twenty five that she had conceived out of wedlock? It must have shaken her to the very core of her being. Did she experience joy, fear, a corrosive sense of guilt? And how could she confess it to her parents, to her sisters, to Millicent whose husband James was?

Grace whose hair was now white silken floss. Ninety seven years old. Sybil from the years of her early childhood remembered visits to the home of her mother's relatives. As she grew up, she remembered Grace's visits to their home too. She had always imagined Grace to be one of the dutiful unmarried daughters who had looked after her parents till the end of their lives. Imagined that she had never known a man. How could anyone have guarded a secret so closely for over seventy years?

Sybil remembered the visits to that sprawling old house they had lived in. A house so solidly built with its portico, wide verandah and a maze of inner rooms set in the secluded garden. Secrets could be guarded so well there. The family was a gentle one, 'meek and mild', was her mother's chosen phrase to describe them. They had passed through the different eras of colonial

history. Victorian. Edwardian. Their lives moulded and shaped by a temperate way of life, educated in private missionary schools, going regularly to the Anglican church and running households that were perfectly ordered. Grace and Letty had never married. Alicia and Millicent had and remained married until their husbands had passed away. In the end the three sisters had lived together. Only Grace was now left.

Sybil thought back on those years, the early nineteen twenties, when Grace was a young women. Closeted in her house. Her brother-in law was debonair, handsome. Holidays spent in the family home. How and when had it all happened. Was it when Millicent was in childbed - but where? Was it at home or when Millicent was in the hospital? At any rate, those were stolen moments of joy and pleasure, intermingled with pain. How had Grace ever told of it. Was it first whispered to any of her gentle sisters? Or to her mother? What could they do? The child must be allowed to be born. They would protect the child. And the mother too. But there must be no family disgrace. Grace must be sent away, far from home so that no one would ever know their secret. It was at this point then that the myths, the legendary journey to another country began to grow. Did that journey ever take place?

India. To a remote hill -station in the North. Grace and her father would go there. First cross over by boat and then take that long train journey. Grace was not to know what would happen when they arrived. She imagined that after the child was born she would never have to part with the infant. But then did that journey ever take place or years and years later was Richard allowed to believe it. Perhaps Grace never left the island but remained secretly in safe-keeping in a convent where she gave birth attended on by the nuns. Was the child then given for adoption to close relatives and taken far away from the mother to India, not to be seen until he was a grown child?

"What a family for secrets," Sybil thought to herself. Grace had transgressed in the eyes of her family. She had violated the kinship ties that were sacred to them all. But they would be lenient, up to a point, after which the decision would be made. None of them ever knew of that deep hurt, that thorn buried in her flesh.

Now, at ninety - six years of age Grace was blind, her hearing too affected. All she had left was speech but her words emerged from a lost era. Was there no other way out for her? In those days, perhaps not. The child saved by Grace had never recovered from that separation. Did she never want to search for that lost son? Did she never want to tell him the truth? What a terrible price had to be paid for that affair of the heart. To relinquish the source, the fountainhead of all her happiness and delight, turning her into a quiet woman who went about her accustomed tasks, unable to pour out her heart to any friend. Unable to even tell James. But Richard that lost son, had discovered her. He had wanted to know. Who his father was, who his mother was. He listened, he kept his ears open while he grew up with his foster family. Yes, he listened carefully. Pieced things together. Did their veiled utterances have truth in them? Did they deliberately mislead him, taking him along a mythical journey to that other country? He made his discoveries. He bided his time. He would in his own way, claim his mother. His father was beyond him. Forever distanced.

"Every family has its secrets." Must be allowed to keep them. Why extend and offer knowledge of a self to those who were insensitive to your feelings, even spurn them? Judge you. Find you wanting . Accuse you. The act of love turned to the act of betrayal. Who dares be the judge, the awful, terrifying judge that condemns you to eternal suffering, guilt and penance for loving another human being, for bringing forth a child unless it

be swaddled in the baptismal robes of legitimacy. And those were the times when such an act was considered to be a scandal, bring disgrace upon a respectable, educated family, proud of their forebears who settled down in this country or sailed away who knows where. At least one ancestor had done so. The adventurer. The fortune seeker. He too had left a son and departed never to be seen again. In those days there was acceptance. Not recrimination. In these times how people would whisper. How the talk would go round. Gossip. Malign the family, destroying the very foundations of good name and respectability. Morality was a social, a religious obligation. Live within the fortress walled in within its conformity or be damned forever. There would be no talk of divorce. The marriage would continue. The man would not have to pay the price of philandering. He would go back to his wife and resume his marriage as if nothing had happened to change it.

Sybil as a child, would observe Grace on family visits to her granduncle's home. He had always been a gentle, quiet man who had never shown signs of the upheaval that had disturbed the family menage. Dressed in full suit with waistcoat and coat even during the day, he would welcome his niece, Sybil's mother Camilla and they would talk of everyday, mundane events. Camilla's mother had died young and to her, maintaining links with her aunt Celia who lived in the old family house in Colombo and her uncle Frederick in Kandy had been important. Sybil never saw any children on those visits when she accompanied her mother. It was a house of spinsters who spoke in subdued voices and moved silently about their tasks. By that time Grace had returned to the family fold. The child had been taken away from her. No one ever mentioned that child. Sybil never heard a word about him even from her mother. Family loyalty kept their lips sealed. The cousin with the sweetest, gentlest nature was the youngest, Letty. She was even-tempered, patient with children

and years later she had told Sybil that she had been a companion to the children of family friends. The children's mother had been an Englishwoman. The children loved this gentle young woman who had spent hours with them, playing their childlike games, reading to them and teaching them their early lessons before they were sent off to school, and later to England. Lost to memory Letty and Grace lived on with their parents. Grace had an air of quiet charm but often there was a poignant expression on her face. A smooth, rosy-tinted complexion. Grey-blue eyes, silky brown hair brushed sleekly in a side part, secured with a tortoise-shell slide. Old maids. Sybil never thought that there had ever been romance, excitement or turbulence in those lives. The days were spent in looking after their parents, managing the household affairs. All this was in the early forties. After the death of their parents, the two unmarried sisters searched for other avenues of income. They had had no professional training so they used the skills they had acquired of being companions, housekeepers. Grace was the companion-housekeeper of a Burgher lady, a widow, who possessed a palatial house. For years Grace and her sister Letty lived companionably together with Mrs. Van Rhee. After the death of Mrs. Van Rhee the house was gifted to Grace who kept two paying guests, one of whom was a reputed lawyer, the other a Burgher school teacher separated from her husband.

Sybil was then a young student at the University and remembered Grace's constant visits to her mother. Always in need, always desperate for an efficient servant to cook for them and keep the house in order.

"Camilla, can't you get someone to do the cooking, even a daily help would do. Someone to prepare rice and curry for lunch and courses for dinner - soup, cutlets, stews, roast beef and chicken, puddings...."

Sybil spoke little to her nor did Grace speak much to Sybil. She merely overheard the adults, sitting out on the verandah, speaking of matters that were of little concern to her. Sybil and her sisters were growing up, interested in fashions, make-up and hairstyles. They went to parties and dances and formed romantic attachments. Never did Sybil think for a moment that Grace had ever known passion or what it was like to be closely locked in the embrace of a man. Virginity had been so carefully preserved among that generation of spinster aunts and cousins- or so she imagined. Moreover Grace did not appear to have much time for Sybil and her sisters. She must have been in her fifties at that time. Faint streaks of silver were beginning to thread through her brown hair. The cousins were separated by time, at least over half a century.

Many years later after her mother's death, Sybil went in search of those lost cousins. She and her family had driven through winding roads until they reached the hill where the old house stood. A house whose architecture belonged to a colonial era. Time seemed to have stood still through the changing decades. The lawyer sat at the oval shaped dining table. Yet another friend of the cousins, a retired school mistress had now taken up her abode with them. Grace, Letty and the widowed sister, Alicia, now lived together. Alicia was childless, alone after the death of her husband. The school mistress had her own apartment. A Victorian corner - what - not, an intricately carved camphor wood chest, her drawing room suite, upholstered Chesterfield settee and chairs and her own bedroom made her feel that she was at home there.

They sat and talked of the past and Sybil felt that she should once more forge those kinship ties for the sake of her mother. "Come and have tea with us," Sybil invited them spontaneously. "We will pick you up by car and bring you back home."

"Cousins," she thought to herself. "My granduncle's daughters. They are part of my own recollection of childhood. Dear granduncle Frederick, the brother of that grandmother whom I was never to know, who died so tragically young. So many children. Weary of childbirth. No escape for women like her."

One day, Sybil heard that Grace had sold the house and property. Moved away with her sisters and the retired school teacher. The lawyer had long since died. She lost touch with them. She did not know where they had vanished until one day she heard that they had a kind guardian, an old friend, who had taken over the management of their affairs. All four women now lived in part of a house rented out for them by the guardian. Grace had consulted no one about the move. They moved from house to house, growing older and older, cared for by for the family retainers. Their bodily needs were taken care of but their minds and spirits rotted with ennui and inertia. They became more isolated, blinded by cataracts that veiled their vision, their ears like shuttered windows which kept out the sounds of the outside world. Yet the school mistress had till the very end been sharp and alert but all she did was pray with her rosary clasped in her hands, while Grace sat beside her in wordless communion, day by day, hour after hour. That was the scene which greeted Sybil's eyes when she ultimately found them.

One day the three sisters visited Sybil in the family home which she had inherited from her mother's side of the family. The house was over a hundred years old with arched doorways and pillars with rooms that led one into the other without corridors. Rooms and passages that had been long inhabited by women. Their only surviving brother had a little bedroom on the opposite side of the house. There had once been a beautiful garden with roses, gladioli, hydrangeas and ferns carefully tended by a gardener. Only memory remained of that family that had lived to

a great age and had then quietly, undramatically passed out of their heritage. The cousins had walked from room to room recollecting their own first cousins. "Ah, Nellie was so proud of the house. It was her life. She kept the house going for so many years after the death of her dear mother. How much she sacrificed for them. She had even to forego marriage. Lived here till the very end. But, sad, sad, she didn't ever know who would inherit it one day when she was no more."

The guardian and his wife had also come to tea. "They can come and live with you," said the wife but the suggestion was not practical.

"It's an old house," Sybil had said. "Not really meant for people like them. They need to have nursing care too. I wish I could have them but they must have an entire apartment for themselves and carers too. I'm working. Out of the house most of the day. I feel they would be lonely here."

Sybil had visited Grace on her Birthday. Ah, they were relics from the past, left behind after the Burgher migrations had taken place. Why had they never gone out of their narrow confines, even for a holiday? Content they had been with each others presence. The wider world did not seem to impinge on their thoughts. Lived long past their time forgotten by the world except for the priest who visited them from time to time to administer Holy Communion. Leftbehinders like Sybil herself. One by one the sisters relinquished life until only Grace and Letty were left.

"Such loneliness, how can they endure it, day after day?" Sybil asked her husband. Such isolation was corrosive. Bereft of all love and family. Condemned to live within this prison of age and silence. Once more Sybil had discovered them living alone in a house perched on a hill. Solitary lives. The sisters clung to

her, compelled her attention, planted kiss after kiss on her cheeks and hands, shed tears that touched her skin, held her back from departure.

"Stay, stay, stay," they pleaded.

"Talk to me. What did you say?"

"We're lonely. Waiting for the call."

"When will you come again? Why didn't you come all these days?"

Grace was the most articulate of them all. As we sat facing each other, Letty wept and cried out breaking into an incantatory chant;

Not a sound, not a soul!

Not a sound, not a soul"!

God forsaken!

God forsaken!

Kept repeating her litany again and yet again. Then broke out again in those soul-crying words. God - forsaken! God-forsaken! God - forsaken!

"Grace", Sybil asked her one day, "Why didn't you ever marry? Did you never fall in love?"

Grace had given a soft almost girlish laugh and turned her face away as if she were gazing into the past, into another age and time, glancing back at her own life as it had once been. What had she seen? What had she remembered? Were those spectral memories still haunting her mind?

How closely she had clung onto that secret past, yielding nothing of those memories. Not one word did she utter of a lost love, of pain or hurt.

Now yet another lost cousin of Sybil's had turned up on her doorstep, entered her house, sat comfortably on one of the chairs in her drawing room, introduced his English wife to her, established a family connection with the ease of belonging to a common bloodline. He had then proclaimed one astounding statement in answer to Sybil's query.

"And how are you related to Grace? And how are we related to each other?"

With his answer all the hitherto unasked questions in her mind coalesced to form a pattern, a design. Sybil felt she was looking into one of those funnel shaped kaleidoscopes. The scattered pointillist prisms of colour which once shaken formed strange, fantastical designs out of which emerged an ordered pattern with its mathematical exactitude. Remembrances from her childhood.

"Grace is my mother," Richard had announced. Sybil and Richard gazed at each other in silence but only for a moment. With this confrontation, the truth was out. Grace's life, her past, everything that had happened in it, fitted now into a centrifugal design. The colours were vivid, not dull and sombre. Grace had known a different life even if it had been momentary, snatched away from her whatever mirage had once deluded her. No, there was no one to remain by her side but memory would always remain a presence.

How had Sybil moved toward discovery? One day she had found a letter in Grace's pocket. Put away. Preserved.

"Sybil, I want you to read it - there is an important address, someone I want you to write to. A mutual friend, a cousin of the retired School Mistress had told her that there was someone living in England who was helping Grace and the sisters. Sybil had written to that address to inform him of their well - being.

" I will be coming to the island in January and then we can meet." The letter was signed with a name, "Richard".

Sybil knew nothing of him , only that, besides herself there existed yet another necessary lifeline, a kind of umbilical cord that extended from that distant ancestor who had established this inheritance. In the aftermath of a finished conquest and at the end of that imperial rule the heirs had to struggle for survival as best they could.

Sybil wrote that first letter to Richard and later other letters telling him of the minutest details of her visits to these lonely women living on top of a hill with no hope of love or companionship, nearing now the end of their days. Overtaken by the isolation of age, of belonging to forgotten eras, their lives, chapters in history books, had no relevance to the present context of changed and changing times. Why then this pity for these women whom even time had forgotten? Was it the remembrance of her own mother's generation, the mother whom she had lost so long ago and whom she remembered with poignant sadness. Did Sybil seek to re- establish those tenuous links with a past that was growing into a hazy mirage in her own remembrances? Only legends remained, oral narratives of stories that were passed from generation to generation that Sybil would occasionally relate to her own children.

"My father," Richard had continued, " was already married. The story pieced together from my foster parents was that he was the husband of a sister of Grace's. So there was no hope for Grace. No hope at all. Imagine what a scandal there would have been if it had all been disclosed. The story was that my grandfather had taken the family to India to one of those remote British Hill Stations where they had rented out a cottage until Grace gave birth."

"And then?" Sybil had queried.

" I was the baby. Grace, my mother was not allowed to keep me. She was distraught. She wept and wept. Refused to give me up. Refused to be separated from me. She grew very ill. The baby was given to another family for adoption, a family distantly connected to either my grandmother or grandfather."

"But why India? Why that remote hill station? Was it because there they would be unknown?"

Sybil wondered to herself whether it had been a mythical journey. Had the family ever really left for India so that the whole event would be shrouded in secrecy? Or had Grace been sent away to a safe place away from all who knew her, perhaps to a convent where the nuns would care for her. Looking back into the distance of the past, a journey of this nature took on a different aspect. It became almost... almost what? An allegorical journey. Did Grace have to undergo all those travails in order to come back and take her place in the outside world, changed within herself, a woman, a mother, one who had known a forbidden love and undergone both chastisement and catharsis? For that parting from her child, the secrecy clamped down on her, was bitter. The agony had been so great that she had lost her senses for a period of time. All this, Richard had related to Sybil. And then the family had returned to Ceylon. Grace had to face a terrible sense of loneliness incarcerated with her parents. Yet they had stood by her. They had not disowned her. Her sister's marriage was protected but who knows whether that relationship would ever be the same again? " My grandfather gave me his name," Richard continued. The family I lived with was not so well off and so my grandfather sent a monthly allowance for my upkeep together with remembrances on my Birthday. When I had my confirmation in the Church of England, Grace sent me a Book of Prayers.

I remember meeting her when I returned to Ceylon with my family. I was about seven years old then. Grace had embraced me and showered kisses on me. I couldn't understand why her eyes were full of tears. Why she felt so much love for me. I never knew she was my mother. I had to leave this warm, affectionate and loving woman, those relatives as it was told me, and accompany my adoptive family, first to an estate where my foster father was planting and then back to India. I was to see her again years and years later.Then Grace was in her eighties. I had come to the island with my wife on holiday. I was then in my forties."

The secret had held all these years even when the necessity for concealment no longer existed, when the breath of scandal had long since been dissipated, the protagonists dead or forgotten. What need would there now be for knowledge of that past and its dramatic disclosure except perhaps for Sybil, for Richard. His half - brothers or sisters would never want to know him or admit his very existence.

Did Millicent ever forgive Grace, Sybil wondered. And James, the lover of Grace? Was she ever allowed to meet him again, face to face at family functions, at the celebration of festivals? Or was all joy and happiness banished forever from that household where so much bitterness and frustration had taken place. Did Grace rail at her parents for taking her child away even before he was weaned or was she grateful for their support? Did she herself give into the moral strictures that governed that family? The thought of destroying other lives would have left her more guilt-ridden and distraught. James and Millicent left Ceylon, never to return. Both were now dead. Millicent ended her days in a Home for Senior Citizens. She would write letters home in the latter days of her life complaining that with her failing sight she could no longer see the flowers in the garden and their burgeoning during the seasons of spring and summer.

Did James ever know? That he had fathered Grace's child? Or had that knowledge been withheld from him? Wasn't Richard like the son of one of his early ancestors who had sailed away during that long ago period of European conquest, leaving his heir behind. That heir to a disinherited kingdom yet who had survived to bring forth a bloodline that relied on its own strength. His grandfather, never openly acknowledged, had given him the right however to inherit the hallmarks of documented genealogies. He could claim legitimacy through that name but his own father's name? Was never to be his. Only the cinnamon stone on Helen's finger the stone that had been buried deep in earth for aeons and aeons had been unearthed to reveal its light and colour. It was sombre, not scintillating like a diamond nor sparkling like a blue sapphire but it possessed its own rich hue. It would be there for all time, would never be crushed underfoot or disintegrate. The stone was the link, that symbol of a lost fidelity that would be handed down through the years. Grace had proffered it with love to her son's wife. That was her only open acknowledgement of what he meant to her.

And now, all that remained was Grace's helplessness in the face of age, her loss of sight and hearing. Yet her mind was still alert.

"Is anyone here?" She felt the human presence beside her as Sybil approached close. She pressed Sybil's hand as they sat together on the bed.

"Anyone listening?"

Yes, there were always listeners, ghosts crowding in from the past as if her strident tones summoned them to keep her company. What were they all listening to, the ones who were alive? Grace's pleas, her complaints, voicing her need for love, love, love, to plant kisses on Sybil's face for the recipient of those

kisses could well-nigh be the lover from the past. Those kisses , those embraces had cost her dear. It had cost her the loss of her only child. Yes, these were pleas.

"I am a pauper , a pauper, a pauper," she wept. How could Sybil proclaim to all the world that it was not so, that Richard, her son was supporting her? No Sybil could not do that. All she was allowed to say was, "No, Grace, no, you are not, it's those of us who are in the wide world who know what early loss of life is, what death is." Grace could never know that the country she lived in had changed from that period when her lack of sight and hearing sealed her off from all else but her memories. When she was running her own household, ordering its affairs. Now she felt herself a victim, at the mercy of her carers.

" I must have money. Kusuma, keeps worrying me for money for various things." Kusuma was her carer, herself an ageing woman full of groaning aches and pains.

All Sybil could do was to slip a folded note into a hand. Which went into her pocket. Sybil had once asked her

"Did you have a happy childhood?"

"Yes, a very happy one," she had said. But there were no mementos of her early life or of the past. Not a single painting , or photograph or book or letter had been preserved.

"What's the use of keeping all those things", Alicia once had said. What she meant was, what's the use of preserving memory when it was no longer of significance, when memory could even be painful. Alicia was herself widowed at that time.

"I 'm waiting to go and join the others", Grace said. Letty, Alicia, Millicent had all gone. Her belief was that she would be

re-united with her sisters. Yes, she alone was now left. Submission to the ministrations of Kusuma, who was herself old, full of rheumatic pains, stern. Who would care for her, for Kusuma herself, one day?

Sybil's mind went back to the past. In the drawer of her writing desk together with her letters there was a copy of her grandmother's genealogy. Grace's aunt. The family line of Grace's parents and the birth of the children were recorded in it. Grace had been born in the year 1899. Her sister Millicent in 1897. James, husband of Millicent, lover of Grace, had been born in 1890. And now the love child of Grace and James was seventy years old.

"He's all I have. He's all I have. He's all I have. I love him so much, so much, so much....." Grace's words bore the full load of significance now. Did the words reverberate so deeply from the past that Sybil now caught those echoes? As she lay in James's arms racked with joy and guilt at the same time. All forbidden fruit yet once enjoyed. Even in that the legitimacy of marriage vows. Granduncle Frederick had done what he could and bestowed his name on that son. He was a man who placed great store on that family name. That was his most valuable behest to that child. That was all he could do. He tried to save Grace. Could he not have left her behind in Bangalore, to nurse that child, to nurture him, bring him up? Were there conditions laid down by Millicent that the child was never to be brought back, never to be seen by her, never to be spoken of? Did Millicent even know of the birth of that love - child?

"Let the dead past bury its dead."

Richard and Helen would stay but briefly here. They had met Grace for the last time and left their final gifts for her. Grace had almost reached the end of her days. Sybil felt the waste of all those

years. She longed to tell Grace, "Your son cares deeply for you. You have not been alone all these years. You gave him life - he has made something of it. He lives far from you but he has a beautiful house, a garden that is profuse with vibrant, colourful blooms." Sybil wished that Grace had been able to share that home.

Grace died in a convent some months after Richard's leave-taking, the convent which stood where her old home had once been. Here she had passed away peacefully and was buried in the garden beside the convent chapel. Finally, her soul was at peace. And all ghosts laid to rest.

And all ghosts laid to rest? But for whom ? The living would remember. Richard would. As long as he lived. Sybil would. Thinking with regret that she could never help Grace in the way she had wanted to.

During those last days before Grace slipped gradually away from life into unconsciousness and death Sybil had longed to tell her, "Grace, Richard has told me that you are his mother'. But would Grace have ever wanted her to know her secret, so closely guarded all these years? Both passion and guilt buried with her youth in an early grave. It was not for Sybil to resurrect that past. And yet Sybil's unspoken thoughts were of that relationship that had been concealed, locked away but never forgotten. Sybil would never have known of those arid years, that desert where the wayfarer had found no oasis. Only a fast vanishing mirage. Richard had wanted her to know. To have knowledge of who he was. To name a mother. A father. To be part of that family that had given him a name and yet withheld what he longed for most, that sense of acceptance and belonging, that proud and open acknowledgement of being a son.

For years, Richard was left to fend for himself. A foster child. Nurtured by strangers. To learn, with the passing of time, as he grew older and listened to the words that eddied about his

ears - and was he meant to hear them - who he really was. Those snatches of conversation he stored in his mind, their utterance would lead to his search and his discovery. She was there. His mother. He could meet her. Talk to her and when the time came, help and sustain her very breath. But never his father. Richard would never know that phantom figure that had engendered his birth. Patriarchy had given that father both safety and escape.

"My son, Richard. Richard, my son". How often she must have consoled herself with the magic talisman of that name, the one she wore closest to her heart. There was no one left to deny her that maternity. "Mother". She was entitled to hear that name. And yet the truth, never uttered, was withheld between mother and son. All these long years she had allowed the canker to eat into her. Sybil, had she had earlier knowledge, would have helped to break that glacier of silence.

The unuttered words, the hidden truth had made her a life-long prisoner. She had earned her reprieve but never given herself that freedom. That inner cell had been her home for years. Did she hold dialogue with those ghosts of the past? With her lover James? He never came back ever again into her life to claim her. He returned to his fold. Fathered his legitimate children. As for Grace and Richard they were the lonely ones. For all time.

Sybil had yearned, on that last visit of Richard's when he and his wife had arrived from London where he now had his home, to speak those words of truth stripped bare of concealment. To tell her, "Grace, I now know why you care so much about Richard. I know he is your son. Why don't you speak? Utter that all important word 'son?' Once and for all. Before it is too late. He is the only child you ever had" But wasn't it for Richard too, on those earlier visits to tell her that he knew the truth and claim her as his own?

No, it was not for Sybil to be the go-between. Richard had made his revelation. The moment of truth was so close at hand for mother and son but it had passed, it had passed. Yes, the revelation, that epiphanic moment, had passed. Only the void remained. Those numerous listeners who stood around, waiting in the wings, to come on stage were never given their cue. They had no clearly defined part to play.

Until the very end, Grace had protected Richard in the only way she knew. Just as she had been protected by her parents. But she had left him desolate - orphaned him when she had within her the power to give him what he wanted most. Parenthood. Leaving her, going away forever , Richard felt the cold winds blowing about his body. He felt a great sense of loneliness assail him. He would travel for the rest of his life from country to country, moving from one changing landscape to another, sampling the different climes, the babel of tongues clamouring about his ears. All his footsteps would now lead away from, never back, to a home, to a mother, he had waited too long, and too late, to claim.

THE WALL OF THORNS

The ancient house without echoes,
an inner courtyard filled with sand
is strangely empty
in the forenoon of your life

The Inner Courtyard

Remembering the ancient house, it is another time, another age. The past.

I had first met Maheswary at Shakti's house on Stanley Road. In the North. We had travelled all the way from the South, Merita, my friend, Shakti and her husband, for the wedding ceremonies of one of Shakti's younger sisters. It had been a long journey moving into a different landscape as we travelled. The roads were straight and empty, at times thick jungle on either side of the road with towering trees and impenetrable canopies of leaves wrapped the undergrowth in darkest shadow. What lay within that jungle? Perhaps an occasional hunter went deep into its heart in search of game or wild fruit or firewood. At other times the thick jungle yielded to scrubland with sparse, thorny thickets of low bushes and brambles, cacti and aloe, the vegeta-

tion ashy-green, the wild flowers yolk-yellow or purple. Could those plants be ever transplanted to grow in the rain-wet gardens of the south from where I came? Random thoughts impaled on those thorny spikes.

We met with only one or two check-points manned by policemen in khaki- uniforms. Intimations of political changes and the militant movements that were emerging in the peninsula to create a separate State. The landscape became surreal, and a sense of threat and of tension overcame us as we stopped each time to face interrogation about our journey. Shakti's husband, a doctor, showed his identity documents to the police officer who stood beside the car and spoke in a language shared by the two of them. The tone of the officer's voice changed. A kind of understanding passed between them and we were allowed to continue the journey. We drove for hours and hours. We felt the physical impact of the heat and our skin stung with dryness.

At the entrance to Shakti's house we removed our shoes and sandals. We were not to wear them ever in that house again. The only time we wore slippers was when we went for our baths in the cool, dark room filled with huge brass vessels of water, pouring chembu after chembu on our bodies. Because it was the season of the great chariot festival at Kandasamy Kovil it was also a time of viridam, of fasting. Shakti's family who were devout Hindus fasted in the mornings before they went to the kovil. In the inner section of the house was a shrine room. I could hear Shakti's father intoning the Sanskrit slokas every morning as he performed the rituals of worship.

At the entrance to Nallur Kovil as the streams of devotees passed through the gates, stood the parked military trucks full of armed soldiers from the South.They were wary, yet relaxed, playing with the children from the nearby houses. Within the temple precincts were milling crowds of devotees. The penance

seekers rolled round and round the veedhi and poojas were performed within the temple.

For me this was a world apart. I remembered the huge petalled flowers, lotus, marigolds, hibiscus, raining down from the chariots which bore Siva and Parvati, Skanda, Ganesh. Hundreds of bodies drew the shafts round the veedhi and the deities were taken in their embellished and ornate chariots in their microcosmic view of the world. The young men leaped in the air, chanted slokas and sang thevarams, praising the deities. Their fine transparent veshtis clinging to their slender bodies as they cracked the coconuts for the poojas and bathed themselves in streams of fountaining water.

The devotees who called out to Skanda in a thousand, thousand names were lost in the trance of bhakti. The guns were then silent at the entrance to Nallur.

When we returned to Stanley Road, we prepared for the marriage ceremonies.

In this house there were many rooms with a courtyard at one end. Glittering foil cut-outs brilliantly coloured, of gods, goddesses, kings and queens,mythological characters, chariots and horses were pasted against a dark background and framed behind glass. In one of the upper rooms there was a courtship swing where the young couples, once the marriage had been arranged, would get to know each other.

I sat on the thinnai with Merita and Shakti's sisters and relatives, watching the coloured jets being fixed onto the jasmine bushes in the ulmuttham. My hostess, Shakti's mother came up to me with a fragile looking woman, middle-aged and introduced her to me. "This is Mahes", she told me. The woman sat quietly beside me as if we had known each other for several years.

"Your face is familiar. I have seen you somewhere before," Merita who was threading jasmines into a garland, said, glancing up at her.

"You must have seen me at the Nallur festival", was Mahes's response.

"Ah, yes, you were among the bhajanai singers." Merita recognized her.

"Yes, we were singing and dancing all the way to Nallur from our village, Navaly."

I remembered them singing their thevarams and bhakti songs as they clapped their hands, clashed their cymbals, caught up in their trance- like dance, eyes half-closed. The faces of the women drifting past me were blind to the crowds in that world of the temple festivals on the distant plain, the walls shimmering with a white glaze in the sunlight. Round that vast echoing conch shell hurled onto the wide, horizontal stretch of sand, the bhajanai singers followed the nadhesvaran players, the flower- decked, lumbering chariot with its flags and pennants billowing out, while an old man kept the talam.

"Every Friday it is I who lead the bhajanai singers at the Pillaiyar kovil in the village now. My father too when he was alive, led the bhajanai singers in worship."

"Then you are Ramachandran master's daughter? I have heard so much about your father. My husband spoke of him often. He was part of that childhood spent in the village."

"Yes, I am the daughter."

"Do you remember my husband's family? I remember your name. You were one of my husband's playmates."

"Yes, I have known them for many years. Since I was a little girl. You are Babo aththe's daughter-in-law?"

"Yes".

"Babo aththe was very kind to me when I was a child. Whenever she came from Colombo back to Navaly, on one of her visits, she would always bring me an apple. One of those luscious red apples. She would come and see me. She was very fond of me. Yes, she never failed to come and see me," said Maheswary.

I wished my mother-in-law had sought out her grand-daughters, the children of Kumar and myself, with those fragrant apples from the South. No, my mother-in-law thought it fit to bestow her first gifts in finely-wrought bangles of gold. Did I see them, when I began that self questioning of the hierarchies of Kumar's family, as manacles of tradition? How long would they last? Fine, brittle gold. They snapped off like dried twigs and lay buried in an old almirah drawer, fragments of gold, misplaced and lost with time. Yet, that first traditional visit would have significance for me for the rest of my life. Her first words, uttered to me, outlasted the gold. I had expected no gifts. Had not even expected that visit. But she had swept in, accompanied by one of her daughters-in -law and a son-in-law. She had brought her own food packed carefully in a silver container. My husband explained to me that food cooked in our vessels would not be suitable. My mother-in-law was a pure vegetarian. The vessels in which our food had been prepared, meat, chicken, fish, would not be to her liking as a result. While she stood beside the bed I was lying on, she opened the blue velvet-lined jewellery - box and drew out the gold bangles which she fitted onto the baby wrists of her grand-daughters. She had then stood upright, a small woman, yet so regal, so strongly matriarchal and her eyes, flashing fire, uttered that one sentence, " I have come only to see

whether my son is happy!" I was silent. I offered no resistance. It was the truth. I accepted it as such. Words that were uttered without deception. She had been hurt, deeply so. Hierarchy, tradition, caste and lineage made up the structure of that fortress. Kumar had breached it. But then so had an elder son, by marrying an Englishwoman. It was too much for her to countenance another act of rebellion.

I had yet to understand the feelings of my in -laws. Was hierarchy something territorial? Did it go with their material or with their spiritual inheritance? That village in the North was where the family had started out from. The hierarchy had been maintained for generations. If they had remained there, that inheritance could have been preserved for yet some time. But for how long? Society was changing. Even the older generation had moved out. There was nothing to keep back the younger family members from traversing the streets of the world. There were new hazards to be faced and the palmyrah grove would no longer be a safe refuge into which they could retreat. My mother-in-law herself who as a young woman had ordered her household following her traditional roles as wife, as mother, her whole life given over to the dispensation of those roles, had had to relinquish the power of matriarchy with age and loss of wealth. But till that day arrived, and no one could foresee it, I, her daughter-in-law regarded her with veneration, seeing her as a woman who was strong; looked up to by the family who relied on her strength as upholder of the hierarchy of birth and lineage. I was young, compliant, even malleable, the eager acolyte at the entrance to that sanctuary, longing for the door to be opened to partake of those rituals. That was never to be. Never. After Pata's death, everything changed. My mother-in-law's spirit and will remained strong but she had to face displacement and dispossession. The time would come when she would have to leave her familiar territory. Her home. She would be vulnerable but always

brave, courageous. Never shed a tear or ask for pity when that day dawned. Who would protect her after Pata's death? She believed that the three sons who still remained in the island would be her props. The fourth son was lost to her forever, living thousands of miles away. There had been no one to read the crystal ball, predict the future with all its turbulence while she had enjoyed life in her heyday.

She was a proud woman, proud not in the inherent role of her matriarchy alone but proud of the status and position of a woman who had inherited all the prerogatives of power not only through her inheritance but by being a dutiful wife and mother. Proud of being a virtuous and upright woman ensconced within the hierarchy of caste and lineage. She did not indulge in peccadilloes. There were women in her society, bored with lack of colour and drama in their lives who had lovers. Pearl necklaces had been violently snapped and long strands of hair unravelled, the women snatched from the embrace of lovers by irate husbands. Bruises on tender skins. Pearls scattered all over while a son searched for each bead under beds and chairs and hidden corners of bedrooms. Oh, not Babo aththe. She was different, a wide-eyed woman, her eyes large and brilliant, her lips chiselled, her enigmatic smile like the smile on the face of a sacred goddess. How did she look upon me? Acceptance comes only with a sense of belonging to the self-same traditions.Her own daughters had dutifully accepted those carefully preserved traditions and followed the dictates of that society which they had been born into. They had married the partners chosen for them. As for myself I had wandered blindly through the world and ventured without trepidation onto those sacred preserves. Territory. Kumar was racked by a sense of guilt for breaching the walls of a seemingly impregnable fortress. There were subtle ways of making him feel a renegade and so he ran away. Hid himself in another life. Allowed himself to be forgotten. They too could then forget. He

became the son who was no longer a son. A brother. When it came to apportioning out family land, they felt justified in leaving him out of that inheritance until one member of the clan, with a munificent sense of pity tinged with condescension said, 'Give him the smallest portion'. Pata was not willing to do even this. Impelled perhaps by a sense of fear, fear of the erosion of respect for the family name which went back generations in Navaly. That village from which they had migrated to the city of Colombo but where their roots still remained deeply entrenched. Pata had voiced his disapproval of the rebel in the family.

" That son of mine will sell the property to anyone, even to an outsider, one who does not belong to our caste". What difference would it make to safeguard those sacrosanct preserves? Those who had gone away, would they ever be able to return, lay claim to houses, properties? Even be able to excavate the earth to retrieve the jewels and gold they had buried in gardens before they joined the exodus to the South while the separatist wars raged? Kumar's family house, where his grandfather and great- grandfather had preserved their wealth in those locked iron safes, where the nautch girls had danced to the rhythm of tabla and mridangam and veena, had been locked up and empty for a long period of time. Kumar's father had returned only for the Kodiyettham ceremonies in the temple of which he was patron until he grew old, too old for travel. And the house? It would one day be a shelter for the displaced who had lost their homes. Refugees from war-torn zones. There would be no one left to keep out any anonymous outsider.

But in those early days it was the family opinion that Kumar had committed a transgression by marrying an outsider who did not belong to their hierarchies. And what of the name of that stranger who had walked into their lives? A name that bore no significance to the family, no mythical or magical connotations.

A name without the fragrance attached to ancestral memory. A name tied up with a different identity. It was not a name that belonged to their deities. It was not a name loaded with myth and legend. From the windows which opened out into their vision of Kailasa or even the ordinary world. Kumar had been careless of that glittering inheritance, the precious jewel of his birth and when it came to the younger sister's marriage he meekly signed away his share of the family property, for his refusal- if he were to think of his own family- would have piled up curses on his head. Had he not already endangered her chances of a good match by marrying outside the hierarchy? The eldest sister too, bitterly opposed our marriage. "The girls from that community have too much freedom" , she said. "Don't marry her." They had taken up their stance. Nothing would change it. We lived on either side of an impregnable wall. Each of us in our own territory.

None of them thought me worthy of stepping on their terrain. To me each step was hazardous. I stood on the shore. I stepped into the water. Innumerable shattered burial urns lay beneath the shallow surface. The ashes had floated away into the ocean. When I trod the water I was careful that none of those sharp, broken bits of clay should cut my feet. My journey through the life of my husband's family would be like that, I must not let myself or my children be hurt. I must not let them draw blood. One day, when my husband had visited his mother in her Colombo home, she had taken out her jewel box. There were still a few finely- wrought pieces left. An attiyal of brillliants, rubies, emeralds, with the padakkam shaped like double- headed eagle lay before her. " For your wife", she told Kumar. Then she put it away, reluctant to part with it. Those jewels had been part of her inheritance. When the moment came, perhaps she could not bear to have it close to a stranger's body. But one day it vanished. Like all she owned. Whisked away by someone who felt I had no

right to it. Perhaps by those who were her own kith and kin. Leaving her flesh cold, unwarmed, without the blood- heated gold and stones that pressed against her flesh.

"Babo aththe". That was her pet name. Only those who were very close to her used it. Maheswary knew her by that name. She had cared for the little girl. Perhaps each of them sought the other out by that bond of innocence. The child and the woman. Babo, 'little child'. And now she was the mother of many children. Her social gift of hierarchy attached herself to the innocence of Maheswary. And so she sought her out with apples in that lonely lost garden so rank with undergrowth, so stifled by the overhanging canopies of broad, fan-shaped fronds of palmyrah.

Maheswary was now a middle-aged woman, all innocence of that playful childhood lost, but she had grown in her spiritual life as she moved in her tranced dream, speaking to the gods she followed in her bhakti worship. That breath from Kailasa had touched her and given her flesh that rare and purified air of abstraction, so that in her presence you could feel a sense of calm and gentleness. Yet she was still human. She did not oppress you. She accepted you. We had just got to know each other but I did not feel myself a stranger. But then, knowledege of the family with whom we both had ties, had given me a certain credibility. Mahes and I had both known Babo aththe. I wanted to know more of my mother-in-law through Mahes. Or else we would have merely passed each other by. Mahes would never have woken out of her trance to acknowledge me.

Nor would the tragedy of her death, when it did take place many years later, from the bullets that entered her body, have touched me. Her death, her heroic encounters with those whom she had never considered her enemies, her stance when she came out, unafraid to face those hostile forces that surged in those

death struggles on the very land we had once walked, was surely a pointer to her fearlessness to face the asuras. By her death she was saved. By living, my mother-in-law had to face many indignities and humiliations. She had to learn the bitter and corrosive lessons of being the penitent. She who had towered over all of us, puny as we appeared to her. Maheswary would be born again, a pure, a beautiful apsara. Kailasa would surely be hers to wander through with the gods and the goddesses but first she must go through her tranced journey on the road to Nallur and thence, to the battleground where a senseless war was waged, before she reached there.

But in that brief, yet enduring encounter I had with Mahes I saw the gleam of that apple still in her hand. The innocence remained, unperverted, uncorrupted. The apple would never be completely consumed. The seed had taken root and the tree had borne fruit which she now offered me. Mahes had never left the village. She would live and die here, living close to the temple of which my husband's family had been patrons. The structure of her house still stood, solid, enduring, while Babo aththe's house was gradually falling apart. One day, would even the roof remain?

On an impulse I had said, " Maheswary, take me to my husband's village. Take me to Navaly" , as if it were some kind of Eldorado or Byzantium or Babylon I was seeking. I was no exile returning. I was the outsider, searching for that ever illusive clue, the key that would unlock the treasures hidden from my eyes. I had to sift through with my naked hands to know whether it was true gold, to see for myself whether there were spirits that guarded with their skeletal hands that cache from which sovereigns and gems spilled over.

" How long will it take us to get there?" I asked Maheswary.

"About half an hour," she replied.

While Mahes and I talked in the wedding house of the bride-to-be, Shakti's sister, preparations were on in full swing. From the kitchen came the hot, sweet smell of pannyarams being fried in ghee. Shakti's sisters had been shopping and were holding shimmering silk, gold bordered sarees against their bodies, peacock blue, vermilion, sarees from India. We left the house, walked along the near- empty road.

We began our journey through a landscape so bare, so open to the white sunlight on this straight road, that our minds formed our own surrealistic totems to guide us. Suddenly the sound of temple music filled our ears and we saw flashes of colour in a courtyard. We saw, leaning against a doorway, dual trunks of plantain trees with full bunches of fruit to herald a wedding. At Annaicottai, Mahes had pointed to a large, white-washed temple with its god-filled gopuram. " That's your brother-in law's temple".

Mahes reiterated the statement. "Your sister-in-law Lakshmi's husband's temple. Temples that still belonged to the uprooted Tamil families who had left the traditional villages and now lived in the city. Their houses carpeted with English carpets. The rooms filled with heavy carved furniture, Pier tables, Indo-Portuguese couches, Victorian sofas, Italian chandeliers. Family photographs. Pride of place was given to the forebears who had distinguished themselves in the social and political life of those colonial times when that uprooting from the village had begun, bringing them from the North in those slow chugging trains to a city which gave them the opportunities for their entrepreneur-ship. They wore the traditional clothes, the veshti, the gold bordered shawl, until, with time, they assumed different roles, took on western attire, manners, language, while preserving deep within themselves that conflicting dichotomy. So much so that Babo aththe was proud that she lived in a part of the city singled

out for the elite, the wealthy, the high- born. She was brought as a young child from Navaly in the early years of the century away from the true landscape which had given her birth. There, the feudal lifestyle had sustained her family for generations. The feudalism she carried to the city where she treated me, her daughter-in-law as one who could never belong to the family by virtue of being casteless, racially different, someone apart from her hierarchy. It had taken me years and years to understand this.

Her displacement began after my father - in-law's death. She would never return to the village, to that ancient house. Her life was now in Cinnamon Gardens. In the city where the other family members also lived. Yet there were so many memories buried deep within her psyche. How could they bear the remnants of that velvet- cushioned palanquin through the thronged streets of the world, through the roads deeply pitted with pot holes and ruts where the armoured tanks had rolled. Through the bomb craters that yawned open. Once, the dust raised from its passage through the village had filled the nostrils of those who walked on the highway.

I had waited with so much patience and hope that one day the family would bind the ring of thetpai grass around my finger in that bond which would make us one but they let that thread dangle loose, allowing it to shrink, disintegrating like a worn-out thread. I wanted to share in their rituals but I was not invited to partake of their pongals ever. I sought the gods in their shrines, my ears attuned to the sonorous incantations of the Sanskrit slokas. My husband never failed to offer poojas for me but that was an individual act, one they never allowed me to share in except once, just once when I accompanied my mother - in - law to temple. My sister-in-law entertained the elite of Colombo society in her home, the tables laden with chicken, mutton, and

varieties of sea food. The liquor cabinets were filled with cognac, sherries, whisky, wines, liqueurs but every Friday they still fasted and served only vegetarian dishes. Nothing would change in their attitude to me. I remained alien, the stranger who had disturbed their clanship.

The bus sped by. We had come to Navaly. We got off the bus and went first to Mahes's house. It was very large but incomplete. The second storey had never been built, it was only the wall that climbed upto the roof. The building looked surrealistic in this landscape, with its trembling shadows from the trees and the darkness of rafters supporting the gloom of tiles, wrapping the house in a kind of shroud. Maheswary's husband welcomed me warmly although I was a stranger. He had a friendly face, smiling intelligently and unruly grey hair. In a corner of the verandah there was a blackboard with a complicated technical drawing on it. We sat down and looked through the photograph album he brought out. He had lots of colour photographs and many penfriends as if it were a compelling need to reach out from this obscure and forgotten corner to the wider world outside.

I gazed at a picture of the Pillaiyar kovil and the statue of the five-faced god. Long, long ago, Kumar and his brothers had sung thevarams when it had first been taken out into the temple veedhi during the festival season. "Shall we go and see the family house?" I asked.

"Don't go to Navaly". My husband had warned, " the place is in ruins". That was because it had been abandoned after the family had made their home in Colombo. Only travelling to the village to maintain the temple festivals and rituals. My brother - in - law's temple on the other hand was impressive, freshly painted, well maintained. It was a wealthy temple. Once

before when I was travelling on the same road with Kumar, we had passed that temple. It was crowded with people and the courtyard echoed with the music of the nadheswaram, the conch and the deep rhythm of the thavil.

How soon we reached the house, too soon, it seemed. It appeared to be there, and yet not there. A portent of things to come. With a sense of shock I asked, " Where's the house?" My eyes searched for it. I could not see it. "Why, there it is before you," Maheswary had pointed out. Chimeric. An illusion. The house seemed to be withdrawing into itself and away from me. A crumbling ruin in a wilderness of palmyrah. " Don't go to Navaly" Kumar's words re-echoed in my ears. I had disregarded my husband's words. Was I still searching for a rediscovery of the past? Was this then all that was left?

White ants crept up the side of the walls, their crumbly brown mazes spreading over the surface of peeling plaster, a city of termites. In the sand, piled up beside one of the windows lay, partly buried, a mutilated stone elephant. Two elephants of stone had once adorned the parapet at the entrance to the house . They had been missing for years. My father-in-law used to drive out of those gates in his phaeton to catch the train back to Colombo. The gate was now almost always closed. As I walked round the house I suddenly decided to let the stone elephant remain where it was. No one cared any more. In the past the elephants that had belonged to the family had swung their trunks as they carried my husband's ancestors to the court of Nallur. Those ancestors whose traditional duty it was to anoint the kings who ascended the throne. The elephants had been chained to the trunks of the palmyrah trees, but the links had, with time, rusted and broken off. The chains had given way and the house receded, its walls being gradually brought down. The grove with its thorny bushes and trees had brought the wilderness closer and closer to a

diminished dwelling. A wooden latch held the windows together. How easily they could be opened. I peered into the room. It was dark and dusty inside, piled with furniture; mattresses, the coir bursting out of torn ticking and rolled up in mats, were suspended from the rafters. I quickly closed the windows and moved away.

The truncated elephant itself was now a myth of the past. The elephant god was Ganesh, the god of wisdom. Within the Pillaiyar kovil stood his carved statue garlanded with red hibiscus and white jasmines. An ancient god before whom many poojas had been offered. The kovil was silent and empty. Myths and legends, great heroic deeds, had enriched that past. I searched for what had once been, but there was not a single sign of all that had long since vanished. There were inventories, palanquins, elephants, lands, fields, groves, jewels and gold sovereigns. Endless rituals at temples, offering children symbolically to the gods to avert their anger, even changing the name of a child to make its life full of auspicious portents.

Who were these people? The family I had married into? I had wanted so much to know them. I had never seen the kolam my mother-in -law had drawn to herald the festivals. Nor had I ever taken a grain of rice from their pongal pots. The sun had risen, the milk had boiled over. They had raised their hands in Suryanamaskaram in worship to Suriya the sun god. There was no one left to beseech the gods for their protection or to revisit this desolate land. Good period. Bad period. Malefic planets. Propitiation. Penance. My mother-in-law had always felt that the placing on her forehead of the holy ash, fasting and praying, were part of her every day life. How could I, who bore no thirunur on my forehead, be welcomed into her sanctum?

My husband had broken those family traditions. Would they now cease to care for him, concern themselves with his

happiness and well-being? As for myself I could not blame that belief so deeply ingrained within their traditions and hier archies. It was part of their identity. There was no need to change it. It must last for centuries. For their concern, he must marry within the hierarchy of their caste and clan.

Now I had come to the land of the disinherited. Time was closing in. We entered and sat down in the pillared hall. I wanted to get up and flee from this ruin. Was this where I thought I would ever find sanctuary? The heart of the house seemed dead. Even the spirits seemed to have withdrawn from it and moved out into an uncurbed wilderness. A stranger came out to meet us.

" I am Pathmanathan," he introduced himself. "Your lawyer brother - in - law in Colombo gave me permission to live here." He began to talk volubly about himself. " My home is quite close by, but I don't want to live there. I cannot bear to look upon my brother's face. It is best to live away from him. I don't have to see his face first thing in the morning. I've been a bit of a rolling stone and now have come back to the village. Mother", he called out and a young woman emerged from within the house carrying a baby. " I married late in life." He explained, " My children are all very young. Yes, I have returned to the village and your brother-in-law told me that I could live here."

"Mother, bring nelli juice for our guests. They must be tired after the journey, " Pathmanathan said.

" I want to see my husband's portion of land. Will you point it out to me?" I asked.

We walked out from the pillared verandah. Before me spread the grove with its thick growth of palmyrah, mango and untrammeled thorny bushes. The years had passed so quickly and in all these years no one had made any efforts to curb the wilderness. Thorny bushes and thickets confronted me. I took a

few steps forward and then drew back. A stillness lay over everything. There was no pathway I could see. There were no boundaries. They lay only in the minds of those who had apportioned out those unequal territories. Here, the thick overlay of thicket and the snarled, thorn-tipped creepers created their own barriers. There was no one left to clear this land, abandoned and deserted by the migration of the families. Everything had changed. Those who had performed their feudal duties were no longer there. The men, the women, who had served this family were now clamouring for land that would enhance their prospects, marriage for their daughters being uppermost in their minds. It was a deep hunger, a craving for territory. The family would never return to claim these fields, these groves. What I saw was a desolation. Nothing had been preserved. It had once been so great an inheritance. If all these things had once been so precious to them, the family house, the family name, why was it all allowed to fall apart and become dust? I felt pity for this family. What had compelled them to relinquish this inheritance? Was it their migration to the South? Had they lost, in the process, their kinship ties? Uprooted, living in the city, dining, and wining, travelling abroad on their expensive holidays, going up country for the season, travelling in their cars, they were blind to what they had lost. There was only this ruin to remind me of what had once been. It was now a tumulus, an anthill. The remains of a once flourishing community as if forced to flee, abandoning everything to the encroaching barriers of thorns.

Where was the lotus pool in the garden where my mother-in-law and father-in-law had sat, discussing the marriage contract of their daughter into that wealthy family from Colombo who had vast extents of property? That elder sister of Kumar's endowed with so much beauty, so much talent. Sand now filled the empty pool. Not a single flower bloomed in the inner courtyard. Not a fruit hung from the branches of the pomegranate

tree. The last time I came here I had peered into the empty well with its green, scummy water shimmered over with dragonflies, filled with stone-like frogs, mossed over and glistening. The water lay too deep for me to skim off. The house was retreating into the wilderness, the walls were crumbling. I stood looking at a great structure which was diminishing even while I stood and watched. I felt I had no right to be there. It was as if I had to come secretly, an intruder, trespassing in a territory which I had no right to step onto. At the same time however I had always been there, a silent watcher.

Now there was nothing except the belongings of some stranger who had turned away from the brother whose face he could not bear to look upon. Was this house now merely a refuge for one whose heart was bitter against his own kin?

After his marriage, my husband's name was never uttered by anyone again. The only time they remembered him was to summon him for his father's almsgiving. They chose to leave me out. And my children too. In the structure of that kinship there was nothing to hold the bricks together, to prevent the rafters from rotting and the walls from crumbling. The pillars which held the roof tiles on those once strong beams were sinking deeper and deeper into the earth, the doors of the rooms locked, the fine carving blunted and dull, the grain of the wood smudged with age.

The doors were locked. Against whom? In this forgotten house there would be no intruder. Who would want to enter, establish themselves in a diminished and abandoned dwelling? Anyone who wanted could wrench open a window and enter into this tomb with its clouds of dust and mouldy furniture. Everything was cold and dead, shut in. There was nothing of value left. The only welcome I got was from a stranger. Yet a welcome accepted by me half in guilt, for I was the intruder.

It had been years since I had seen my mother-in-law. What were the thoughts she had in her mind concerning me? That I had stolen her son, somehow, by false pretences? Had she never thought of his happiness? Marriages and alliances were to be arranged only to preserve the hierarchy. Not to replenish the depleted blood. She knew nothing of me. Nothing at all. Nor had she wanted to learn. Even my name, so alien to her, was buried in her mind vault never to be recollected. We needed to understand and to forgive each other. When she had slipped those golden bracelets on my children's wrists she had said: "I have come only to see whether my son is happy", with her hand upraised against me as if to brand those words on my mind. The gesture was half a threat. Her hand like a weapon. To protect herself from me? Or to establish barriers and boundaries? These grandchildren whom she was to lock the doors of her heart and mind against, for years, yet whom she could not reject for they had part of her in them too. And towards her they had bonds of love and loyalty. Yes, my children loved their grandmother. They were a part of her. They were a part of that inherited culture. One day my husband would be summoned to light her pyre. It was his duty as the youngest son. Until that summons came they would not remember him.

As I returned to sip the nelli juice that my host had offered me and sat within that denuded, pillared hall, a sense of pity filled my heart. I had spoken so much to Merita, described the house from my memory, the land, the family into which I had by chance thrown in my fortune. And now, confronted with the emptiness and desolation, what could I say in the face of such ruin?

Yes, Time was closing in and what little was left seemed to be choking, a rampant, wild growth of rank vegetation. Across the waste of this wilderness it had been impossible to see which part had been left for Kumar, that small, unequal part of the

family property just enough for him to set his tentative and exploring footsteps. The brothers and sisters had been apportioned out larger inheritances. There were barriers that impeded me. Across those invisible barriers stood the entire family. I could do nothing to reach across to them. I wanted, I desired, I longed, to reach the other side. It was of no use. All my attempts had ended in failure. I had struggled, yes, hard, to get to know them. To be accepted by them, but I had never been able to share that familiar territory.

They were all ageing, growing nearer the grave, the funeral pyres. Greater, more powerful forces had almost demolished their edifices. The forces of change which had destroyed the feudal structure in the village on which their power had rested, had taken over. Things would never be the same again. Recognition, acceptance, welcome - they could be acknowledged only by the ghosts of the past.

The sadhus would no longer visit their houses for alms. The only response to the tap on the wall was the hollow boom of emptiness. It was only a facade that held. In Colombo, in the Cinnamon Gardens house the servant had held back the chair for my brother-in-law to sit and eat at the dining table, a king-emperor. An empire of property and wealth had been conquered for him by his father. He had inherited its wealth, the territory, without any effort on his part. I was the stranger for whom there would never be a welcome.

"Come, let us go. Maheswary, take me to your home".

We would not see Kopan Walawu, the grove where my husband played as a child. "I'll remind Babo aththe of the apple," I said. But I knew I could not. I wanted to write back and tell her, but no, I knew I would never remind her. Babo aththe did not need such reminders from a daughter - in - law. It was enough

that Mahes remembered. The memory was preserved, like the apple in her mind, of that gesture of kindness.

" Let us go back," I said, "It 's growing late. We have a long way to go!"

I longed for the house of my friends on Stanley Road and for the house in the village of Sanguveli, that large solid and hospitable home. Sittappah must now be getting ready to sleep under the mango tree in the garden. The guardian of the house. I wanted to go back to that long, hall- like room upstairs in which we slept, with the night wind blowing from the palmyrah grove and the glimmer of the white- walled temple before dark finally curtained the land with its thick, heavy folds.

Mahes, Merita and I walked back in silence along the road which skirted Kumar's house. During the temple festivals the gods too had travelled in their Ther and in front of his home, the kumbum had been set, the table with its white cloth covered with silver trays of fruit and modaham.

"Is there really no time to go and see Kopan walawu where Kumar played as a child?" I queried regretfully as we walked back towards her house. When we arrived I observed part of an old bed was propped up against the wall.

"Why don't you use it?" I asked.

She was silent.

"It's a beautiful bed. Old seasoned wood. Carved. You can put it together, I continued.

She said hestitantly, after a silence, "What can I say?"

We sipped hot lotahs of tea on the verandah of the half - completed house.

" I should like to stay here. Would I be able to come and live here? " I said.

"You are welcome," they said in unison, Maheswary and her husband.

"Are you related to these people"? I asked, referring to Kumar's family. Again they were silent. Was the hierarchy closed to them too?

"Take a message back for me," Rama, Maheswary's husband said. Tell the people in your part of the world that not all of us are brutal." But those words would be ironic. Incredible utterances. Too much would happen to blunt all feelings. All that would remain would be hatred and fear with the war that raged in the peninsula. The struggle for a Separate State. Death. Mahes would have to pay the price too, caught up in the political chaos and upheaval.

In the bus, on our return journey, a man dressed in white, his hair long and curling to his shoulders, holy ash branded on his forehead, turned back in his seat and looked at us with eyes riveted on our faces. Until we got off he kept on repeating the names of God, of Amman, of Mary, as if beseeching those powers to protect us.

If my hands sought to tear its tangle apart the sharp poisoned barbs of wildly overgrown thickets would impale the flesh. I did not want more wounds. Only for Mahes that mystic tree would always bear apples. Those elusive branches would bear no fruit for me.

THE GROVE

1998

"Why don't you return to your village, you had a home there once. Is it too late?"

(Mythologies of Childhood: Peacocks and Dreams)

The telephone rang. Kumar called out to me.

"There's someone who wants to talk to you".

I took up the receiver and heard an unfamiliar voice.

" I got your phone number from your brother - in - law in Colombo. I am Santhoshini. From your husband's village of Navaly. My cousin Shakti is your friend. She has spoken of you. You have met my mother in the North. Many years ago. Ramachandran Master who used to play the serapina every Friday for the bhajanai singers at the Chinthamani Pillaiyar Kovil, was my grandfather. You have written of him in one of your books, recollections of your husband's childhood in the village. I wanted to hear your voice...."

"My voice? Well, what do you think of it? What does it sound like? What you imagined it to be? But why, why did you call? Out of the blue? Because I knew your mother? Because my mother-in-law loved her as a child and would bring an apple for her each time she came to the Peninsula for the holidays... I know that story. Your mother too told me of that special name she was called by. Babo aththe.

"Yes, yes Babo, aththe. My mother always remembered that apple."

The apple that was part of the little girl's childhood. The little girl who played among the ponds and fruit trees and temples in Kopan Walawu. Santhoshini's family too were part of that village for generations. I knew of her mother's tragic end.

"My mother was killed by a bullet when the Peace Keeping Force was in occupation. A reprisal killing", Santhoshini continued. Perhaps that bullet was never meant for her. Was it her fate to die in that manner, the woman who had remained behind in the village? Kumar and his family had left long ago. Maheswary, Santhoshini's mother had told me how she too had carried on the traditions of the bhajanai every Friday at the temple. Every year she and a group of devotees would travel along the road that led to the temple of Nallur, dancing and singing thevarams, lost in their bhakti trance. Then the roads were clear, filled with the bhakti singers, the carts drawn by the long-horned white bulls, the womenfolk in their brilliant sarees of silk and cotton, flowers in their braided hair, kum kum and holy ash on their foreheads. The brass bells tinkling round the necks of the oxen with the movement of the cart as it travelled along those silent roads.

"Navaly has changed greatly. I went back after eight years. Your husband's family land, all the land that belonged to his

people is now completely bare of trees. Not a single palmyrah palm is standing in the grove. And the house is roofless."

That grove with its hundreds and hundreds of palmyrah. All gone? Straight, tall, vertical with their enormous girth. Towering above all the other trees, the mango, tamarind, the vembu and the banyan. Fan-like leaves spreading a blue-black serrated aureole about the clustering bunches of fruit burnished a dark brown, shading into copper and golden brown at the base. Bound to that tree, day in day out, Kumar would say, bound to seek every part of it for food and sustenance. Did that world enclosed within the grove have maps to show each one of Kumar's family an intricate system of routes to be traversed? Was that exploration limited, the world become too small and circumscribed so that they had all to walk out of those gates to come and go but never to remain permanently. Did they imagine a heritage was something that would always remain there for them to claim, unchanged and unchanging? No, it was not to be so. The trees had all been razed to the ground. And the roots? Each tree took a hundred years to mature. How much life, how much vegetation had flourished within the convolutions of the fronds, the squirrels, the insects, the beetles , the palm cat. The birds. The epiphytes. The vines spiralling about them like goddesses embracing tree torsoes. And after a single tree had been cut and that once in a century, Kumar had told me, the wood provided beams and rafters. Who would want to cut a tree that gave all of its abundance to assuage both hunger and thirst?

"Yes, your land is bare. And I told your lawyer brother-in-law that some"local" says he has bought it."

"Bought it? How? The Deeds of the property are in Colombo" Had the family really lost their land? But then they had let it all go when Pata had set up his business in Colombo

living in a house in Cinnamon Gardens. No, there was little prospect of repossessing the land in the village.

Santhoshini was still talking on the phone. Her voice seemed to be travelling from a great distance.

" I went home. I felt I still belonged there. Changes had taken place and someone who my father had helped to educate in his youth has also claimed part of our land too. He does not need it. He is in England. His mother is still in the village."

Thousands had left the Peninsula. Left their homes and properties. Christianne, a U. N. worker had searched for a house to reside in during her stay in the North. The people had shown her empty mansions.

" What do I want such a palatial building with so many rooms? I want a small house, she had said." The houses, many of them, had white flags to show that they were the displaced who lived in them. Families camped there. Had moved from the battle zones or had lost their own houses. The walls were bullet pitted. They had the money, so they could go, most of them, abroad. The next generation..... who knew what would become of them and their children?"

Home?

"Home. Yes, even after eight years I had this longing to return, " Santhoshini said.

How many different worlds can each of us inhabit? How many countries can we belong to? Home? Where is home now for the displaced and dispossessed anywhere in the world?

I put down the phone. Perhaps Santhoshini and I would pick up the threads of an unfinished conversation one day. In my mind

the grove sprang up as I remembered it in the past. Kumar's childhood was part of that mythworld. In the still hours of the afternoon when everyone was indoors asleep he would wander about picking berries and fruit. Beside the trident in the Bhahirawa temple tamarinds lay strewn on the ground. It was this trident that had whirled before his very eyes on a day when not a breath of wind stirred. As if the power of the god had manifested itself before Kumar's eyes. The prongs were twisted out of shape . On an outstretched branch the striped wild cat bared her teeth at him. He was used to seeing her with her two young cubs. In the sunlight filtering through the filigree of leaves a golden sheen rippled on the cat's smooth coat of fur. The grove was Kumar's secret world in which he felt the familiar presence of the deities with whom he shared it.

Kumar was silent as I spoke to Santhoshini, deep in thought when I repeated what I heard to him.

"Kumar, all the palmyrah trees have been cut down in the Navaly land. Even the roof of your house is no longer there. And she says someone from the village has laid claim to your family property. Bought it, he says."

"The trees, all cut down? Who would have done it - no one ever cuts down a palmyrah palm.... Perhaps they were to be used for bunkers. As for the ownership of the land. It will always be ours whoever may claim it. The land will always belong to generations of my family even if we never live on it again - no one else could own it- the deeds are with us - but it's easy enough to take over someone else's property today. None of us are there, on the spot, to say that it is ours. We should have remained behind but we wanted to possess both worlds, have one foot there, entrenched in tradition, one foot here. The new generation, the grandchildren, the great grandchildren, have never been to the village. It's another country for them. They have their lives to

lead - roots, it's something they come in search of occasionally, but they always go back. Within themselves they are assured that they belong, it doesn't matter where they live. I have my memories... feel inundated by them..... that grove, Sinnian climbing the palmyrah trees. What a beautiful body he had, rippling muscles, a skin like dark silk.... the sharp-bladed knife tucked in at his waist to help him allow the sap to flow from the palmyrah flowers..... he would gently put his hand into those numerous apertures in which the parrots were and bring them down. He loved those parrots, kept them as pets. We would stand at the foot of the tree and call out to him, "Sinnian, what can you see?" Those trees were about seventy or eighty feet tall.

"Oh, I can see the temples in the grove, your house and the pomegranate tree in the ulmuttham. I can see the women spreading the paddy to dry on the mats, the water being drawn from the well.. I can see the pinatu which you love to eat under the sun, it's bright orange..."

"What else, what else?"

"Well, beyond, is the sea , the Kallundai sand dunes..... the jungle, the bare spaces.... the sandy plains, the roads, the groves of palmyrah, the paddyfields..... the vegetable plots... the tobacco plants.. and yes, yes, a car.... a single car....."

"Bring us the parrots, Sinnian, bring us the parrots."

One day, Sinnian fell from a tall palmyrah and died. He did not live to see the Peninsula change, the village change, the hundreds of trees cut down in the grove. What would he have done without his trees to climb?

"What was the use of thinking about the lost land now?" I said. " If you look at one or two pages, all that's left of the inventories of what your great grandparents possessed, you'll see

that so much of that property was in the South. Worth thousands of Rix dollars and sterling. So your people had begun to migrate years ago. Look at the dates in the inventory. It must have all begun in the latter part of the eighteenth century or in the early part of the nineteenth... and the names mentioned, the bonds, the people who owed money to your family. What a mix of names... Don Nicholas Liane Appuhamy arachchy of Attepatto, William Franciscus, Agohamy of Sedewatte, Mr Van Beck..... and the movable property .... look". I read out from the page on my writing desk that I have retrieved from old documents.

		RIX DOLLARS	POUNDS
1	*small house and ground at Sea Street*	*500*	*37-10*
1	*large house and ground at Ṣea Street*	*1500*	*112-10*
1	*large house and ground at Sea Street*	*800*	*60*
1	*large house at Chekku Street*	*1000*	*75*
1	*garden at Lunupokuna*	*500*	*37-10*
1	*large house and garden at Hill Street*	*2000*	*150*
	A strip of ground at Sea Street	*200*	*15*
2	*buticks situated at Coffy Street*	*500*	*37-10*
3	*new buticks at Bankshall street*	*6000*	*450*
1	*old butick at Bankshall Street*	*1000*	*75*
1	*garden and field at Sedewatte*	*800*	*60*
1	*garden and field at Peliyagoda*	*700.*	*52-10*

27 th June 1836

And then all the gold and jewels! Lost of course, all of it lost, but your people had begun their migration from the North about two centuries ago, part of the white colonial business enterprises, a different kind of diaspora but one that filled your coffers. The feudal ties remained in the village. It was important when it came to arranging marriages especially, that your name was a respected one in the village.... you were the daughter of the son

of so and so .... hierarchy. Roots embedded in hierarchy like the roots of the palmyrah that lay deep in the soil of that grove , trees that lived for centuries and grew harder, firmer and longer-lasting with time, like the seeds embedded in the orange flesh of the fruit..... ah, you had to make your choices. How important was that territory to you?"

"It is still important. It's my true home. Where I can talk to the birds in my own language. The flavour of the fruit will never change. The mangoes remain sweet. At night the thudding of hundreds of falling palmyrah fruits and mango would keep me awake. In the morning I would run outside to see them covering the ground, their skins split with ripeness, the ants, the bees, the beetles swarming all over them... and the rustling of the palmyrah fronds when the winds blew through them..... how soothing it was to the ears.....

But now it's different, I know. There are those who have remained behind. The others have gone away. That's why the houses are all empty or filled with strangers, yet it gives me a feeling of happiness to think that water from our well was sweet enough to quench their thirst, the firewood from the grove plentiful to light their fires, the fruit still full of nectar. When will we ever traverse that once familiar veedhi again?

I listened to Kumar's monologue with hardly an interruption. The telling of that narrative was a reliving of the old myths and memories.

"And then with time.... it grew more difficult. To preside over all those temple festivals of which my father and forebears had been patrons. It was expensive for us to even take it in turns. For myself, it was not easy, pre-occupied with my job, my household, bringing up children. Of course, I could have made the effort, together with my brothers but then, the journey to the North seemed so long. It became easier to send the money to the

Brahmin Iyer to perform the rituals for the Kodiyettham. And then with the wars raging in the Peninsula, the old routes were blocked off, passage along the familiar routes was cut off, the route to that return was no longer possible.

I too was lost in my own thoughts and recollections, remembering the last journey I had made to the North, so many years ago. Would I myself ever return to walk among the ruins of memory? Or was that life over and done with forever?

My rare incursions to that land had been in search of my husband's heritage impelled by that great curiosity to know that other part of his life and that of his forebears. A heritage shared by our children. It was a world that I was no longer a stranger to. My mother-in-law was now dead. In her ninety eighth year. We had drawn close together in those last years and I was filled with a great sense of loss at her death. Kumar had performed the death rituals, the duty of the youngest son, for his mother. It had been, he said, a traumatic experience to sift through the few bones that remained, to retrieve the ashes, to fill the urn which would be cast into the sea. I had tried so hard to know her thoughts all those long years. I had tried to move that veil of myth and hierarchy that enclosed her life, I had to get to know her as a woman, the grandmother of my daughters, as Kumar's mother, as my mother -in-law. Mother. The word buried in a fleece of conjectural emotions. The narrative would unfold from Kumar's lips, picking up sentences of recall from a psychic ola leaf with its ancient records. For years in my mind I too fed the flame that rose from Agni's fire on the altars of the shrines she worshipped at when once or twice she had invited me to dip into the holy ash from a silver vessel to place on my forehead. How was I to keep that fire burning when no one else cared to do so any longer? I had to learn how to roll the lampwicks into narrow cylinders of old, soft rags and place them in the niches of the brass kutthuvilakku soaking in the coconut oil and lighting them -

what a blaze of flickering light would encircle the tiered lamps. Dispelling the darkest shadow.

With time and age she had kept a tiny flickering flame in all those barren, arid years enshrined in an abandoned temple far away in her village. Would her life have been different if she had returned in her old age to that village? But the feudal bonds had long been severed and who was there left to serve her as they had in the past? In the village, the house had been surrounded by temples. Family land had been gifted for the Chinthamani Pillaiyar Kovil. The veedhi along which the Ther with their deities was taken along had been the land trodden upon by generations of that family. Even if the veedhi was deserted by all who had once followed the Ther, the gods would never be dislodged from the sanctums. They would always be there. The palanquins had long since crumbled into dust, the links of the elephant chains buried deep beneath the earth. These were now symbols of the past which had lost their value. Nothing was left in the house, not a stick of furniture, not a single ancestral portrait. The years had passed. The family had not returned to the village. Far away from the ancient house from which the rafters and tiles had been removed, my mother - in - law had closed her eyes and slept peacefully.

I had been a stranger to that family but I had wanted to be part of them, part of their way of life. To understand their rituals I had bound my finger together with Kumar's within that circle of thetpai grass. Yet it had slipped off with time. I realised that my bond was to Kumar, not with his myths. But understanding his myths was also to gain knowledge of him, his life. I did not want to live with a stranger. At the early stages of my marriage I had allowed myself to be carried along in the palanquins of individual histories. How could any of those histories be important anymore, bound to hierarchies that could not outlast

these violent epochs? The marriages by which my mother-in-law had laid such store had endured only within the frames of predictable happenings.

Kumar had sought freedom, but a freedom from the constraints of tradition. Like the others, he too had left the protective shade of the grove where the palms had stood like sentinels. Soared away like the giant kites, the pattam that had been secured so firmly to the trunk of the palmyrah palm. Lost. The strong ropes had finally given away. Gone, all the kites and the palmyrah trees too. The flowers on the palm would never bloom again. No Sinian was left to gather the toddy wine. The palm cat, the birds, the epiphytic plants and vines were all dislodged from stem and frond. And those who served the family? How many of them remained. Perhaps only the women and the very young or the very old. The others were scattered in different parts of the world, migrating in the diaspora. Even in the city in Colombo when my brother-in law died there was hardly anyone who remained of his generation at his funeral. Almost all his friends were dead.

Kumar would often recount those days in the city mansion in their Cinnamon Gardens houses. Nair the cook- and no one could prepare those repasts as he did - would serve up the platters of yellow rice plentifully flavoured with cardamom, cloves, cinnamon, garnished with butter -fried sultanas and cashews, hardboiled eggs, strips of crisp pappadam, the table laden with roast chicken, chicken curry, devilled prawns, curried crabs swimming in red-hot gravy floating with murunga leaves, mutton porial, vegetables, sambols, salads, chutneys, pickles. The cars turning up the driveway, liquor flowing, whisky, cognac, gin,Cinzano, sherry, wines, cooled beer; laughter, jokes, tidbits served up, potato chips, slivers of fried chicken, devilled cashew nuts..... I remembered how I too had once dined in that house. The crabs brought fresh from the St. John's Market, the tureen brimming over with the spicy, red-hot curry with dark green

murunga leaves floating on the surface of the gravy. My sister-in - law generously urged us to eat leaning over the dishes, serving the crabs onto our plates. "Take, eat, eat," she had said. And yet had we not been alienated for years by our own emotions. And now she was dead too. The agonizing cries of her husband calling out her name, "Lakshmi, Lakshmi", echoed from his room where he sat alone, alone, missing her very shadow that he had shared for over half a century. Those were all predictable deaths, deaths far away from the Peninsula. Their shadows had not fallen on the earth of their villages for many, many years. My brother- in-law now turned his attention to the temples that his family were patrons of in the city. It had been many years since he had carried out the Kodiyettham in the family temple at Annaicottai.

Everything in their lives was ordained by the hierarchical values of the society they were born into. They could not escape those pre-ordained roles. My mother-in-law, her daughters, were examples of the traditional woman from that society. From birth they had been trained to fit into the conventional roles of wives and mothers, trained in the traditional arts of bharatha natyam, singing classical ragas, playing the veena, studying Sanskrit, facing all the taboos when they attained age and when the time came, allowing their parents to arrange their marriages to suitable partners. Yet the daughters had travelled far and wide, adapting to other cultures but continuing to fast and pray, carrying on their rituals wherever they found themselves.

Santhoshini's telephone conversation took my mind back to my last vist to Navaly, sixteen years ago. I stood staring out of the window onto my garden with its trees of clove, pomegranate, guavas, mango, a little grove in the city. I heard Kumar's voice, a monologue, in the background.

"My father, as a child, used to go running out onto the road to watch the American missionary riding on his tandem. It was

the same road I travelled on whenever I left the grove. The trees have stood there for centuries, the mango, the palmyrah are a hundred years, one hundred and fifty years or more. I have not gone back for twenty five years at least but I know the roads will never change. No, they never will. I was so sure that nothing would change, that those trees would remain there for ever and ever. And the mango trees? Those must still remain? Thousands and thousands used to fall every season. We would pick them up and feast on them. Oh, it was a grove full of spirits, full of deities. I had my visions, Amman combing her hair in the sunlight, the quivering trident shaken by a godwind. My mother heard the chuckle of Murugan all night. I heard the thudding of the fruit. And now the trees are not there.... we had a forest of trees, fifty in the front garden, five hundred altogether. The cholaham and kachan winds would blow, the rustling of the fronds made me think of the punkah boy in my grandfather's house..... and now the house is roofless..... it must be so hot in the grove without the palmyrah palms.... my mother was a young woman in that past. She gave birth to all of us in that house and when we spent our childhood there during the war years in the 1940's, lived with us. My father was in Colombo. She supervised the household by herself. She was unafraid when darkness closed in early, wrapping the grove in shadow. The fences had to be renewed from time to time. The men would climb up to the summit of the palm and cut off the fronds. They would drop down to the earth with a tremendous thud crushing the grass beneath their opening frond fans. Dragged along and placed one upon the other in lines until streams and tributaries of green ran through the grove. Turning from green to yellow, the old black and brown palmyrah fronds taken down and used as manure for the paddy fields".

And now where have all the birds gone? Those parrots which streaked through the shimmering light in bright green flashes? Kumar's aunt Anandhi used to sew parrots out of strips

of satin, green, orange, red. She would sit for hours on end sewing those parrots with minute hand stitches, stuffing them with kapok until they were full and round. The soft fleece unravelled from the wrinkled, sun-dried, dark-brown pods. She would give them rounded, wide circles for eyes as if to say 'Find your way easily through the grove in your dreams," for they would be placed on perches of freshly peeled cane and hung wherever she pleased within the house but always beside an open window or looking out onto the ulmuttham or the grove. When the breezes blew through, the parrot would swing, swing, swing, in a mesmeric movement. Aunt Anandhi would sing to the parrot, lost in her singing

My little parrot, my darling parakeet
I have created you out of my dreams,
Talk to your brothers and sisters in the grove,
Tell them the story of your life and mine,
I who have given you life,
You are sacred to me,
Fly among the gods and goddesses,
Perch on the trees, eat of the ripe fruit,
The trees will last forever , yes, forever
Do not be sad, oh parrot,
Your wings dazzle the face of the sun,
Do not be sad, I will never leave you.

Your wings are folded but you'll never
Never be lonely.
I'll sing to you everyday,
Tell you the stories of the grove,
I will tell you my life story.

Kumar heard her voice chanting, singing thevarams praying, lighting the Kutthuvilakku, performing her poojas. The holy ash glimmered on her forehead. The scarlet kum kumum opened its petals from the furrows of ash. A hibiscus that bloomed on its arid plain. Singing to the parrot.

Even if famines devastate the land,
Even if the land is laid waste by droughts,
Will we ever fear
As long as the gods of Nallur are with us?
Yogaswami had sung.

Kumar and I sat facing each other. Thinking each our own thoughts. At last he broke his long, meditative silence, his words sifting through the darkness that was closing in. Shrouding the garden until the plants and trees became a dark blur.

"A house without echoes.... empty now of familiar voices. My village, my childhood, a distant dream from a hazy, miasmic past. My parents, dead. My elder sister dead. A brother and sister, far away, in distant lands, never to be seen again. Our worlds are separate. The kinship ties were once so strong. No, we can never reach each other again. Those of the family who are left behind have long since migrated to the city or.... or yes, they too must now be dead perhaps. The last time I saw the old aunt who had lived for years in the family property in Navaly, was at my father's funeral. There are now so many questions to be resolved with all these deaths.... questions like, who will now be the patrons of the temples to whom hereditary ownership had belonged? I have lost touch with my relations, even the ones who live in the city. Even if we meet again it will be if a special occasion demands that the rituals be observed. Births? Marriages? No, only death will ever bring us brothers together....."

PENFRIENDS

Milda had alighted from the car carrying her own pillows. She had been sent all the way from Colombo with the old lady, Renee's ninety-five year old mother-in-law who, now displaced, was moving from house to house. Her own home, gifted to her younger daughter as part of her dowry, had been sold. No one thought of the old lady's feelings. All she needed was shelter. That was the main concern of the family. A room. A space for a bed, a chair and a single suitcase. Roots wrenched years and years ago when families migrated from the traditional villages in the North to the city. Often their retainers too were taken along with them to work in their houses extending their feudal rights of ownership, compelling them through traditions of loyalty to serve the family, generation after generation, until the time came when political changes had more or less put an end to all this. The new generation had found homes in other countries, mostly Scandinavian, where they had changed their lifestyles, drove big cars and owned houses and apartments, their obligatory rights finally over. Unlike their parents and grandparents. Milda however had remained. Her grandfather had been one of the

cooks in the Mylvaganam mansion. Now she had been summoned to serve the family. "Milda will do everything for mother, " Saraswathi, the eldest daughter, had said. "She will be in total charge."

Milda began her regime of caring for the old lady from the very next day. She ruled over her through silence, convent - bred silence. Silence to counter-act the compelling need for attention, for companionship in her charge's exile. Controlled and disciplined silence. How else could she endure this life where her own thoughts, feelings and emotions would have to be sublimated. Where nothing dramatic would happen to make life exciting for her. Milda's expression was always imperturbable. Her voice low and muted. Her manner calm and unruffled. "That is how the nuns tell us, missy," she said. Milda never reacted openly. Never in front of Renee. But things happened behind her back. The sibilant hiss, the rapid flow of words in a shared language, little scraps of paper with scrawled messages passed on to the old lady, messages once deciphered which provoked the most violent responses leaving her upset and agitated. In Colombo Milda had a threatening stick. Who knows whether she ever used it? Milda was too valuable to pull up or find fault with. She appeared to be a paragon of virtue. The old lady bowed down to her every wish and command. Achchi would stubbornly oppose all others if she disagreed with anyone else's point of view or opinion. She would respond with child-like mockery. "Akal" was one of her favourite terms of address. "Akal". The common, the ordinary folk. Qualified by adding "Wellawatai", a suburb lying on the outskirts of the city. "Akal" lived according to her, outside the pale of society. On the fringes. Different to her social status.

"We are from Colombo Seven", she would often boast. To achchi, Colombo Seven was the Kailasa of the elitist and privi-

leged. The others did not belong to this hierarchy. Her life had been cushioned by these firm beliefs even in the face of the loss of wealth, power and property. She knew nothing of the changes that were going on in the great wide world, nor had she knowledge of the political and ethnic upheaval in her country.

When refugees who had arrived from the North, taking up their abode in rented rooms in Kandy brought Rence offerings of sadham and modaham, sweetmeats in celebration of Pongal, all that achchi and Milda said, puckering up their lips wryly was, "Who made this? What is this? Not sweet. No sugar. No salt." Who could explain that these gifts of food were brought by those who had not forgotten those traditions they had always followed and still continued to follow, exiled as they were from their homes in territories ravaged by the war. Women who prepared their sadham and modaham on one-burner kerosene cookers in the cramped spaces which they now occupied, apartments divided by sheets and bedspreads so that privacy was afforded to all those who lived there, crowded in as they were forced to be.

Achchi had had to relinquish so much after the death of her husband. Her inventories of past possessions were just ghostly reminders of the past. All she had now was Milda. Her only possession. Milda with her impassive face, sleek, oiled black hair, blank eyes, in her flowered housecoat and frilled underskirt peeping out beneath the hem, had complete dominion over the old mistress. Milda, that crippled child, neglected by her stepmother, given over to a convent. Milda, who dragged herself as a baby on her haunches with her weak legs splayed out before her, who prayed to all the gods both Christian and Hindu, made novenas and vows, massaged her legs daily, stood up, walked, indomitable. She married, brought forth a child, was abandoned by her husband, went back to the convent and saved all her money. Money she earned by doing the Farm accounts of the convent, or so she said.

"Must be one lakh I have now, missy in the convent. Nuns are looking after. Saraswathi achchi also keeping my salary, twenty, thirty-thousand must be there. I have lot of money. Christmas lunch my account for Murugesu dorai and family." Murugesu was Renee's eldest brother-in law.

Murugesu had told Renee that Milda had worked in Kuwait. Was this too a fantasy, a desert mirage? All she could say about Kuwait was," My mistress in Kuwait very kind. Very, very cold there." The desert landscape perhaps existed only in her imagination. Had she ever been there? Murugesu believed in her implicitly. She was such a prop to them in their lives. Managed the whole household and looked after achchi as well. Milda had been recalled to fulfill the traditional duties. "My servant," achchi would say, "My daughter has sent her to look after me." She clung to Milda. Resented sharing her with the rest of the family. "Don't ask her to cook for you," achchi said. "Would you like her to cook only for the two of you then? "Renee had asked in order to please her mother-in-law but the suggestion had not really worked as Milda had set ideas of what should be cooked and how much. It merely led to achchi's deprivation especially as she liked spicy food to titillate her taste buds.

Achchi and Milda were both now widowed. Milda in her forties. Yet longing for her dreams and fantasies to be realized. Milda's physical handicap did not hamper her in any way. "Look missy", she would say, standing firm and upright. "My legs are straight. They are both of equal length." Renee admired her courage. When Milda walked her body was hopelessly contorted. She moved with difficulty but nothing deterred her in what she wanted to accomplish. The old lady would flatter and wheedle her because she was aware of her dependency on Milda. Honey dripped from her tongue when she addressed Milda.

Milda's regime where food was concerned was strict. "Missy, not so much. A drop of this. A drop of that. Only little, little of jam, butter, sugar. This much rice enough. Nothing more". But Renee defied her. She fed the old lady who ate with satisfaction and relish. "No coffee, Missy," Milda said firmly. " Coffee will keep her up all night. No six o'clock evening coffee. No morning coffee. I won't be able to sleep. Ten, twenty times she will wake up". Milda resented the fact of other people sleeping. She had to justify her existence. She wanted everyone to pander to her, to feel guilty, although Renee knew that Milda enjoyed a good night's uninterrupted sleep. Milda woke late too. This was not the strict discipline of convent life. She wanted achchi to sleep late so that she did not have to bother about her breakfast but only her bath, lunch, afternoon nap. She was shrewd. She could keep more hours to herself. But Renee continued to defy her. Opened the window to light, air, sunlight. Coffee achchi had. Her plate was filled with slices of fresh, crusty bread, dollops of jam, sugar, butter. Milda retreated into thwarted silence, her face tight, unsmiling and impassive. Sulked.

The old lady's gaunt cheeks filled out. Her face with its chiselled lips and deep-set eyes grew beautiful, almost youthful. Her weakness disappeared. Became once more the strong-willed matriarch she had always been. Biscuits for elevenses with tea. Biscuits for afternoon tea with sweet, milky tea which she loved. Milda was not pleased. Biscuits were discovered hidden away in tins. "For later, missy." The old lady enjoyed her food. "Eat, eat, eat", Milda would hiss under her breath "Whole night I cannot sleep. I am awake", she said in loud, bullying, threatening tones for Renee to overhear. Renee smiled to herself. Milda's words were meant to make her feel guilty. Milda felt she was indispensable. Yes, perhaps she was.

Renee watched lynx-eyed. She served out the old lady's food herself. Achchi savoured it with all her reviving taste-buds,

the sweet, the sour, the spicy, the hot, the cold. Her eyes sparkled and the flesh began to bloom on those gaunt bones. But Milda had to have her regime. Every morning, rain or sun the old one must have her cold baths. That was the event of the day. She would be led out of the warm shell of her room like a lamb to the slaughter. Protesting but weak. In Milda's power, completely. "I have fever. Today I cannot bathe. See, see, my body is hot. My head aches. Fever. I shall catch a chill. I will die. Who will pay the doctor's bill?" Achchi moaned.

But the bathroom door would be firmly shut. Locked from within. Through the barrier would issue the cries, the moans, the sobs, the appeals and pleadings. " God, god, god..... my planets. My malefic planets. Saturn. It is Saturn that has brought all this upon me". Weak and feeble lamentation would intersperse her cries to all her deities. One - sided conversations. Monologues. "Never in all my life.... baths in cold water..... never." Whimpering, moaning, yet complete, total, absolute subjugation to Milda's will, Milda's desire for purgation and catharsis. Then the sound of the running water from the tap would come to an abrupt end. The old lady would emerge dripping from the bathroom. Hugging her damp housecoat to her shrivelled body. Wet hair streaming. Her beloved coat flung onto the line in the back garden.

"Milda, her coat, she must have something warm on", Renee would plead.

Milda was adamantine. " Perspiration, missy...." Wrinkling her nose.

Renee suffered for her mother - in - law. Whose will must be stronger? Renee's sister - in - law had given Milda complete control. Milda was powerful. Like steel.

"No, Milda", Renee was firm. "No more cold baths. Hot baths. Dry clothes. Well towelled. Hot coffee. Put away those

flimsy clothes. See that she's warm, dry". Pink bouffant nylon negligee with ruching left over from someone's long-ago honeymoon, with spaghetti straps; smocked bed jackets for pregnant women, fripperies and housecoats cut up from old sarees were banished to the bottom of the battered old suitcase. Milda baulked. Gave in to a certain extent. A basin of warm water was taken into the bathroom but the tap was kept running, replenishing it with cold water. Cries, whimpers, sobs, moans continued.... Power. Subjugation.

But Renee insisted. Hot coffee. Hot tea. Dry, warm clothes.

The old lady's strong will completely subjugated. Yet she knew she must placate Milda. "Darling, Rasathi. Deivam," she would bill and coo at Milda's stony, implacable face. After which Milda would begin her own purgations. Her own catharsis. Her baths with the strongest antiseptic soap. Washed her clothes meticulously. Powdered herself. Fresh housecoat with frilled skirt. Oiled her hair sleekly, braided, knotted, coiled it and then took refuge in the kitchen. First to have a leisurely breakfast and then to begin cooking. Oil for everything. Minute quantities to be served only with teaspoons. Milda had her own unique style of cooking. Chilly hot. No subtle flavours. " I can do anything, missy".

She would elaborate, " At Saraswathi achchi's house very nice there but my cousin also working and very jealous. She not have children. Very tall but looking very tired always. Ambika missy give all her nice frocks. She give me also but I like only housecoats. All the frocks she give- short, long, mini. Achchi also have some of Ambika missy's caftans but she do not like to wear bright colours. Sometimes the boys are there from Rasa's village. I give my share of food for them. Saraswathi achchi asks," Milda what did you eat last night? And I tell,"I drank only tea and slept" and Saraswathi achchi very angry with me. I am

completely in charge there. All very jealous. Why bebi, I tell story about Subramaniam. All are spitting in the sink. Malaria and all getting passed. Bad, no bebi? Small children in the hall. Small bebi Radha coughing and coughing. Subramaniam slowly coming and spitting there. I told whole story. All angry. Won't talk. But all trust only me. I can cook anything, no. Make sandwiches. Chinese rolls with sauce. Cutlets. Hoppers. Thosai. Stringhoppers. Tandoori. Chicken Biriyani."

Renee listened carefully. Milda needed patience and approbation for everything she did. What she cooked did not always turn out to her expectations. The stringhoppers were never steamed properly. The hoppers never rose. She frightened the daughter of the house by saying that pol roti should never be eaten at night because of supernatural visitations. Her rotis were flat and oily. The kitchen, however , provided her with reprieve, her modus operandis of escape from her charge. She took hours and hours and hours to prepare the pittu. The whole process exhausted Renee. Her own autonomy was eroded and subverted but she endured it all for the sake of her mother - in - law. Milda took over space, took over privacy, made her presence felt. While she prayed she sat wrapt in silence in the bedroom. Achchi too had to be silent. Her interminable prayers at set hours forgetful of achchi till she had finished. Her TV viewing. Her English lessons. Her Bible reading. Her newspaper reading. Her afternoon naps from one o' clock to four thirty p.m. The old lady waiting for her tea and biscuits. In mortal terror. Banging on every door except that of Milda's, tip-toeing past so she would not disturb her. Mortal terror. Fear of being abandoned by Milda. Stony silence. Milda embroidering piles and piles of linen in minute hand-stitches for Saraswathi achchi- and her letter writing. Her fictions and her fantasies.

Soon the letters from overseas started arriving. Blue airmail envelopes. Postmarks from all over the world. Renee

scrupulously handed over every one to her. "Milda, another letter from one of your brothers", she would call out from the breakfast table. Soon Milda would come to Renee. "Missy, see". Kroners, francs, marks, pounds sterling would be held out to her. "Missy, please change for me at the bank. What is the highest rate I can get?" Milda's wealth kept increasing. All tucked away in her locked suitcase. She did not use her own money. Everything had to be provided for her. Her food.... and she was choosy. She must have rice twice a day. Renee felt she was running a Guest House to please the two newcomers. Both women were demanding and Renee's husband spent hours lugging home fruit, vegetables, fish, chicken, milk, sugar, jams and preserves, sweets, kilos of rice and found his pockets growing quickly empty. Milda needed her Sunday papers, soap, toothpaste, hair oil, powder, eau- de-Cologne. The household revolved round the perpetual catering to the needs of the two women. Milda's money reposed among her possessions, her sarees, housecoats, skirts. She needed a plentiful supply of stationery too. She would spend hours sitting on her easy chair writing her letters. Creating a fantasy life in which she spun her romantic dreams. She was not Milda, widowed, handicapped, a maid, but a woman who needed love and the fulfillment of her deepest needs. Renee understood, encouraged her to fulfil those needs, looked upon her as a woman, a courageous one who had the will to get whatever she could out of life. Obstructions. Impediments. Nothing should hinder her to find her happiness.

" I want respect", she would always say and she got it by the subtle wielding of her power. Her husband had got tired of her and brought another woman into the house. " Go, go, I don't want you. That's what he told me, missy. I worked, made rice packets and sold everything but he had another woman and a child by her. Then suddenly he died."

When she wrote her letters and sent them abroad she described herself as Milda, Maria, Rani, Ambika, Lakshmi. She

was also young, a dancing teacher, a net-ball player. She had dreams of going to Germany. Of marrying one of the asylum-seekers, the refugees in Frankfurt. " He will send tickets. He wants me to marry him but my brother says no, he drinks. You come too, Missy, with me. I will get tickets for you too". Dreams. Dreams. On Christmas day Milda went to Church. She pleated her saree with great precision, wore it hipster style. She put on high heels and could not walk could hardly balance on them. Her companion, Shanthi, a student who was spending Christmas at Renee's had to help her, almost carry her up the road which led to the church in Piachaud Gardens.

One day there was a knock on the door. It was afternoon. The family was taking their afternoon siesta. The old lady, the ninety-five year old grandmother was asleep in her room, an innocent smile playing on her lips, curling up like a karmic cat basking in its pleasant dreams of milk and cream and mice-catching. Lulled by the soft wind that blew through the coffee bushes, the lime, the mango and the fronds of the coconut palm; birds, butterflies, green chameleons in the Thumbergia bower. The old lady would watch the fruit growing ripe, the gauvas, the mangoes, "give me one, give me one", she importuned, her taste buds avid for all that was sweet and sour, her few residual teeth biting into the ripeness and richness. Dreaming. She had always lived in houses with gardens filled with fruit trees. Groves in her ancestral lands in the north of the island as well as in her Colombo home.

The knock was presistent. Savithri opened the door. She was one of Renee's daughters, young, large-eyed with thick curling hair. " Yes?" She asked questioningly. A stranger stood on the verandah. A young man with long, shoulder-length hair, curling about his face. Tall. Slim. Dressed in denims. He had a hacking cough. Embroidered flowers ran down the length of his blue tetron shirt.

" Rani?" he asked, looking at Savithri's unrecognizing expression.

"Rani"? he repeated hopefully.

"Ah, Rani," Savithri said, understanding, "take a seat". She pointed to a chair on the verandah. The young man sat down to wait. He was not impatient. He had waited for things to happen often. To get visas, foreign air - flights, train and bus-rides, entry into countries; in queues at employment agencies, Food Banks, refugee centres. He waited.

Savithri went in to tell her mother, " A young man has come to meet Rani. Probably one of her penfriends."

Renee was amused. "Rani". One of Milda's nom-de- plumes. One of her aliases. Just another of her several personae. Renee's husband Rohan went out to speak to the young men. "How did you get to know Rani? Who are you?" he asked the stranger.

" I am from Switzerland. Rani is my penfriend." The young man showed him a piece of paper on which Rani's name was written together with other bits of information. " I am a teacher. I play net-ball".

Milda had to be woken from her afternoon nap. She quickly put on a freshly-laundered housecoat and flounced underskirt, oiled and braided her hair, powdered her face and came out with expectation. This was an unexpected encounter between two strangers and Rohan, Renee's husband, did not want to embarrass them. Milda and the penfriend spoke briefly. The young man then ran back to a van crowded with his relatives and brought a parcel which he handed over to Milda after which he vanished, never to be seen, never to be heard of again. Milda showed the contents to Renee later on. Chewing gum. Deodorant. Ballpoint pens. Gifts for children? For adults? A generous mind that had thought of a penfriend. Perhaps he had thought too that here was

a girl whom he could take back to share his bleak life in a faraway country where he had sought asylum.

This was the reality of one of Milda's photographs. She knew nothing of what Renee's friends wrote of - bombs in the offices of those who worked for human rights and for refugees. She knew nothing of the neo - Nazi racial attacks; murdered asylum- seekers. The penfriend had actually come to see her all the way from Switzerland. He too perhaps needed to know that his was not a forgotten name without identity in the country of his birth. Milda had a collection of colourful photographs of young men, moustached, bearded, dressed casually in denims and sweatshirts, some of them in heavy overcoats armed against the winter cold. "See, missy all my brothers." "She doesn't have to work. She has brothers scattered all over the world. She's a rich woman. They send her a lot of money". Murugesu was impressed. He believed her implicitly.

"No, Milda, they are all your boyfriends", Renee teased. Murugesu had believed and sought to convince them all that Milda had several brothers who were living in Europe and England. It was true in many cases. Renee knew of husbands, of brothers who were all asylum-seekers in Germany, France, Canada, Switzerland and England. They sent home money to support their families in the North, the North-East and in Colombo. Wives waited patiently for visas to go to their husbands. These visas were expensive. For Canada it was lakhs of rupees. There were agents who saw about all these matters. Brothers tried to get their sisters across to arrange marriages for them with friends. Proposals were frequent, parents were go-betweens. They first went through the photographs, met the parents and then arranged the marriage.

" I want my brother to have a happy life", one sister had said. There was a certain poignancy in her words. Life was lonely

there, living in ghettoes, facing the fact of being alien. To have a fresh, innocent young girl from their own country was greatly desired. One country was a stepping stone to reach another. While others wanted to escape from war-torn zones in the north. Displacement. Exile

" He's trying to go to Canada, or to Switzerland or Sweden." These asylum seekers were always on the move , often stranded, lonely, living in unheated, cold-water apartments, doing low-paid jobs, facing attacks on lonely streets, waylaid when they travelled about in trains and buses. The pallor of loneliness and silence was written on their faces. Yet those who remained behind thought that by going abroad you would have a good life, make plenty of money, have a big car, a house, a well -paid job.

Milda had dreams and fantasies about these young men. All of them must have lots and lots of money so she would send lists to them. " Missy, bebi, soon presents coming for all". She gave an enigmatic smile to show that she had secrets up her sleeve. " Nice skirt, blouse, for bebi, missy for you saree, master shirt and trouser, for me money to buy sewing machine. Then I can have business, take orders for clothes. I don't have to handstitch. Nice patterns I can do on machine."

"But Milda, you say you want to marry Joseph and live in Germany".

"Yes, missy, he want to marry, but my brother say no good, he is drinking, no? You also come to Germany, missy. I write and tell him to send tickets for both of us". Milda found strength in Renee too. She knew that Renee would always be a friend who would support her.

Sebastian was seen in a photograph slouched over a cafe table. Asylum seeker. He had managed to get a visa and lose himself in the city. Hamburg or Frankfurt, who knew where?

Milda was not to know of the loneliness, the lack of money, the cold, icy streets, the alien language. Sebastian was another of those pen-friends. He had never really seen Milda nor she, him. He imagined her to be a young and supple girl, a teacher, a dance teacher of classical dance, Bharatha natyam, and had dreams of bringing her over. Those young men needed to have wives of their own people, but it was growing expensive. The agents needed so much money to arrange the visas and passports, even if the passage money was forthcoming. So Milda wrote her letters to her penpals. To Sebastian and Nagendran, to Ravindran, Renga, Ratnasingham, Balakrishnan, taking their names from the Penpal column or from Kumara's Penpal Club. Letters and photographs swelled her collection, men posing against enormous TV's, out size refrigerators, posh cars, wearing windcheaters, scarves, woolen caps, gloves, heavy boots, compensation for all that they had lost in their own part of the world where there was no longer electricity. No TV's, no refrigerators, no cars. Where drugs for medication too were in very short supply. Where day-to- day life was difficult and hazardous, food and fuel rationed. Where the struggle to gain Eelam, a separate state in the North and North East of the Island was going on, waged by the Liberation guerilla movement, the Tigers. Against the State.

Lonely exiles, shadow people. " All my brothers missy, all my brothers," and that was in a sense, true. They were her kindred. Her own kind. Belonging to each other even though they had ensnared themselves through her own imagined fantasies of who she was. Milda thought Germany was Eldorado.

Paradise. Apples and chocolates and nice clothes and money and cars, marks and dollars stuffed in your wallet and the glamour of saying you lived abroad. The newspapers spoke of vicious racist attacks on foreigners, waves of hostility on the asylum seekers and emigrants, neo-Nazi gangs attacking hostels

for foreigners, petrol bombs lobbed into dormitories for aliens; arson; attempted murders, beatings, assaults on those considered " illegal" immigrants. Being stranded, being deported. All this did not touch Milda. She waited for that ticket that would take her there. It supported life, hope, and escape from the eternal monotony of living and caring for achchi who had had youth, wealth, many children, happiness. All that Milda had been denied. Only Renee looked upon her face, thought it beautiful with its poignant expression. Only Renee thought she had the right to being considered, not as a servant but as a woman.

"Sometimes", Milda said with pride," She loves me more than her own daughters". Perhaps it was true. Achchi was homeless today because of the dowry she had to give for her younger daughter- the house. One day Renee found a photograph of the daughter. A beautiful picture of a young woman decked in silk edged with gold lace, adorned with jewellery. The jewellery gifted to her by her mother who now had nothing left for herself. Except a pair of ruby and brilliant earrings and a single brilliant mukuttu with a brilliant in her nostril. She was now far away in another country with her family yet the dowry house had been sold. Milda, however, was growing richer. Her suitcase filled with all the rewards for being an honest servant. International currency notes in her handbag, a camera sent from England- a Canon. On the package a message:' Please do not nike this'. It was addressed to the master of the house. " My brother sent, missy. Now I can take lots and lots of photographs. Whole family. Christmas time we can take, no? Other presents also coming. Wait and see". These photographs would prove that Milda herself belonged to a family. That she had a home of her own. That she was not a servant.

Did she really think that Renee was so naive? Murugesu had believed everything. "Milda ...oh she is one of the family." Strange that acceptance in that once tradition - bound household

where those who were born to serve were considered a race apart. Here in Murugesu's apartment Milda was the surrogate mother, aunt, wife, everything. She imposed order over chaos in that household. Where the eldest brother's wife did not care, Milda cared. Where the wife did not cook or wash, Milda cooked and washed. Milda would proudly say that she had three buckets of clothes to wash every day. One bucket she claimed contained shoes and handbags. " I used to read the bills, missy", she said, " When I was sweeping the house. Handbag brought from big shopping plaza, nine hundred rupees. Why Geetha bebi, always match and wear, no".

When the wife did not find time to feed the daughter, Milda sat beside her and fed the girl. "For bebi also I will make nice things to eat, Chinese rolls, cutlets, patties", she told Renee's daughter Savithri. For Virendran baba's birthday, I bake date cake. I take big tin, fill with sand, make very, very hot and nicely bake cake. All the friends saying very tasty, Milda's cake... I help family a lot missy. Christmas lunch I give family. My account. Once I pay electricity bill also. I have money in the convent. Nuns are keeping. Why, bebi, I did Farm accounts there. Saraswathi achchi also keeping my money. Now I think I have one lakh fifty thousand".

In Colombo food had been strictly rationed for achchi. The eldest son had theories of how much someone of her great age should be given to eat. Three thin slices of bread, nothing more at night. Naturally achchi had felt the pangs of hunger. Hunger kept her awake the whole night through. " Fifteen, twenty times she is getting up in the night," said Milda not without sympathy. Achchi had been locked up alone in the house. The others had gone about their own business. Left with a slice of plain bread and grated coconut. She had managed to attract the attention of the neighbours downstairs. "I am hungry. Pasi, pasi, hungry, hungry," she had cried out. The women downstairs said how they

had made a parcel of bread, butter and jam, tied it onto a long pole for achchi to reach from her window. Achchi had a wonderful instinct of self- preservation, of survival. She was a vegetarian, a Saivite, but hunger drove her to taste surreptitiously where tempting smells emerged out of forbidden cookpots filled with fish and chicken.

Leaning against the kitchen table slicing carrots casually or blowing the fire on the hearth for drinking water - the water must always boil until bubbles appeared on the surface - Milda would begin her family stories. Almost everything centred on the big house and the Mylvaganam family where her grandfather had once been cook. The relationships between the caste groups were still feudal for Milda could be summoned at any time to serve the family. The only one who continued to command respect was the elder sister. She could use, and this was her right, the pronoun "ni" , you, to those who served her. The tone in which she spoke was one of authority, command, the prerogatives of her caste. Achchi had lost her ancient matriarchal power although her will remained strong. Her soft maternal flesh had long since been leeched off her body by age. Milda and achchi were all the shadow people. Milda was there only to carry out her orders but Milda also watched, observed, listened and although she was at first cautious and reticent with her new mistress, gradually began to talk.

Renee had thought Milda the soul of discretion yet she sensed in her that longing to talk of the life she had experienced in Colombo. Pity for those very beings who thought nothing of her. Even affection, admiration for those whose lives were one big clumsy mess was what surfaced from all the stories she related. She had moved from one home to another, first cooking for Saraswathi. Then she had been sent to look after achchi who had been abandoned by servant after servant. One had run away

with the chauffeur of the downstair apartment. All of them had been indifferent to the old lady. Among the shadow people there were others who were even more shadowy. Milda watched all the goings-on here in this upper storey apartment where the eldest son, Murugesu, lived with his wife Radha and the two children, the girl and the boy.

Milda stood on the outskirts. On the fringe of all those lives. "Ah missy that Geetha bebi always go for parties no..... very nice, missy".

"Why Milda, why nice....?"

"Safari suit and all, no missy, with shawls also; mother and daughter both like sisters, no? Radha missy wears safari suit and salwar also. Both very beautiful."

" What were those parties , Milda.? Where were they?" Renee asked. She knew that Murugesu never had parties in his house. He had never had them even when he lived in the palatial new house he had built with the marble floors and the mirrored walls, the master bedroom and the pond in the garden. Never. The whole house was for himself and his family and even with all those bedrooms and double drawing rooms he never had had parties. Parties. The whole family did not know what a party was. Even in the good old days when achchi held sway over the Axminister carpeted drawing-room with its smooth, polished uncomfortably hard drawing room suite. Only Saraswathi achchi had parties where the elite of Colombo society of all communities were entertained, wining and dining in her mansion.

But Murugesu's wife loved parties and so did the daughter. Dancing. Drinking wine. Dressing Up. Murugesu's wife used to glitter in red georgette and golden sequins, her eyes outlined with kajal resembling those icon-like Byzantine mosaics or perhaps the filmy heroines of Bombay movies. Life with

Murugesu was dull especially now that he had no money, no house and his debonair good looks were gradually diminishing. He had also lost the affections of his wife who no longer found him attractive. Radha lived for enjoyment, for fun, for pleasure, but perhaps it was also because she was heart-broken over the death of her first born. She would weep before his photograph. She could not get over her grief. She could forget in this way , by dressing up, going to parties, enjoying the company of friends. Her husband was however, still involved in trying to get his brilliant schemes for his colossal projects off ground.

" What were those parties? " Renee asked again with curiosity. " All young people, missy. Nice, nice boys and girls. Tamil. Sindhi. Burgher. Sinhala. What to do? Must enjoy life. Some are wearing shorts, T-shirts. Geetha baby very pretty. Friends are admiring her. But brother angry with sister. He don't like her to go for all the parties, no. Evening parties. Very late, no. He very careful about his sister. But many admire her. One day nice boy presented with basket of roses. Lovely, missy, ooh, nice. Beautiful red roses. I think he like her. Want to marry her. One day went for party in hotel. Geetha baba and Radha missy. That same boy who like her with his parents at another table. Geetha baba and boy looking at each other but what to do? Boy shy. He is with parents. In the end a sad story. Boy went abroad. Geetha bebi waiting for letter. Three month, four month pass. No letter coming. Disappointed. Sad, no? I know she like him very much. One day, Christmas time Virendran baba won air ticket to Hong-Kong. Sold ticket and put money in bank account. Yes, missy, Virendran baba very careful. Very wise. Sin, no? Nothing for the family..... but he must look after himself or who else will do for him?"

To a captive listener, Renee, more was told. " I only am running the house. I am thinking bad first but Murugesu dorai very good. He like good food. I everyday making two cutlets for

him from small fish, that salayo. He like two - egg omelette also. I make pittu, thosai, roti. Always out. Murugesu dorai, coming back and typing typing, in the room. Friendly with all big ministers but no money, no? Saraswathi achchi only told go there. I do not know the place. When I went there, a lady came out of bedroom. She asked, " Who is this new person?" she smile at me. That was Radha missy. Very beautiful. Smartly dressed. So many sarees. "What to do? Milda. I had so many sarees. I sold, yes, sold and finished." Wearing salwar kameez and safari suit also. Achchi's clothes not washed, all in bundles. I washed all and put on balcony to dry. At first, missy, they take all the food. Saraswathi achchi bring everything, no? Chillie packet, noodles, flour, sugar, small packet Astra, rice, two hundred fifty grams of vegetables. Only for achchi and me but no, achchi get very little. Little only, jam, Astra all finished. Sin, no? Others eating all the jam. So I put achchi's share in small cupboard in her room, then Radha missy ask, Milda, "Why you do this?" Later Murugesu dorai come and say, "Milda you only know what is correct thing to do. So you do everything. Now you run the house." Weekend must have lot of food, why Radha missy also coming, Otherwise she not in the house. Then I must cook. Wash all the clothes.... also you know what happened? Deepavali, missy, Murugesu dorai telephoning and telling Saraswathi achchi, "All the food is finished ... quickly send some more...."

Achchi's sister come one time. Saraswathi achchi come also. All brought lots and lots of food. Sweets and all. Big plates of food. Modaham. Favourite sweetmeat of Ganesh god, no? I take and separate. They saying, " We have also brought your share Milda, you must eat also. After they go, dorai and missy come to the room and take the plate away, a small bit of modaham only for achchi to eat. Murugesu dorai scolding and saying, " All the sweetmeats for my mother. That's her share"

Even kiribath or cake, small teaspoon, small piece only giving achchi.

After Milda left Kandy to go to Colombo and sign the Deeds for the house which she owned-it had belonged to her husband - she wrote to Renee from time to time. Letters in which she said she would surely return in two weeks time, that no servant should be employed, that she was ill, had been in hospital, that she was at the convent, that she had now got another job, that her brother was expected from London.... letters which Renee did not answer because there were no addresses on a single one of them. Once Renee wrote to the Mother Superior of the convent where Milda said she would be staying. Milda felt it was not safe for her to stay in the same house as her widowed brother-in-law who wanted to marry her. She didn't fancy being a household drudge once again. The brother-in-law was a lawyer's clerk. Milda had brought up his daughters when their mother, her sister, had died. The brother- in- law had come to fetch Milda. He had brought an enormous chocolate cake as a gift, told Renee that Milda had promised to return in two weeks, taken one look at her without even helping her down the steps as she lugged her suitcase and said, " You've got fat".

That was the last Renee was to see of Milda. But Milda laid her strategies. She had found Kandy dull. She had lost her power over the old lady in this household. Moreover, there was no excitement for her here. It was too quiet a life. Saraswathi achchi had given her piles of sewing to be done, hemstitching embroidery, cross-stitching serviettes, tablecloths. All that was now ready. "All for birthday presents, missy", Milda would say. " You must see the presents the Colombo Seven ladies give each other, nice, nice things, sarees and tablecloths and perfume bottles. Saraswathi achchi also have to give them. What presents, missy! For Saraswathi achchi's birthday I cooked five kilos of mutton, missy, and so many chickens. Cadju nuts so expensive

also, for the fried rice. Hundred and fifty cutlets I make also and hundred and fifty patties and sandwiches. Thousand of rupees missy, for that lunch."

" But Milda, Lakshmi achchi says she does not have money. One thousand five hundred rupees is enough for achchi for a month. That is enough for her expenses," she says.

" Missy, no, don't believe. Saraswathi achchi very, very, rich. Have lots of money. Bags and bags of rice brought from the estates and coconuts and tamarind also. Sarawathi achchi packets and sells. She have money. Sunderam say that Subramaniam say that Arumugan told that she is worth koti, millions and millions but don't say I told missy."

Milda did not return. All the letters that Renee sent her sisters-in-law were unanswered. Saraswathi had complained that she was suffering from bad health. For her it was to be tragically, the beginning of the end. She was about to embark on a journey too. The sister who was abroad maintained a stony silence although at the beginning she used to write about her prize roses and her holiday in the National Park and her studies in comparative religion and of how great Buddhist philosophy was. Milda knew her power. She laid down the law. " I will look after achchi in Colombo". Renee pitied the old lady who had blossomed out after Milda's departure. She ate all she wanted, drank innumerable cups of coffee, had warm baths, sipped whisky, brandy, wine. Looking admiringly at Renee's brother she would say with great shrewd naivety, "What an innocent man. So harmless."

Renee was pleased that the old lady was once more alive, aware, a human being, not a non-person, not a shadow woman. Her personality unfurled like one of those Japanese paper flowers in a crystal bowl of water. She felt safe, protected. I will

stay here with you and with my son," she told her daughter-in law. Please don't send me away."

Then a letter came. A letter from abroad. The address was " The Nederland." A letter written by one of Milda's asylum seekers, one of her brothers. The postmark was London. The tone was insolent in its familiarity, both threatening and jovial.

My dear Renee

We are keeping fine and I hope you too same by the grace of Almighty God. There is a talk here that you have got large amount of money by selling house property and you have taking keep interest money to look after the mother-in-law.

Why do you want to get the bad name. We have looked after her for more than twenty years. Now she has a proper place to live, her daughter's house. I think they have arranged everything. Without thinking, send her back to Colombo to her daughter's place where she can stay peacefully. In any case we have no business to look after her. I will tell you more in person.

Thank you
Yours love
Nalini

Renee was taken aback by the letter. She had both loved and pitied Milda for the great deprivations which she had endured and which she would have to endure.

The letter was a revelation. It displayed a confusion of all the values Milda professed to follow. The letter had been manipulated by her and within those lines her own spiritual confusions, her self deception, her personal betrayal were apparent.

"Why me, Milda why me? I never harmed you. You knelt at my feet and cried when I gave you your Birthday gifts, when

we prepared your special Birthday lunch. You said, with tears in your eyes, 'You are my mother, I love only you and yet you did this to me. If you wanted your job so badly, why didn't you tell me....,were the thoughts that flashed through Renee's mind as she went through the letter again and yet again. Renee was deeply hurt but then did she not understand that all these connivings were necessary for Milda's survival?

Renee read the letter from beginning to end once more before she finally put it away. It reflected the transparency of Milda's naivety and shrewdness at the same time. She was a clever woman. Not a shadow person at all. As she thought back on the letter which one of Milda's penfriends had been tutored into writing, a vision flashed through Renee's mind of Milda sitting and praying every evening, reading the Bible, making her novenas to the Virgin Mary and all the saints, writing her letters, counting her money while achchi watched her lovingly yet possessively. Milda was achchi's means of survival too. Her carer. Her closest companion. They were so close, so intimate in their togetherness. Each one helped sustain that life-force within the other. Milda could never survive without achchi and yet she had tried so often to escape through her silent rebellion.

Achchi drew Milda closer and closer to her until Milda wielded greater power over her. But achchi too had a strangle-hold on her heart and mind even while she kept murmuring endearments. " Darling, rasathi, darling, you are a goddess to me." The noose grew tighter and tighter round Milda's neck, almost choking her to death. It was the combat of two victims. Who, thought Renee to herself, would be the final victor?

No, there would be no clear victor, no sure victory. They were both the undefeated.

INHERITANCE

Memory. The jungle. Emerging out of the mist. Leaves clustering on branches appear undefined. Mutations of colour. Dark. Light. Always the jungle. The backdrop to the bungalow planted in that cleared space. The roots twining in the subterranean dark beneath the house. The jungle had once covered everything. Densely. Caves in the wilderness. Choked up with snarling webs of vines and overhanging branches. Deep. Deep within the wilderness which always had to be kept at bay. Coverts. Wild boar, sambhur, leopard still roamed undisturbed. Pockets of secret life. The light hardly ever penetrated the undergrowth. The hoary tree trunks grooved with their striations of amber resin.

In my mind the vague shapes of men, barebodied, cloths wrapped round their loins, lift their axes to strike against the trees. I hear the creak and groan, the wild tearing sounds of the uprooted hardwood, satin and ebony. The agony of that pain enters my own loins. The earth wounds gape open to reveal rocks, stones, roots and embryo plants and seed. Severed roots. White. Tangled about the clods of earth. Gigantic upheaval. How will the blood be staunched? Do I imagine it all, trickling out through the fissures and apertures, flowing in rivulets, soaking

into the scattered leaves and outflung branches. The birds squawk raucously as they take wing and fly into the ravaged wilderness.

Where did they all go, those men, after they had cut down those ancient trees? Did they never question the orders issued by strangers to carve out that territory which had always been theirs? Now to be relinquished. Strangers who said that the land belonged to them.

It had happened on the other plantations too, once the entire island had been brought under the rule of the sovereign power. And my own line, that of my husband's, that of the rest of the family, were allied both to patriarchy and the Empire. But first, the jungles were razed to the ground. The landscape changed. A cleared space prepared on an eminence for the big bungalow. Perched on the summit of the hill. The Line Rooms for the plantation workers lay below the house, at a distance. The voices of those who lived there never reached us. Sometimes we glimpsed their faces but they were the faces of an unknown continent. They spoke in a different tongue so that we never heard the narratives of their own journeys. But they brought their own protective deities with them and set up their shrines with their holy sanctums among the hills. We heard the drums during festival times and often they would come up to the big bungalow and chant those words in which they named their gods, their goddesses. Yes, life went on, their lives linked, connected to that past they had left behind. Among them our bloodline too. The women who bedded with our grandfathers. Jesupulle. Shanthi. Saraswathi, Meenambal and the women from the nearby villages. Golden-skinned women with their thick strands of black hair, oiled, sleek, knotted at the nape of their necks. Yet for many of us, we were taken along a different path. Our gods were the gods of our English forefathers. And we spoke in their tongue. Come to think of it now, we lived in a colony within a colony. Fenced

in. Barricaded. Territory that now had boundaries. We could go beyond them but the others who did not belong to our hierarchy could not cross without sanctions.

No wonder we felt we were a special people. An enclave which was a protectorate ruled over by those patriarchal figures who owned the territory of thousands and thousands of acres of land. Estates. Property. Class. Status. To become our inheritance handed down from generation to generation until... but then, at that stage, we could make no prophecies. There was no presagement of a future in which the giant stature of our progenitors, the patriarchs, would diminish. Did we ever think that with the passing of time, with death and the new emigrations, our names would belong to the history of imperial power and subjugation? That we ourselves would be almost effaced?

I went away when I grew up and got married to yet another of our own kind. My husband too came from one of the big planting families in the island and when my name was allied with his, I too became the mistress of the Big Bungalow wherever we went. But one of my sisters came back after her marriage to the old bungalow. It was there that the tragedy took place.

Looking back. Recollections. I delve into that past in which there are those wide gaps which I want to fill in. To know those hidden people who were also part of my lineage. It has taken me so long and I am old now, in my eightieth year- to want to know. To recognise those faces whose lineaments I bear in my own face. Perhaps as a child, when my grandmother Jesupulle held me, she whispered those secret words, those sacred words she bore in her memory. Her own inheritance. The names of gods. Goddesses. Mantrams. The talisman I never wore round my neck. I wore a fine gold chain with a tiny gold crucifix. My grandmother knew what that talisman meant. Was not her new name now, Jesupulle. Her people were also our people. I never knew her real name. That she

kept to herself. But I needed to have knowledge of her. I needed to know of that other country from which Jesupulle's people came. Where were the villages out of the thousands and thousands of villages in the subcontinent of India from which those nineteenth century emigrations had taken place during the eras of the coffee and tea plantations? We would never search out those roots. There were no documents. No records. Only cyphers perhaps in dusty ledgers. Names. Occupations. I never heard the firelight tales of the coolie treks, of the crossing over from the ports of embarkation at Devipatanam or Pamban, of the dhonies in which the immigrants came from the southernmost tip of the subcontinent. Those forefathers bearing the seed of women like Jesupulle, walking those endless miles through jungle along the Northern Mannar road. Tribes of wanderoo monkeys swinging on the looping lianas. Thirst. Searching for fresh water. Hunger. Boiling their pots of rice on the edge of the jungle. Fear. Fear of the wild animals, the reptiles; of cholera; of fevers; exhaustion. The sick left behind if they could not keep up with the straggling march. And when they reached the cold misty hills, the chills, the long line rooms in which they spread their mats; the ropes strung along the walls where they hung their cumblies.

Out on the hillsides after muster, climbing the steep slopes swathed in those hooded blankets so thick and coarse against the skin, shivering in those moisture laden veils of mist. Drenched in monsoonal rains. Sweltering in the fierce sun and bringing forth their children. Suckling them among the bushes of camelia sinensis. My grandmother Jesupulle among them. I did not know those grandparents, I never heard their legends, their myths, their epics. Unwritten sagas. Journeys. In our lives so strong had patriarchy been that we had only the names of our English and European forefathers. My father, his brothers, created their own country in their manner and style of living. They used their

mother's language only to issue commands to the workers in that distant colonial tableau on the mountainside. My grandfather too, in his times. How did the people who served him interpret his tongue, his gestures? How did they look upon that remote statue, the icon of an empire they knew nothing of?

My grandmother was a strong women. Matriarchal. Taken away from among the women plucking two leaves and a bud, filling their baskets slung on their backs. Taken away from the Lines, from her parents, her siblings, never to see them again. Her rough cumblie cast aside, left behind perhaps for another to use against the cold, she came up to the Big Bungalow. No longer would she bathe in the ice -cold springs that flowed down the face of the rocks into a deep pool or gather firewood from the jungle carrying it on her head, her body erect, statuesque. No longer would she eat the large grained rice provided by the kanganies or listen to half- remembered stories, fragments, snatchess of debt, travail, famine. She would not go to the kovil anymore or listen to the drums at festival time. Her jewellery of silver was now replaced with gold and in the spacious tiled bathroom of the Big Bungalow she stepped into the porcelain bath that took up almost half the space in the room and laved her body with the fragrances of rose and verbena. She now wore velvet jackets, the sleeves edged with embroidery of heavy gold thread. Her limbs swathed in seven yards of silk she walked like a queen through the rooms of the bungalow and sat with the man who had brought her there, eating of his food, waited on, yes, now waited on by her own people.

Matriarch. Jesupulle. My grandmother. My English grandfather I knew. But his people, my great grandfather, remained behind in some English county reading the letters his son sent him from the colony of the Empire. Drinking the tea from fine bone china that his daughter-in-law, Jesupulle's people, culled from the

fragrant camilia sinensis bush. Pruned. Pampered. From factory, packed in tea chests, sent first by bullock cart and then in the colonial railways to the capital, to the harbour. Loaded onto cargo vessels to reach London, to the Tea Brokers Firms. Blended. Auctioned. On my great grandfather's mahogany table, the canister of tea from which my English grandmother measured out the leaf. Infused with hot water. Added sugar and cream. Those English ancestors sipped their brew fastidiously as the tea cake and buttered crumpets were handed round.

Did Jesupulle ever think that her great grand daughter would die alone in the bathroom of the Big Bungalow? Donna, the beautiful Donna, with her waist- length, honey- gold hair who had come back to her old home with her husband. The marriage had been arranged by the nuns of the convent in the provincial township where she had studied. And by the parish priest. She and her husband had gone abroad. Why did she have to return to her death. Nobody asked questions. Everything was veiled in secrecy, Jesupulle's great granddaughter. Donna had grey-green eyes. A skin with golden tints. A throw- back to her colonial forebears, the patriarch of that line. How had she died? So many stories. Had she taken her own life? Had she died as the result of an accident, hitting her head, some said, against the edge of the high porcelain bath where Jesupulle had once lowered herself into the verbena-scented hot water. Weakened with loss of blood after a botched up abortion. Battered to death? Murdered? By whom? no one would speak of her death. Hide the truth. Hide the truth. That's what they did but I cannot forget her. My god- child she had been.

How I had loved her. Dead. Dead in that cavernous bath-room with that enormous English bath, the tiled washstand, the Victorian commodes and elongated mirrors. Did she see the face of death in its wavering reflections, a face distorted as she drew those last agonizing breaths? No strength to call out for help? Did

she lock herself in to die alone? Or was her body, already bereft of life, lifted up from where she fell in the bedroom, battered and bruised. Her body it was said, was black and blue. Was she laid on the cement floor? No one will answer my questions. Why did she return - or perhaps it was destined that she should die in her old home where she had grown up, wandering freely all over the estate, listening to the birds that flocked to the garden from the jungle. At night the cry of the leopard still sounded in her ears. There were some of those wild cats still breeding in the wilderness. At night their nocturnal prowlings brought them close to the house. During the day Donna and her sisters would take those secret paths that led to the caves. Sometimes they brought back a coin marked with strange insignia. Pots of treasure were supposed to be buried there. They had a secret world of their own, the girls, convent-bred but let loose to find their own freedom in the wilderness. They could handle guns. Shot game for the table. Why was Donna compelled to go away? Had she really wanted to know that wider world to which her husband took her? No one spoke of her death. The silence bore with it a load of guilt. And in the end they all went back to their lives but I know the grief brought about my sister's untimely death.

I had spent halcyon days on that estate in my childhood. My grandparents James and Jess had come to the thickly forested hill, The Hill of the Leopards and cleared it for the plantations of cocoa and coconut. The Hill of the Leopards was given a new name- Epping Forest Estate. It lay thirty miles away from the provincial township of Matale.

My grandfather had first set out on that long sea voyage from England in the heyday of the Empire and had arrived in Ceylon when the tea plantations were being opened up in the hill country. I often wondered about that first journey into the interior of the Island and of his arrival in Colombo. He had disembarked

from the ocean liner after what seemed to be an interminable voyage, to be carried off in a rickshaw to one of the big hotels in the city where he stayed for a while visiting the Tea Firms to find out which Company would find him a billet on one of their plantations. What did that Englishman know about planting tea - coming straight to the colonies in the East from an English country village with its rolling downs and fields of corn and oats, the woods with their beech and oak? He would have to learn much that was new, teach himself to grow and nurture the tea bushes in this part of the Empire in the latter part of the nineteenth century. To tend the bush that would yield the leaf which had given so much pleasure in a more ancient empire, the Chinese Empire, for so many centuries. The Manchu Dynasty was disintegrating, the monopolies of the East India Company coming to an end , while a new Empire was growing and expanding in the East, taking root in those territories that were being newly acquired. The tea bush which soon began to mantle the hills where ancient forest cover had been razed to the ground.

My grandfather must have listened to the stories of the old planters, those early pioneers, who read manuals on tea and acquired the knowledge imparted by those who planted, pruned and plucked the leaf as it grew from seedling to bush; pruned to a certain height, never to be allowed to grow into tall, gnarled trees which would require an elephant to uproot them. And as for the plucking - two leaves and a bud- just that. The nimble fingers of my grandmother Jess must have been adept at it. It was when she was a young woman, that my grandfather had seen her on that upcountry estate as he rode along the winding tracks on horseback and summoned her to his trimmed lawns and flower beds. Were her parents ordered to bring her to the big bungalow? Perhaps it was her father who took her there after she had bathed in the ice cold water that gushed from its source on the mountains; her hair smoothly oiled and knotted on top of her head;

wearing her heavy jewellery, earlobes weighted down with bright cylinders of silver, a thick twisted coil wound round her throat, anklets, toe-rings, a vermilion cloth draped on those warm and throbbing limbs. Jesupulle, some say her name was. But then did she not have her own gods and goddesses to worship in the temple with its Siva trident, on the estate close to the line rooms, where the labourers lived? Jess was the name I knew her by. Jess was the name given to my parents firstborn my golden haired, blue- eyed sister.

Ah, yes, I remember my grandmother Jess so well. A tall, imperious looking woman with satin- smooth skin, sleek, black, oiled hair. A welter of waves trammeled by the combs and brushes my grandfather gave her. She never went back to live with her parents but took up her abode in the big bungalow. Nor did she ever need to pluck tea again, waking up at dawn to climb those misty hills, shrouded in her thick black cumblie going back to share the crowded space in the line rooms with her parents, brothers and sisters. I wonder what happened to Jess and her people when her life changed - my father's other grandparents, his aunts, uncles, cousins from South India. I never heard of them. Never saw them. Their lives never impinged on my parents lives. It was only Jess. Yes, always Jess. Yet when I look so many years later on the portraits on the walls of my own home I see only the portraits of my grandfather and my own father. There is an empty space where Jess's portrait should have been. She was a woman whom I doubt was forced to live with my grandfather. She would have stayed back of her own free will.

A strong personality. Grandfather married her in church I am told. That was the legend of Jesupulle. And she wore those famous velvet jackets of emerald green with the sleeves edged in gold lace, silk sarees from South India and a whole load of jewellery. Accompanied grandfather James on his visits to

Kandy where they stayed at the Hotel Suisse, bordering the Kandy lake. Followed him too with her first born who had been born at Somerset Estate in Lindula, miles and miles away into the unknown, to the Matale district where James Maddingley had set his sights on the Hill of the Leopards. Where acres and acres of land would be eventually planted with cocoa. On the summit of that hill would be built his bungalow and below his bungalow, the line rooms for his workers.

We were all part of that Empire-the one my English grandfather created on the Hill of the Leopards. We were part of the greater Empire too, that of Great Britain. Tea had created part of that empire. Lord Bentinck gazed into the future when he signed that Minute which called for a committee to look into the possibilities of growing tea in India. Already in the nineteenth century the Empire was thinking of trade, commerce, the new markets for the filling of the imperial coffers. My grandfather had become part of that enterprise. It changed his life certainly for had he lived in his country village until his death, marrying an English country woman, keeping to his own 'jat', his own kind, where would we be? We were also part of his jat, yet unique in being mixed with that of our grandmother's. Jesupulle our grandmother no longer picking tea but sitting in the Suisse Hotel and sipping the finest Broken Orange Peckoe from China cups in the dining hall would no doubt have appreciated the ironies.

And so Epping Forest Estate was carved out of jungle land in the early years of this century. A winding road led up the hill to the Little Bungalow which could be reached either by foot or on horseback. There were stables for horses and a horsekeeper to groom the horses We had pure water which flowed along a pipeline from its source at the very summit of the hill. The jungle had not been cleared up there and wild animals still abounded - deer, wild boar, leopard, snakes.

My grandfather, we were told as children, came from a conventional English family - the epithet used to describe him being ' respectable' according to the accepted Victorian norms. Before he arrived in Matale he had taken up to planting upcountry at Somerset Estate. At Lindula, James' and Jess's firstborn was a son, born on one of the tea estates in the master's bungalow. No, Jess would never pluck tea again. She was the mistress of the house with servants to wait on her. James moved to other upcountry estates and before he decided to retire to the Hill of the Leopards, planted tea at Lamiliere in Talawakelle. My own father started work with his father James and was on a salary of rupees 87/50 per month. He married my mother Sophia Bridges who also belonged to a planting family. Her father William Bridges had come out with his brother and opened up the Uva district for a Company, at Hopton Estate in Passara. Hopton, because it was the name of the ancestral home in England. They belonged, to we were told " a very good family", in which there were admirals who fought in the Napoleonic Wars and the Battle of Waterloo. My mother had a nursing career before marriage as her father insisted on this. My mother and father married in the month of June, 1911, in Kandy and went up by car to Mahawela the same day. They were carried again or walked all the way to the estate and then carried again uphill to the Bungalow, yes, uphill all the way where my grandfather and grandmother lived (Dad's parents). All four of us children were born there- Jess, myself, Joanna. Ann was born in the New Bungalow in the year 1926. The New Bungalow was built in 1924. It had a tennis court and vegetable gardens both up and downhill where the thick jungle had once been.

There were large flower gardens too leading from the vegetable garden on top to the tennis court. The grownups played tennis. So did Jess my eldest sister. I was too young anyway and never was a sportswoman. I loved dancing and was

musically inclined. From the factory there was a rock road to walk up a short way to the bungalow with streams on either side. There were cattle sheds on the other side of the paddy field below the stables. Dad had another horse with the strange name 'Grenadier'. Dad walked or rode horseback round the fields. He was out early morning for muster and then to the factory, dispensary or wherever else he was needed- the dispensary was at the bottom of the hill - this was his daily schedule. The Beef Box was brought fourteen miles twice a week from Matale. The labourer was paid an extra allowance - batta - of twenty five cents. We had no refrigerator so the beef was hung from hooks and left in the fresh air or kept in mesh-covered safes. On the first day we had fresh steaks, then roasted beef. In the box was brought tongue, tail, liver, tripe. And mama had fowls, reared in large fowlruns, so we had fresh eggs and fresh vegetables too. We also had ducks, turkeys, geese, pigeons in their cotes and rabbits. Bread was baked in the kitchens and we had plenty of fresh milk, clotted cream and home-made butter.

Epping Forest Estate was a world in itself- flower gardens bloomed where jungle had once stood, tended by garden coolies. The 'tappal' cooly brought the mail. We had a cook, second servant, kitchen cooly and the vasikutti for washing out the bathrooms with the commodes and 'thunder boxes'. We had no drainage, and no hot water. Buckets of hot water were carried into the vast bathrooms for each bath by the kitchen cooly. Our servants were garbed in clean white clothes always. When they served at table they wore coatees and cummerbunds. According to the traditions introduced by my grandfather, western food was mostly served roast - beef, beefsteaks, stews, steak and kidney pies, but we also ate rice and curry. For breakfast we had hoppers now and then but generally it was mostly western, porridge, bacon and eggs, toast and marmalade with fruit and tea or coffee. Dinners and lunches were elaborate affairs. We had grand

afternoon teas with bread and butter, jam always, toast, scones and honey. The menfolk had drinks at lunch and dinner. I can't remember whether ladies did too- as for us children, never! And on a special day, we sat in state at the Big Table, at other times we young ones sat at the Little Table set beside the big dining table. Early dinners and bed early too were the order of the day. We did not have even a radio, but later on we had a gramaphone and records. I always remember the pianola in the drawing room and some lady friends played beautifully on it while the men stood round singing. We had ballroom dancing too in our homes. Really good times! We never missed the towns and cities. My father insisted that we children walk daily, every morning after breakfast, sometimes meeting us along the roads and giving us rides with him on horseback, Jess behind him holding fast, myself in front with dad's arms sheltering me as he held the reins. Joanna was too young at first to ride.

We loved to paddle in the streams during walks, catching crabs and little fresh water crustaceans and fish, putting them into bottles. Sometimes we had stream baths on hot days, picnics when older and on holidays or we had magic lantern shows. We were carried up in chairs at night. Ma sat in a chair, one of us on her lap, the other at her feet, one carried on the shoulders of a labourer who smelt of earth and cocoa pods, from the factory to the bungalow. I always had to be carried. Joanna sat on ma's lap and Jess at ma's feet. Dad rode on horseback. All this was if ever we went off to the estate, returning from church or school. At Christmas we were all together. The children were given gifts and we had turkey and ham for dinner and pudding made by mama each year served with brandy sauce. Silver charms and other talismans were in the pudding. After midnight mass - we had our private chapel - we had mince pies. We put out our stockings on the twenty-fourth night and I was so sad when I discovered who Santa was. I was a real dreamer. Jess was very

matter of fact and Joanna a lovely baby, always dressed beautifully by mama. We were old fashioned in our mode of dressing and always wore sun hats. I still remember the rocking chair in the drawing room but that was for the older ones. Meals were regular and on time. Dad went out early, then came back for lunch and a wash, afternoon rest and out again to the factory and dispensary.

We had Christmas trees for the labourers in the garden and gifts for every labourer. They danced too - their own dances. They were mostly Tamils down in the village. The estates had boundaries sometimes. The labourers were good people. Helpful. What else was required of them? Qualities, virtues that those who served us, were expected to have. Respectful towards their masters. Humble. It must have been irksome, that subservience. They were allowed no room for rebellion. Time would change all that with its reversals of history. We would grow up and go away. Mama and dad would pass away. And the empire that grandfather James carved out? Become a desolate, lonely place, an eagle's eyrie. But for the moment we lived our lives as if change was nowhere in sight and from the summit of this hilltop maintained contact with the outside world. The post -office was at Mahewela and the tappal cooly man came daily, climbing that winding road early morning with tappal, books, letters in the tappal bags. The estate tappal bag was locked up in the office, opened by the post master. Letters, newspapers came by post Letters padlocked once more in the bag and sent back. The tappal cooly returned about mid day. We had tappal on Sundays too.

We loved it when visitors came to stay a few days as we were allowed longer hours. We had very strict parents and as children we were obedient and loving. Our parents were loving too, although dad never spared the rod when we needed it! Jess

hardly had it on her-she was grandpa's and grandma's favourite, possessed a very fair complexion, blue eyes, dark hair and she was clever. I was timid, loved my dolls till I was grown up and got married too. Joanna was sweet and mischievous and very loving. Jess was more serious and more grown up.

I suppose I was childish and never bothered about being with the grown ups. This was the life we lived in the old bungalow. We had a large lawn and at one end there was an enclosure for a deer that had wandered down from the jungle and had become tame. We went down to the stable often to talk to the horse and pat it. Dad always had dogs - they were taken hunting too sometimes. The dogs were brushed, cleaned daily, bathed and kept in good condition. We loved roaming around the very large garden picking flowers and helping ma who taught us all about plant lore. She did lots of sewing. Dad was often in the office or sat in the easy chair in the drawing room reading. Old fashioned kerosene oil lamps, and table and hanging lamps illuminated the rooms. Dover Stoves were used for cooking and we toasted slices of bread in the furnace after stoking the cinders away. Most times when the 'beef cooly' arrived late , we would run to the kitchen where we burnt raw meat on pokers held before the blazing furnace.

We kissed dad and mama daily every morning and goodnight before bed and we all taught our children to do so. At least I did. When we started going to boarding school, I hated it and crept into dad's bed one night and mama's bed the next, each time, at the last week of holidays.

Our cook and mama made marmalades, jellies, jams and we liked fresh cream on fruit. All kinds of fruit grew up there. We never saw butter from shops as we always had a large bowl of home made fresh butter in the milk safe. Milk was kept after boiling in three large basins and when cold, the cook or mama

creamed it and called it first milk, second milk, third milk and creamed the freshest first, then the second and third with a flat ladle holed all over. The cream was kept in a separate large bowl and made into butter- there was no churn but the cream was stirred round and round, slowly with the wooden, flat broad ladle till the butter formed. Then water was added and salt little by little and the butter lumps all brought together, slowly into one big mass.

Then the liquid was poured into another clean vessel and this was done many times until the buttermilk formed. We had sips of it too and lovely scones were baked for tea with the buttermilk. Mouth watering when I think of it. We had the scones hot with butter and jam or jelly. We hardly had ice cream and none of us liked it except mama. We had it only in Kandy at the Queen's Hotel or at mama Sproule's Tea Rooms. We were real country bumpkins coming to town, sun hats and all, with starched frills around the crown of our hats to make them look more dressy when going out of the estate.

What country had we belonged to? I wonder to myself as I recollect through dream, through memory, through those fragmented visions that still remain with me. Clinging on to faraway traditions that belonged to the memory of one part of my ancestry and lineage. One part alone. Allied to partriarchy and the empire.

Yes, empires mean territory. Power. Those thousands of acres owned by the plantation families constituted territory, power. Empires in themselves. All that now is over. Who remembers us? A forgotten people. I have only my recollections. Memories. Somehow my bloodline will continue. In another country. The vessels that brought my people here, to this island,

will also take my children away. They will be the new emigrants, their inheritance diminished. Adopt new homes. New names. The two halves of their divided selves come together. Re-write their histories. We, who are left behind, the footnotes, the addenda to that epoch.

With Naomi my faithful companion, the governess who had taught Donna and her sisters at Epping Forest when they were young and one of the old retainers, Appu, I live out the remainder of my days in a rented apartment. Surrounded by the furniture that belonged to my old home where my husband planted thousands of acres of tea. My bedroom still has those twin beds of mahogany with their high headboards like the pews in colonial churches. Carpets cover the floors. The what-nots and side-boards still bear the cut-glass and crockery from the past huge portmanteaux and boxes are filled with linen and curtains that I shall never use again. The banqueting table has places set for two where Naomi and I eat our sparse meals. I live on a diminished allowance from the Shares I have in the old plantation Firms that still retain their names but have changed hands in the new political set-up.

In my drawing room hang two portraits- my father. My grandfather. Englishmen. Their routes were assured. They had the sanctions to build their small empires. Reigned over them like kings. But the empires changed hands. The inheritance left behind diminished. We were by then forgotten names with legends of a former greatness attached to them. The new migrations then began. Different to those of my ancestors. I will search out Jesupulle's photograph from the family album, get it enlarged. Framed and placed between those of the two men. Fill in the gaps. Retrace the routes her forefathers took. Acknowledge the part that women like Jesupulle played in creating our kind. Celebrate her birth. And that of her children.

THROUGH THE EYES OF THE EAGLE

It was a long journey by train to Anuradhapura. The landscape kept changing. There was a feeling of travelling through endless, lonely spaces. We arrived, finally, home for the long vacation. The gate opened onto the garden with its two turpentine trees. Our house too lay within the railway enclave among familiar people, new friends as well as those who had moved along as my father had done, on transfers to different parts of the island.

I loved this house we lived in mainly because it was an upstair house with balconies and a stairway with banisters along which I slid down.

The railway houses on either side of the road were all architecturally alike. Steps led upto a pillared verandah. Three doors opened out of the drawing room onto it. The front door led to a small alcove from which the stairway mounted up. Beneath the wooden steps of polished teak there were mysterious, dark corners for private games. The bookcase was an additional screen which provided even more privacy. On either side of the alcove was the drawing room and on the other, the dining room

leading off onto the open back verandah, the bathroom with its cemented bath and commode, the storerooms, the kitchen and steps leading down to the garden that surrounded the house. Bo-trees, mango, jak, grew in profusion. Shady trees under which we played.

Upstairs were the bedrooms with doors leading onto the balcony. The doorways were set in a precise pattern, placed directly above the doors below. The balcony had an ornamental enclosure of four rectangular squares within which were set in uniform precision, smaller squares. From a diamond shape of wood within the smaller square radiated four spokes. Four lines of wood sprang from the diamond points defining this strange geometrical patterning. The roof was tiled. The bedroom windows had wooden awnings with serrated edges. The awnings provided shade from the hot sun. The drawing and dining rooms had glass- paned windows. The doors of each had eight glass panes, half doors of wood and carved lintels. The back verandah was a different world altogether as if separate lives were lived in those nests of rooms for cooking, bathing, storing the great barrels of drinking water and for the maid to sleep in. On one side of the house was the Trans Office, a hive of paperwork and files relating to railway administration. On the other side lived the Berenger family, a large family of girls and boys. While I was there a new baby was born. I was taken into the bedroom where Mrs. Berenger was recuperating. I was very shy. I had been assured that only the baby would be in its cot. That there would be no adult to whom I would have to speak. The baby was a great curiosity to me. There it lay, deeply, peacefully asleep in its cradle with the mother lying in bed smiling at my consternation.

Opposite our house lived the Jones' family who had been our friends in Kadugannawa. There were many others whom we soon became acquainted with, being taken to their homes on

formal social visits where we were entertained with Arnott's Assorted Biscuits and fizzy aerated waters, kola, lemonade, ginger beer and ginger ale. The names remained stuck like those old colonial postage stamps with the imperial insignia, on my mind to be retrieved years afterwards, opening those forgotten envelopes to decode messages from the past. Names would be part of our history. The Mottaus, Balmonds and that famous women Theja Gunawardana who was at that time newly married to a Railway offcial of hierarchical administrative standing. Those were some of the names that would always remain, even in after years, when the Anuradhapura epoch was over, in the forefront of political transition and change in radical ideologies, University administration, historical research. They were of Sinhala, Tamil, Burgher and European stock but during that era, predominantly Burgher. A hardy yet resilient stock which retained its individuality and talent, emerging out of that colonial backdrop.

I was a railway child who was involved in the formal introduction to that historical period, taken along by my parents on their visits to the homes of those people who had all come together as a result of that intricate network of communications that snaked its way over the face of the island. Close associations, friendships, the sampling or at a deeper level, the experiencing of a way of life never to be captured ever afterwards. It was the architectural construction of those houses which were uniform yet set apart and unique and the placing of those houses where access to a friend or neighbour with like interests was possible. The environs of the railway station and its administrative set up which led to this way of life where socializing became part and parcel of everyday happenings. There was even a kind of dependency among the different families where loneliness could be mitigated by closeness of contact and in those sometime isolated outposts, entertainment, hospitality, a commonality of

feelings grew and flourished only to be dissipated or cut-off by departure, migration, a voluntary exile or death .Even the weaker ones were protected when they were in debt to the Afghan moneylenders. How often my father rescued his friends who were left virtually penniless after paying off their debts or trying to evade paying off their debts from their small sterling salaries. All this was to be knowledge acquired later, but again gleaned from the conversation of elders when I was skirting about within earshot.

For years I had preserved a photograph which one day was lost or misplaced, of myself as a child during one of those Anuradhapura holidays. Clad in a short skirted, chequered cotton dress with a pith helmet pulled low over my forehead, standing beside the huge stone trough on the way to the summit of the rock at Mihintale. I had once reached that summit. The steps were rough hewn. There was an eagle's eyrie on the highest peak. Anton, my brother's friends had said " Shall I carry her up?" " No," I answered. " I can climb on my own." Would the eagle swoop down on me and edge me off as I clung on to the rail? Would I be able to get a glimpse of the nest with its eaglets? I reached the very top and the world of fields, wewas, canals, temples stretched before me. I shared the view of the eagle.

Often , during those vacations I would find my brother's friends, Anton and Lloyd, university undergraduates, in my parents home. Anton used to play be-bop, jazz, syncopated music on the old German Nagel piano with its brass candlesticks, ebony and ivory keys, the piano on which my sister was playing her examination pieces, Bach, Brahms, Beethoven and Chopin. I watched him as he played with intensity, head bent low over the keyboard. Exaggerated movements to capture his audience. Amusing and entertaining us all. Amusing himself too. Singing as if he were in some night club in New Orleans. Thumping out the strong chords. Staccato snatches of song.

Who's the tiger?
Where's the tiger?
Hold the Tiger!

The words jogged about in my head. Anton's piano rhythms hammered against the brain. Verses from Blake too.

Tiger, tiger burning bright,
In the forest of the night,
What immortal hand or eyes
Could forge that fearful symmetry.....

We had a leopard skin on the drawing room floor lined with crimson felt. The yellowing fangs grated against my palm when I slipped in my hand, imagining the teeth fastening into my flesh. Willing myself to feel its fear and terror. The tongue stiffened with taxidermists glue was as harsh as sandpaper against my bunched up fingers.

We had long hours for the pastimes we conjured up to pass the time away. The rooms upstairs formed a separate world. From the balcony we looked out on another view of the world dominated by the railway bungalows, the station platform, the ancient trees of teak, Bo, Mara, tamarind, mango and gnarled araliya.

The dense and impenetrable jungle had once covered all this land and the ruins of a past civilization still yielded its artefacts of broken pottery and fragments of tiles. Stretched out on comfortable cane chairs, canvas covered loungers and rattaned arm chairs we amused ourselves with card games, Lexicon, Spelling Bees, I Spy, Forfeits. I was able to spell out 'gnu'.

"And how does she know that word," the adults were mildly surprised. I was triumphant. I was reading voraciously at this

time, books from my father's collection of travel stories. Learned the early pleasures of winning. Being the victor in games.

Lloyd would narrate all the stories from the Hollywood films that he had seen in the Colombo cinemas. The Majestic. The New Olympia. I was asked to leave the presence of the adults when the romantic parts were being described. Were they so much more knowledgeable? Why were they so patronizing? I was summoned back only when the dramatic love triangle had been resolved. Or was it only after a warm embrace or a chaste or passionate kiss had been given? Hidden revelations. Closely guarded secrets. Taboos. Books snatched away from my hands, which I was supposed to be too young to read. Discovery was bound to come however closely guarded the secret was. The source of discovery lay within ourselves, within the oasis of the body where the trees fruited and nature procreated. Outside of it lay the vast sand dunes and the memory of fossilized forests. Beneath the sand the sweetest water flowed through subterranean channels seeking the ocean to which it had once belonged. The doors were still locked to the adult world I was forbidden to enter but my instinctual feelings people those rooms echoing with solitude and loneliness, with creatures of my imagination. The wind had carried echoes to my ears of the whispered utterances of men and women in their eternal pursuit of love. I had seen it, in that faraway garden in Kadugannawa beneath the thumbergia bower where Bert Albrecht held my cousin Lorna in his close, all enveloping embrace. They had come to announce their engagement to my parents and had lingered there together oblivious of my unregarded yet all observant presence.

After work in the Trans Office my father would take my sister and myself on long walks through the ruins of the Sacred City. As we wandered in the glades among the broken columns and the remains of shrines and palaces with vestiges of moonstones and

curiously wrought pillars he related stories from his own childhood as well as from his store of historical lore. We walked through the Mahameghavanna Gardens and peered into ponds filled with dark, turgid waters. There were empty niches among the ruins where the Stone Buddha images stood guard at the entrance to shrines. My father pointed out the remains of the Brazen Palace.

"It once stood here." The imagination made its own constructions. History was visual. Our path that of those pilgrims of the past. Of the inhabitants of the royal city. We followed that path, guided by those sacred birds, the hansa, and the geese.

I gazed silently at my father's face. He too was lost in the past. For a period of time, in his childhood, he had lived with his family in the vicinity of the Royal Gardens. His father, once the Headmaster of Richmond College, in Galle, then a lawyer, had brought his family to Anuradhapura, his home enclosed within a wilderness, reading his Bible in Hebrew, Greek and Latin. The house, tiled and bricked, stood on its sprawling acres, the jungle and thickets the only boundaries, the garden filled with thambili and coconut trees, mango, tamarind, wild almond, teak and ironwood. It was left to that indomitable mother to bring up the seven children. Tragedy overtook them there. The eldest son Willam, died of pneumonia. He had caught a chill after a bath in the Malwatu Oya while convalescing from an attack of measles. He was buried in the cemetery in Anuradhapura. My father would always grieve over that death. My aunts were sent to the convent in Anuradhapura travelling in the buggy cart. They were taught by the foreign nuns who had established the convent here. The children studied by the light of oil lamps and at night listened to the cries of jackals and the trumpeting of elephants from the surrounding jungle. Once my father as a young stripling, on one of his forays into the jungle had confronted a bear.

My father had stood stock-still while the bear had bared its teeth, let out its fierce roars, probably protecting its cubs, and then lumbered away.

Reptiles abounded on the garden and there were tall iron-hard anthills of clay in which they found sanctuary. The trees were full of drongos, parakeets, and jungle fowl. The wonderoo monkeys loped about from tree to tree with their young clinging to them. The iguanas crawled into the garden and the pea-fowl spread its plumes and danced its mating dance before the peahen. Cattle wandered about the fallen pillars. In his study my grandfather had sat, translating the Bible and annotating the texts in the margins of the Old and the New Testament.

On those first early days of the holidays my father would take us along the bunds of the ancient wewas, the Nuwara wewa, the Tissa wewa. The grey-brown snouts of the crocodiles appeared like the prows of half-submerged boats as they surfaced in the expanse of blue ripples. To my father, who had spent his boyhood vacations in Anuradhapura walking with us among the ruins it was a retracing of familiar routes. The Kottamba trees (terminalia catappa) filled the gardens of our railway house. Just as he had once done, we too cracked the wild almonds, smashing the fibrous outer cover with stones, prising out the tender slivers of the kernel. Baskets of mora, kon, karawala kebilla were brought from the deep jungle, fruits and berries of a forgotten Eden very delicate in their sweetness or tart, their juices. The teak trees bore masses of creamy white blossoms. The Gloriosa superba and the plumeria trees grew among the ancient wild mango and tamarind.

It was my father who reconstructed that past for us through the rediscovery of familiar routes. In his utterance and his narration he awoke in me that historical imagination that lay

dormant in my consciousness. I wanted to relive the memories of my father's childhood too. When he spoke of Mihintale where we would often go travelling in a buggy cart along those silent roads he told us of the hunt of king Devanampiyatissa in the mountains of Mishrakanda in the dense forest. King Tissa had come upon a deer and had twanged his bow string to give warning of his presence. The pursuit began. Was it really a deer that had been feeding in the glades? One historian had called it a dewa, a divine being which had metamorphosed into one.As the king had lifted his bow to take aim, he had heard his name being called, "Tissa, Tissa." Mahinda had stood before him, the deer disappeared and Mahinda had delivered his discourse. There had then followed the conversion of the king, his queen and his retinue to Buddhism.

Sometimes we went of an evening to the Railway Institute. There were glass covered bookcases filled with English novels. I clung at all times to my mother. She must have found my presence sometimes irksome, invading her privacy, compelling her attention, forcing her to acknowledge me, hovering beside her, waiting to sit on her lap, sleeping beside her, wanting all of herself for me. She was a gregarious, vivacious woman and people were drawn to her, her conversation witty, her imagination vivid. She sat one evening at the Reading Room talking to the wives of the railway people who congregated there. An English army officer joined them. Soon they were engaged in conversation. I felt excluded. Did I feel he was too attentive to her? What were they talking about, once more was it adult conversation in which the rhythms and nuances were different? "Come, it's getting late, let's go home," I importuned. Was it jealousy, possessiveness? Should I make a scene? Making a scene was something abhorrent to my mother, a stubborn obstinacy echoed in words and phrases "I'm going to keep up the whole night. I won't sleep."

Sit with back against the rails of the fourposter bed. Arms folded across the chest, leaning against the pillows.

"Cutting off your nose to spite your face."

Determined not to give in but I fall asleep anyway.

"You go home, I'll come later", my mother said . Was the English officer paying my mother compliments? She was an elegant women with her silk gowns, very demure gowns , always with high neck pinned at the throat with her topaz brooch, the thick gold bracelet on her wrist and her gold wedding ring and engagement ring of rubies and diamonds. She would not be persuaded to return with me. I wandered off by myself back home, to the upstair house with the fine meshed rooms like a meat safe and there I waited until it grew dark and Mary began to light the lamps. When my mother returned late in the evening I demanded of her why she had sent me home alone, why she had stayed back to talk to the English Officer who had perhaps paid her so many compliments on her wit and elegance.

"He was homesick" she told me, " and soon he will be sent to the Front. He will always remember our conversation and of course, I shall never see him again....." Was there a note of regret in her tones?

Would we always believe what adults told us or were their words a game, just another treasure hunt to keep us diverted with their clues?

I wanderd away from the garden of our house with its beds of orange, red and yellow zinnias, I wanted to go and watch the troop trains pass by. On the way to the station I knelt beneath a sturdy tamarind tree . There was a patch of sandy soil with significant concentric circles which marked them out for my purpose.

"Circle the sand where these marks appear with your index finger three times and chant these words, "Kuruminiya, come out," I had been told. Kuruminiya. The dwarf man. And sure enough as I sat on my haunches intent on those shadowy circles, stirring them with those magic words summoning the tiny grey beetles from the enchanted nether world to where nature concealed that alternate life, out they would come, scurrying forth. My finger edged them about touching them lightly, gently, for they were too delicate to hurt. They had a life of their own which they revealed to me before the folds of fine dust-like sand enfolded them again submerging them beneath a timeless, hourless age.

"The troop train will be passing through to Talaimannar this evening," my father announced.

"Take me to the station. I want to see them," I pleaded. Regiments of Sikhs and Gurkhas on their way to fight on behalf of the British Empire. But it was only my father who went to the platform to view the complex troop movements that were being carried on. I stood from afar and watched the trains passing by. The soldiers waved to me. A child watching them, suspended in time. Already belonging to another age.

The trains were packed with regiments of Indian soldiers. Who knew what battle-fronts they were sent to?

"The men are very strong, very hardy," my father told us. "They eat chappati made of wheat flour."

Part of my father's rations, since he was a sergeant major in the volunteer Forces were tins of Bully Beef and biscuits, a kind of hard tack. The biscuits were rough grained with different cereals half- crushed in the mills and supplied to sustain the men on their long marches. I would take them back to boarding school

where I stored them beneath my cotton and coir mattress, nibbling on them like squirrels when I was hungry. I shared them with my friends to whom those biscuits with their military history were a novelty. None of their fathers were in the army.

Going back for the holidays Mary Rajapaksa was there to meet us. Mr. Cowie's cook had abandoned her. He had another wife. Her mind was quite unhinged after he had left her. She still hankered after him, my mother explained. She returned to her Kandyan village on the Alagalla road, her moods, sulks and tantrums part of her emotional upheaval and sad to say, she never returned to our home and we were never to see Mary of the amber eyes again. I missed the soft gleam of those eyes and her gentle voice but it was Mungo whom I always longed for. Mungo, the woman who nurtured me in my early childhood. Mungo, my ayah.

On the back verandah of that railway bungalow used to stand the huge wooden barrels of water brought in the goods compartment of the train from another station. The Anuradhapura water was an amalgam of different minerals and after drinking of the water in other parts of the island especially the up- country areas, the taste was not easy for most of the railway folk to accustom themselves to. The water for drinking and for our baths was heated in great iron kettles on the hearth, smelling of smoky wood fire and steaming in earthenware goblets and zinc baths.

AFTERWARDS

A journey. A search that entailed discovery of self, travelling through years that were now historical. A journey into the past to know who those parents were to who had engendered this birth. The routes, roads, bypaths, tunnels, bridges became metaphorical.

My husband and I stayed at the Tourist hotel built where there was once a forest glade through which I had wandered. I had wanted this journey , returning to a time when I was a very young child during the years of the Second World War. A desire to revisit a place and piece together the remembered fragments of that experience, to hold up that tapestry to the light of an open window. Was childhood too a place, temporarily inhabited by me within the enchanted circle in which I had lived, watching my shadow grow and extend beyond it? The scent of danger was instinct even within that circle but when I stepped out of it for ever the jungle swallowed me up, the routes snarled and devious. And when I emerged out of the shadow of those trees and vines, the hidden gaze of bird, beast and reptile watching me in that darkness, seemed friendlier. I had more kinship with them. They had not harmed me. I was now alone. I did not have my father's hand to lead me, only the remembered wisdom of words and actions to which I had perhaps paid scant attention, now helped me. I was not even aware of time. The clock hands moved on without my awareness of the passing hours and years. My life had then no calendar. No dates. No days, weeks, months, years.

As soon as I had arrived I looked around for recognizable landmarks on the map of childhood and growing up. Where did that route take me eventually? How did I become the kind of person I was? In the harsh but all revealing light of what was to come there was this confrontation with the truth, of that lack of knowledge of the unknown future. There was no predictability, no preparation, no rehearsal of speech or action to help me in countering either the cataclysm or catastrophe that awaited me. But better to know, to experience even finally, all these things than being buried in the tomb of unknowingness. I touched my face and felt the ocean and the island in its lineaments. The map had all the imprints of the self-made cartographer.

Going back is always the veering off from the main route, wandering off unconsciously or with deliberation, off the beaten track but somehow that destination must exist. Xanadu. Tartary. Cathay. The fabled names were real. Within yourself the significant landscapes were never completely effaced. It was possible to point them out even to others, to construct a whole city out of the ruins, set the pillars in place, step on the moonstones which led to temples and shrines and say, "I was once here....."

" I want to go to Anuradhapura" I had told my husband. "I want to see the old house in which I lived. I want to walk among the monuments and artefacts that were so familiar to me as a child. It was the place where my grandparents once lived too for a space of time. Temporarily. Everything seemed to have that transitory feeling in my grandfather's life. Was he a kind of scholar gypsy carrying the King James' Version of the Bible with him wherever he went? But he was never alone. His faithful wife and progeny followed him in all his peregrinations. I too had spent brief periods of time there long afterwards. Was I happy then? Or did I feel the threat of fear and separation..... yes, separation from my mother. That was the main event that happened there.

Separation from my mother. Being taken away from her. Being put into boarding school. Always among strangers. Seeing her only during snatched hours and during holidays- Easter, Perahera , Christmas. It was at this time that I discovered books. Reading grown-up novels, exploring the emotions of a people whose fictions were the beginning of reality to me. The Moth and the Flame. Woman. Man. Reading the work of generations of English writers, epics, sagas, 'romances'. During this time, both at aunty Tommy's and in this outpost which was then considered a difficult malarial station, the war impinged on our

lives in different ways. The troop trains embarked on those endless journeys, stopped occasionally, the soldiers occupying military camps or continuing enroute to battlefields. There were well-demarcated maps, landmarks of victory and defeat among the Allied and the Axis Powers. They were everywhere, khaki-clad troops, reminders of a war not our own but into which we had been drawn. "Missing in Action. Believed killed." Their names now history.

I return to all those memories, re-living them, as I walked through the gates to the house where I once lived. Opposite our house Roy had continued to play with us as he did in Kadugannawa but Harvey was an adolescent, growing up to be a gentle and charming young man. He had his little quirks and one of his idiosyncrasies was that no one should touch the daily newspaper until he unfolded the pages. The Berenger's next door were a large family. I would watch them on their back verandah with their tin plates near the kitchen door waiting to be served their hot hoppers off the pan. I remember the gate. In a childish game I had been pushed against it and I had got a huge bump on my forehead. In Kadugannawa Mungo would have fomented it with hot ashes from the hearth wrapped in a tight cloth bundle or she would have applied a paste of rath handun, red sandalwood, on it. For once there was no sympathy for me. I was growing up and was being prepared for boarding school. I had a bad headache from that bump. My headaches would last for days, three days sometimes and I would drench my head in medicinal herbal oils.

Beside the tree near the gate there had been an anthill. " A cobra guards a treasure within it", my mother had told me. The treasure remained buried there for all time. No one had unearthed it. Perhaps it was still there, undisturbed. It was yet another shared secret between my mother and myself.

Looking up at that open balcony I remembered that night through all these years when my father and I were alone up there.

He was seated on his lounger. I leaned out over the wooden balcony railing, gazing up at a sky brilliant with stars, galaxies, and constellations.

" What is that star?" I asked him, pointing out to the most scintillate among them. For perhaps the first time he called me to him. A rare gesture for at most times he was aloof and undemonstrative in his affection although he shared all his knowledge with us. I kept looking at the sky aflame with glittering light, islanded in this railway bungalow. What portents, what visions did I see ? The vision of the shepherds or the magi?

My father drew me to him and seated me on his knee. I was silent, awaiting his words.

" This world is enough for us. Why do we want other worlds that are so distant, so far away?" I was perplexed. I wanted to walk among the stars, to dream myself into those stellar spaces. But I was now assured of a greater force of understanding. My father then really did care for me. I would have to be content with that gesture and the utterance. Each of us explored the universe in our own ways. To me, he imparted his knowledge of the natural world, birds, fish, animals, plants.... and that night he traced out in my mind the Milky Way, naming one by one, the constellations. And when did he show he cared again? After the insurgency of 1971 when he had walked all the way, over fifty miles from his coconut estate in Mahawa, reaching home exhausted and greeted us with such great jubilation. " I thought you were all dead." But his other thoughts had been sombre. When we returned to the estate he showed us the teak forest where the revolutionaries had been shot and buried.

Portents. Visions. Each unexpected moment had been a revelation, but realized only long afterwards. I thought of him as I read, many years later the lines which were a summation of that

unique and individual vision of life. In all my later rebellion I knew he would understand my search.

I saw a peacock with a fiery tail,
I saw a blazing comet drop down hail,
I saw a cloud with ivy circled round
I saw a sturdy oak creep on the ground;
I saw a pismire swallow up a whale
I saw a raging sea brimful of ale,
I saw Venice glass sixteen foot deep,
I saw a well full of men's tears that weep;
I saw their eyes all in a flame of fire,
I saw a house as big as the moon and higher,
I saw the sun even in the midst of night,
I saw the man that saw this wondrous sight.

Wherever I went I recalled faces whose reflections only remained miraged in the mirrors of my mind, recreating the shadows of those absent bodies in the garden where the late afternoon sun filtered its light through a stillness which was all enveloping.

We took a three wheeler with a friendly driver to Mihintale. I stood and gazed at that rock where once the eagles eyrie was, where my eyes encompassed in its vision a landscape that was vast, stretching into a hazy distance. Pilgrims clambered up the shallow steps. No eagle remained on the summit of Mihintale. The snapshot of myself standing beside the stone trough had not been preserved. I could not recapture that image. It was a black and white snapshot taken by Anton with a Kodak camera. The trough would always be there, embedded in time, in the rock-like centuries. Some of the pilgrims gathered round it. One young

woman said,"This trough was used for serving kenda, porridge, to feed the monks. Huge cauldrons of that gruel simmered for hours and it was served out from them. There was abundant rice from the harvests, the fields fed by the anicuts and canals leading from the tanks and a plentiful supply of jungle wood for the fires. Those vast reservoirs brimmed over with rainwater even during the seasons of drought.

An old man, with the wisdom of years, made a weighty pronouncement.

" Think of the hundreds, the thousands of monks who had to be fed. No wonder the trough is so huge."

The guide books say that it was used for storing water or perhaps for the dyeing of the monks robes. The trough stands in the alms-hall. The refectory of the monks.

The path I wandered through was strewn with broken columns, the fragmented structures of the ancient city; ledges of bricks, dark gamboge, set perfectly in regular rows. Parts of statues of elephants and bulls, stone sarcophagi, pedestals, niches for shrine offerings. I climbed shallow stone steps and walked among moonstones. I felt at home in a world which accepted my presence, my steps impelled by a strange, mystical volition. I breathed with ease as I drank in draughts of sun-drenched air. I went in search of Mahinda's cave. Ebony trees grew into the rock face, the roots twining about the ancient tree torso. Roots embedded in rockstones, which served as steps. I drank a brew of hot beli-flowers - the Aegle narmelos, boiled in a clay pot set on three stones, fed with a fire of smoky twigs. There were strange tattoos on the arm of the old man selling necklaces of a curious dried leaf, black shaped like fangs of some prehistoric beast or reptile. He had carved pendants of agiti, a snake repellent wood and offered us wood-apple, the divul or

feronia limonia which he had gathered from the forest. Among the hoary, ageless trees were occasional palmyrah palms. On the rocks and caves there were paintings and statues of Ganesh, the elephant- headed god of wisdom. This was the landscape of my pilgrimage. Drongos and parakeets perched on the branches of the wild almond and within the jungle where there were not even beaten tracks were deer, jungle fowl, pea fowl and tribes of wanderoo monkeys.

Once long ago, as a school girl, I had walked through those glades, weary and thirsty. A woman had suddenly appeared before me, a pot of water balanced on her head, filled from a pure unsullied spring.

" I am thirsty, " I told her.

She smiled and poured water into my cupped palms. That water tasted of my childhood, long since over. The source of that spring was now what I had come in search of. I would have to walk miles into the forest to discover it. And that woman who had wandered out of a timeless age? Her pot in fragments and she herself long since vanished in a journey of rebirth, the act of quenching my thirst, adding to the merit she accrued in her own samsaric journey.

THE ALMSBOWL

When I returned home that evening from work he was sitting on the carved ebony chair which had been taken out onto the verandah and spread with a white sheet. His bright rather worldly looking eyes sparkled at me, shrewdly assessing no doubt the wife of his old friend. The awareness of the world that he had renounced seemed to linger in the light that spilled in a brightness from them. He had a wide smile and a look of both extreme intelligence yet guilelessness about his face. His forehead was smooth and unlined, eye-browless. I greeted him rather self-consciously with folded hands aware that I was acting a part. Was I going to put myself out to show him how ideal a marriage could be and to make him feel how much he had missed out or just be myself?

The evening was calm. The green light spread over hills and fields displaying in absolute clarity every detail of the landscape, fold, pathway, peak and then obscuring it as dusk slowly passed over spreading shadowy wings. The faintest twitter of birdsong sounded from secret hidden places, from boughs thick with leaves and from seed- heavy grasses. I sat leaning against a pillar watching the landscape change. My weariness flowed into the bowl of golden light flowing from the valley below.

My husband had come home one day with the news that he had met an old friend of his. He had been getting into a crowded bus at Peradeniya. Behind him was a Buddhist monk who had a roll of bus tickets in his hand. He had been the first to recognize my husband. The tickets had been given him by a friend as he didn't want to handle any money.

"Aren't you Thiagan?" he had asked. "Do you remember me?"

When my husband came home he told me, " Whom do you think I met today, an old friend of mine whom I hadn't seen for the last twenty-five years. He reminded me of how we used to go together for lessons in ball-room dancing. When I was at the Alliance Francaise in Colombo I used to meet him often. He was always at the parties we had."

"Did you find him changed?"

" He looks very different now. All his hair has been shaved off. He had a thick head of black, wavy hair, oiled and very sleek. I suppose the bare shape of his head alters his whole appearance."

"What was he doing abroad?"

" Studying, working, having a good time, enjoying his freedom. He made a lot of money exporting cars to African States. He had his own discotheque with all the sophisticated musical equipment, danced, enjoyed his liquor, had plenty of girl friends, spent lots of money and now he's given up everything and become a Buddhist monk. He belongs to a meditative order of forest monks."

"Wasn't he ever married?"

"No, strangely enough."

" Are you going to see him again," I asked idly.

"Yes, I may. He's staying at the Getambe temple for the moment and has invited me there. I think I'll go tomorrow as he might return to Thailand soon. He's living in a little village there undergoing his Discipline."

My curiosity was stirred. How does one entertain a monk I wondered, especially one who had enjoyed the worldly life abroad. I had met so many of my husband's friends from the past among whom were army men, insurance agents, artists, actors, former athletes, Buddhist monks who had given up the robes, brilliant intellectuals who had renounced the world to become priests, architects who had stopped designing houses and taken to living in the jungle, so many of those rather unconventional characters whom he knocked into occasionally from the past. Here was yet another of them.

Now here he was, sitting on my verandah, on one of my comfortable chairs covered with the white cloth and holding forth to my family. He took my greeting for granted as befitted a monk, with only a slight acknowledgement of my presence, yet with a shrewd twinkle in his eyes, and a look of subtle appraisal. His rounded head with its naked protuberances leant against the whiteness, the light shone on the smooth wood-like skull polished and burnished by the red - orange light seeping through the air in this twilight hour. His wide mouth with its full lips shaped and stroked the syllables he uttered in a voice devoid of harshness. Yet his eyes took in everything as if myriads of images seethed within his consciousness. He had a somewhat theatrical and idiosyncratic gesture of gathering the edge of his robe in his right hand, twirling it round in a snail-like cone of meticulous folds, pleated closely, as if he were folding away each episode of his life. As he spoke the folds gradually slipped out of his lightly held grasp and unfolded themselves, falling away from his body.

From across the river the horanewa with its flute-like notes and the drums began to drift through the green dusk.

My daughters had been moving in and out of the verandah half-listening to his words. He spoke to them as if they were adults.

"What were you speaking about before I came home?" I asked my husband.

" His experiences abroad. One day a girl of fourteen had knocked on the door of his flat in London. He had opened it and she came in, sat down and asked him whether he had any "Heavies", pulled out a syringe and started injecting herself with narcotics."

"And then.....?" I asked.

"She said she was feeling warm and wanted to change her blouse."

"What did your friend say?"

" He had asked her to wait for a moment. Left the room until she had changed and then returned."

As I went out with a cup of coffee he told me, " If you take your daughters abroad, don't expect to have them with you for long. They will soon leave you and lead independent lives. Oh yes, children of thirteen and fourteen live in a permissive society. Many Sri Lankans have realized this to their bitter cost."

My daughters were silent, listening intently. They were avid for life and experience as I had been, years ago. Their vulnerability was egg - shell thin, brittle, the vestiges of wisdom sprouting like light, downy feathers. Many who came home seldom painted a rosy picture of life abroad. The last time a

cousin had come she had brought newspaper cuttings of rape, murder and kidnapping.

"Then why do they all go back, if things are so bad there," my daughters chorused.

"Greener pastures. Money. Options. Choices," I replied.

"Boring, boring, listening to all these sermons", they murmured as they drifted in and out, curious. Their bodies, light, airy, puffs of cloud.

" Well, if it's all so boring, why do you listen?" I was amused.

" We like to listen, but we cannot follow the way of life he preaches."

Compulsively almost, his soft, insidious voice pouring their sibilant syllables like warm rills of water flowed about our ears.

I watched him curiously - his brown robe fitted him like a second skin, his cloth bag resting against the chair, his almsbowl, his umbrella, his feet bare of sandals appearing under the chair.

"This is all I need now," he said, indicating his almsbowl when I brought him a cup of coffee.

" Not with milk, please. " he said.

"What do you eat in your village in Thailand?" I asked.

"Oh, the food there is boiled in water, mostly vegetables and rice."

"Are the people friendly?"

"Yes, very friendly, very kind."

"Will you go back there?"

"Yes, I want nothing here. After the period of Vas, during the rainy season, I shall go back. My father has given me my share of property, I refused, but do you know what he told me, "It's not for you to tell me what I should do with my property and to whom I should give it. You are my eldest son and I do what I want with my property." He chuckled recollecting the old men's dictatorial attitudes. "Well, let him do as he pleases. My brother can have it if he wants." A caterpillar crawled on his robes. He removed it delicately with his thick rather stubby fingers.

"This too has life, " he said.

His face fleshy yet smooth possessed no grossness, his expression was calm and unruffled, yet his portly body firm-limbed and healthy looked like a great, wary jungle cat.The golden light was passing and the dusk pressed deeper. The darkness began to enter the crevices of the house, the insects buzzed round the bulb, their dry rustling wings knocking against the thin glass, their shadows imprinted on the walls. Ghekoes, white, brown and speckled darted across the walls swiftly impaling unwary insects on their tongues. The glass bowl of the Golo lamp was filled with the scorched bodies of those hapless insects. A beetle that had fallen in struggled to escape but only slid back on the smooth glassy surface half-buried among the crisp burned corpses that had collected there over the months. The monk's words moved faintly through my consciousness.

Someone began to chant pirith from the darkenss of the village. Sonorous chanting grew, rising and falling in its cadences. Karma, kamma, kama - which word was he using now? Where did the distinction lie? Alter the intonation, change the inflexion and choose the word you find most meaningful. In my life, kama had moved in and out of its passages, sometimes dexterously, sometimes in a fashion both clumsy and destructive. The ghekoe on the wall static in its watchfulness, sounded startling, explosive.

Tchk, tchk, tchk - if I listened closely perhaps I could interpret their omens? Predatory, they pursued the minute insects and gobbled them up.

"What is lust," he was saying, " It passes, it passes. Can you taste a mango everyday? The appetite wanes. You weary of it and then it tastes the same. Don't cling to anything, if anyone should hurt you or want to grab your possessions, think of them as ignorant people."

"The world is full of ignorant persons eaten up by tanhawa, greed and desire. Do not let anyone or anything, any thoughts, any ideas, disturb your peace of mind. If they are ignorant persons it is their karma. See, you have the happiness of your family, each one of you cares for the other. Isn't that enough for you? And one day, the two of you will be left alone, your children will grow up and go away. You will then look round the empty house and feel your loneliness.

Now it is time for me to go. I too cannot cling to anything. You must all think of me as a monk. There is no "me" any longer. Children, I was happy to meet your father who was my friend many years ago. He is still my friend. I was happy to be with you but now I must go. We must part. That is the way it must be. Nothing of the past remains, even as I speak, my words go into the past where they belong. Yes, even the composition of my blood cells have changed."

A faintly ironic smile passed over my daughter's face. "Science doesn't say so," she spoke in an undertone.

" He is speaking as a monk. Let him have his say," I whispered.

"Come and have lunch with us tomorrow. We will give you dana but you will have to teach me how it should be given."

After he had gone I sat listening to the numerous insects crooning in the garden. The drums and the horanewa were silent but the chanting of pirith continued late into the night.

The next morning a carpet was spread in the drawing room, a cushion placed on it and covered with a white sheet. On it sat the monk cross-legged.

" Now you must offer the food to me. It is not for me to take it, unless you give it to me. I can take nothing . You must offer me each dish and you will serve me." I had carefully prepared the food myself except for the rice which Menike had washed and strained.

" Be careful not to leave any stones," I warned her.

" Not a stone will you find," she said.

" Now you must offer me the food." He stretched out his almsbowl, the burnished copper smooth and shining outside and within. The rice was put in spoon by spoon. I heard the tinkle of two stones falling into the almsbowl with the rice; in the silence they sounded like pebbles falling down a rock face. With his finger he probed the rice until he found the two stones, removed them calmly and placed them beside the pathraya. Now he could enjoy his meal.

" Menike?"

"Nona?"

"You promised that there would be no stones." I said.

" How could there be stones? I washed the rice four times at least," she said. Menike was really very skillful at washing the rice and removing the minute grains of sand or even the larger stones. She was so adept at this task that she would really have

to do it only once. When I found stones in my plate of rice it would make me feel revulsion. It spoilt my whole meal but then I had neither the time nor the patience to probe for stones. My hunger was not a disciplined thing, unlike that of the monk's. My husband and children thought nothing of a stone - just a faint grimace would appear on their faces like a slight toothache and they'd swallow it. For me the whole meal was flawed and I would even brood on it.

"What? A stone in your rice?" My father would say when I used to push my plate away. My mother would fetch me a fresh plate but by then my appetite had waned. It was always like this with me. I had to savour the perfection of something unalloyed, a little thing could spoil the entire experience for me.

Watching the monk I wondered. It must be an ingrained habit by now to quietly remove anything that impeded him, to be calm and undisturbed about it. There was no rage left in him, no disquiet, he upbraided no one. The stones would lie beside the almsbowl. Someone else would sweep them away. They would be forgotten. The responsibility for the stones having been there was neither that of Menike nor of myself- part of the living earth had crept into that plate of rice. How often as children we would pick up the stones and say, " Here's a menik for you." holding the sharp diamond-like or milky-hued stone against the light.

Menike came quietly out of the kitchen and placed two glasses of water and two dishes of sliced mango before the monk. The endless ritual of offering and accepting went on until he had had a sufficiency. The food was hot and temping but he allowed it to grow cold.

" Now come, all of you, sit before me. Before I eat I will speak of the dhamma to you." His face grew grave and composed.

" Thank you for this meal. By giving me this meal you are helping me to live the life of a monk. I possess nothing. I have only two robes and my almsbowl.

Do not keep anger, do not cling to views and opinions. It is these that impede a man."

Behind him through the glass of the window pane I could see the araliya tree branches, clusters of white, cream- tinged flowers clinging onto the twigs. The tree swarmed over with ants, the branches were alive with birds. The reflections of the leaves glistening with sunlight glittered through the window pane. The fragrance of flowers was overpowering. All nature was prolific, each bird involved in the act of procreation. The senses grew dizzy from this profusion of colour, fragrance, texture. Each bird and insect relived its kamma, journeyed through the several pathways of their lives, yet joyously sipping the nectar and drinking the ripe fruits of kama.

After he had finished eating, the almsbowl had to be washed clean.

" Be careful not to scrape the bottom of the bowl. Leave it in the garden so that the aroma of the food should be dispersed."

The almsbowl lay moveless on its stand like a dark brown-red mushroom growing strange and alien among the weeds and strong grass that clung so tenaciously to the earth. A chameleon scurried across the garden and climbed the papaw tree searching out the insects that lurked in its encrusted serrations. Birds hopped about, flew down from branches, alighting on the earth and searching among the grass for grubs, insects and worms. The bowl was left there, its surface smooth and flawless, filled and empty,until one day his own pindapatha would cease for ever. The only food he accepted was that given as alms. He would

in this life take nothing of anyone's throught greed or tanhawa. Possess nothing Want nothing. Desire nothing. If his bowl remained empty, he would not eat. Even though he came of an affluent family, he would not eat from his home while he was there, but would go forth everyday on his pindapatha and accept that which was given him. " To those who give, merit will accrue" he would say. All his life and sustenance was found within that almsbowl. Thus could he continue to live the life he had chosen. " It is not only he who receives alms that receives good, but he who gives, gains merit too, " he reiterated. The pathraya was to him a sufficiency to be filled just once a day.

" It is more than enough for a man to live on." he said.

In the afternoon the monk walked round the garden. My husband and he peeped in at the old car in the garage.

" I always loved fast cars. In London I had every conceivable kind of car - a Mercedes , a Rolls. I miss nothing now. You know I was a very good cook. I always cooked my own meals. When I was a child no one could make a sound while I was eating. I would lift the plate and dash it against the wall. I would be in such a rage. My mother would try to appease me but not my father.

" Let him go hungry if he wants to," he would say.

It was growing late.

" Now I must go," he said.

"Don't forget your almsbowl." I reminded him.

He began to gather up his few possessions. He turned to us and said,

"I must not cling to any of you. We must part and accept this parting and when I go I will leave nothing behind me."

He looked around to see whether he had forgotten anything. My husband was going with him part of the way.

After he had gone I found his folded black umbrella on the table.

" Oh, I can send it to the temple at Getambe tomorrow morning, " I said.

After he had left, there was a knock on the door. A friend of mine had come to visit me. She had brought a peace offering of some fruit she had plucked from her garden. There had been a sense of animosity between us for a space of time. I found it easier to speak to her now as we looked out from where we watched the river flowing past and the bathers - now that dusk was gathering-folding their sun-dried clothes that were spread out on the rocks.

Suddenly I heard my husband calling out impatiently from the road below our house.

"Come, come, bring sadhu's umbrella."

"Wait, I 'll come down the hill as quickly as I can,"

The monk had returned with my husband. He stood, looking up at us, his feet planted firmly on the ground, his expression calm and unruffled.

I took the umbrella down to him.

" You said that you would not leave anything behind, but you have," I could not resist saying.

A faint smile touched the corners of his wide mouth. Taking his umbrella from my hand he walked down the path, continuing his journey, his almsbowl slung over his shoulder, with his cloth bag and umbrella, silently into the darkness, without once looking back.

The Hour of the Fox

the elusive fox can be glimpsed gently slipping through the forest,
for them the fox is a sign. A sign of intimate knowledge
of the forest
of all beings, of an intimate web of relationships
of the freedom to exist with the wisdom of our elders
"Quilt"

Almost all the jackals had swum across the river to reach the trees and plants which still grew thickly in the village that lay on the nether bank yet to be disturbed by time. A few jackals remained with their young lurking in the great hollow from which the vegetation flourished springing in a fecund and untrammeled growth, feeding on the moisture that seeped through from hidden springs. Here, the red and orange pinna flower spread its tiered branches and the green wide- leaved ala kola and habarala flared open like cobra hoods. No one disturbed the rooted bulbs and yams buried deep in the fertile earth except for the sleek, black bandicoot rats that tunneled among the roots, or even perhaps a porcupine or two which crept out of the fern clumps.

At night, the jackals barked from their hidden and secret coverts concealed by the foliage. The owls hooted from the trees which still stood on the Housing Estate and the wild pigeons flew freely about, wheeling over the paddy fields, settling on the ripening grain to feed in clusters. Kingfishers perched on the branches overhanging the river Mahaweli, darting over the water to scoop up the silvery blue tilapi fish. Flying foxes sometimes hung from the electric wires and the children from Davy Road would come in bands to aim stones at them, dislodging the dead creatures which they would pick up to take home. Wild white fungi sprouted from the fibres of a rotting tree stump and the women would fill their woven baskets early in the morning with the fragile umbrella-shaped mushrooms.

"Yes", Mudiyanse had told me,"once there were many jackals here. Then it was wild and overgrown with many plants and cocoa bushes but after the Housing Estate was built here the jackals had no place to stay. You can hear only a few of them barking in the night. They will remain in the village on the other side of the river until the jungle is cleared there too." Biso Menike who cooked for my family used to tell me of how the village folk came here to pick the abundance of firewood among the rows of cocoa plants. They would come to gather firewood, jak and breadfruit, ferried across in the boat. The monitor lizards and iguanas, the birds and the reptiles were almost disappearing, displaced from their natural haunts.

Long before, the British planter Hancock had cleared the jungle for his cocoa plantation, the tall trees had remained, hoary and ancient, alive with birds while the sinuous reptiles uncoiled their shimmering length to weave through the tangled lantana bushes and rough-bladed grasses.

"Ah, yes, Hancock mahatthaya lived here like a king in those days", Mudiyanse who belonged to the village, recollected.

A different kind of life had once existed here in the village which the British colonials called Watapologa. In the interior were the scattered dwellings of the true people who belonged to the village with their paddyfields and coconut, jak, breadfruit, plantain, kitul and arecanut palms. The people who lived within the hidden groves had settled there centuries before the British had conquered the Kandyan Kingdom.

Mudiyanse was obsessed with the rights denied him. The ownership of that paddyfield of his. He insisted that his fields had been taken away from him. That he did not get his rightful share of paddy. That others collected the bushels of paddy from the harvest. No body listened to him. Nobody paid attention to his words. When I asked the other folk in the village, they would say," Yes, that family once had land but it was all sold."

Others said," Mudiyanse was the son of the second bed so the children of the first wife had rightful claims."

All he now had was this little piece of land where he had his hut, a makeshift structure where he slept at night. His wadiya, his plot of land too, was diminishing, shrinking as outsiders came in, land hungry folk with money, buying up all the available acres and putting up their two storeyed modern-style houses. His eternal grievance was for a share of paddy from the fields he insisted he had a claim to. Every year, when Aluth Avuruddha, the New Year, dawned and when his nieces brought us gifts of new rice from the fields he would say " If only I had my paddy, I would have brought you a share too."

He had brothers and sisters but lived a life apart from them. He had one brother Malhamy who had a house on the same piece of land, but Malhamy, a quiet unobtrusive man had a hard-working wife and children to care for him. The girls cut bundles of grass for the cattle they owned and tilled their paddy fields.

They had cows and buffaloes too and supplied the people of the Housing Estate with milk. Mudiyanse had to depend often on the kindness of strangers for money, for food, yet he clung tenaciously to his piece of territory, his little abode. He was like some of the animals which still remained in spite of the encroachment of humans who had taken over their habitats.

"You can still hear the nariya's only at night," he would say. It was true. A strange sharp kind of barking sound came from the depths of the great hollows covered with foliage.

"What will happen to Mudiyanse ?" I once asked Kiriamma who used to cut grass for her cattle from my garden " Oh, he will just die, disappear" ,she said," and be buried under the thambili tree with his father". Go back to the earth, his obsession buried with him and some strange plant grow out of the loam, spread its branches, his hut disintegrate, his well grow choked with mud and weeds.

My mind went back to the past. To the day of my father's funeral. How many years had it been? Thirteen years ago? Yes, but it seemed as if he were still alive and in our midst.

My father used to come and stay with me from time to time in the past. Whenever I needed him to stay over the night or spend a couple of days he would never refuse. He would stride firmly up the hill, his figure strong and upright still, although by then he was well into his eighties. His dark-blue beret perched jauntily on his brow, his shoes polished until they shone, the linen and khaki clothes fitting snugly on his full-girthed body. On his shoulder hung his kit bag filled with woodapples and mangoes from our estate in Mahawa. He carried a white aluminium tiffin carrier with each compartment filled with red-hot chicken curry cooked in thick coconut milk, ground red chillies and fresh tomatoes which had simmered on the wood fire of his home in

Katukelle. He himself had cooked that chicken curry, the birds fed on grain and bowls of water in the courtyard of that house. He would also bring his pint of whisky which was kept in his bedroom out of sight of his grand-daughters. His flute was carefully packed away in a corner of the kit bag together with his travel books and autobiographies which he would read late into the night. The fragrant aroma of the honey-cured tobacco from his meerschaum pipe would be comforting to me, reminding me of my own childhood and those evenings at home where my mother and he would sit on the verandah talking to each other, at peace with themselves and the world. If he wanted to smoke one of those Jaffna cigars which he bought from a special shop in the market place, he would go out of doors and gaze at the constellation of stars, pensively puff away until the ash sifted through the cool night air and drifted imperceptibly onto the earth.

My father would wake early in the morning, drink a glass of water - he never drank coffee - and walk about in the garden listening to bird calls. We had two jam-fruit trees and their berry - laden branches were always filled with birds. As far back as I can remember my father was always listening to birds and answering their calls. He tended the plants in his garden with great care, watering them twice a day tying their long wavering stalks to strong supports, feeding both squirrels and birds, setting out bowls of food and water for them. He would cut the bread and butter into minute squares and set them in the green-painted hanging bamboos out of which trailing flowers, ferns and creepers were hanging down in streaming tendrils. He was always pointing out the rarer varieties of birds to us and from an early age, even as children, we began to observe barbuts, drongos, paradise flycatchers, golden orioles, selalihinis, honey-suckers; mynahs, woodpeckers, paddy birds, the seven sisters; the polkichchas and konde kurullas as they flitted about our garden.

He would split the sapu pods and feed the mynahs and selalihinias with the coral-coloured seed packed closely together, whistling and answering bird calls in a mimic voice.

My father never criticized the way I kept the garden in my home. I had so little time with my job as teacher. Moreover I was so absorbed in bringing up my young family. My garden was almost a wilderness, full of wild flowers and tall grasses with king crows stalking through their sharp blades. Tiny birds swung on the seeded grasses, bending the delicate strands. In my childhood home the walls used to be hung with the nests of weaver birds which my father had brought from the Wanni hathpattu, in the village of Mahawa in the North Central Province. We would tuck our fingers inside the fleecy maze of the nest within and explore the woven passages and chambers built by the parent bird for the fledglings.

On the day of his death my father had lain on the big brass and iron four-poster bed gazing out of the window opening out into the garden with its mango, jak and avocado trees. He had spoken to me of birds as he lay there, immobile but peaceful, knowing that he was in his daughter's home, being cared for by the family. The trees were filled with chirpings and the trilling of bird song. He felt he was transported back to his sanctuary at Mahawa, the trees crowded with nests and migrant birds, viewing their transient passage through life. Here, behind the earth bank with its ferns and moss, guava and plantain trees lay the village with jak, coconut, breadfruit, wild berries. We could hear the voices of children pillaging the fruit trees as they played, the lowing of the cattle, the thud of falling coconuts. At night the natter and croak of frogs sounded from our water tank.

" Is there a jungle behind your house?" My father has asked. There must be. I can hear wild duck, owls, pigeons.... He felt he

was on the bund of one of the wewas, the lotus covered tanks where he had walked with his strong haramitiya, the walking stick, of snake wood. How I admired his manner of walking . His strong stride, swinging rhythmically the walking stick. I had once brought a carved Kashmiri walking stick back from India for him. I remember how the customs official had carefully examined to see whether a weapon was concealed within the hollow. "What kind of weapon?" I had asked curiously." A sword", the official had explained.

For a long time confined to his bed in Katukelle, he had not heard the birds of the wilderness which he loved. Wherever he lived there was always a sanctuary for birds as well as for humans. On the evening of his death my daughter Sundari had come out of the room where her grandfather lay. " Grandpa has fallen into a deep , deep sleep," she said. When I touched his body it was icy cold. We had buried his gaunt, emaciated frame in the same grave as my mother and my brother Budgie who had died just before my birth. We returned home when the white kokas, those arrowing cranes were flying over the river. A white cloth fluttered from the papaw tree. The tree had given bountifully of its fruit. Now spent and withered, it was dying, soon the trunk would give way and that too would fall, leaving no impression on the earth which had held its roots and nourished it.

My brother and I sat together on the verandah in silence, each of us thinking our own thoughts Inside the house a candle burned beside a glass of water. My friends had thoughtfully carried out some of the rituals after the funeral. The floor had been sprinkled with turmeric water. A bowl of it stood in a corner of the verandah, part of the rites of purification. "Keep the flame burning for a week," my friend Therese had told me. Was there time to do all these things? I remembered the signal lamp my father used to light. Red. Green. Yellow. Sliding glass panels

were like illuminated stained-glass windows. We kept that signal lamp for years, until it outlasted our childhood but one day it vanished, lost or stolen. But we remembered, yes, we would always remember the signals he interpreted for us, the safe light, the warning colours that signified danger. The rememberance helped our passage through the dark years when he was no longer with us.

My father had been so obstinate, living all by himself after the death of my mother.

" How can I come and live in your small house and trouble you. When the time comes, I will come." Strangers occupied the family house, as a result we were displaced, refugees, transients without asylum.

Dusk had begun to cast purply-blue shadows on the green foliage. Mudiyanse came up the road to our house at that moment breathing fire.

" Mudiyanse" , I called out, " Where are you going at this hour?"

"I am going to prepare the paminilla, the petition, I will take an axe and kill them. Mahatthmaya, will you write this petition for me? This season too, they have taken my share of paddy. They have played me out for one hundred and seventy five bushels. When I go and ask for my share, they scold me, they beat me."

Mudiyanse had invited my brother to see his plot of land. "Come," he said, " I will take you to see my hut, my plot of land".

My brother was curious.

" Where does this man live?" he asked.

" Behind our house, in the village but be careful, there's a wilderness behind you where reptiles abound. It's late evening too. I once saw a king cobra with its hood upraised. There's a burial ground there too," I said. My brother started clambering up the bank but gave up half-way. Thorny thickets, sharp, stabbing blades of grass, rope-like lianas thrusting their serpentine lengths danging from the tall trees, the metallic whirr of insects, the rustling undergrowth, impeded his steps.

" Mudiyanse, come back," I called out, " my brother is not used to that pathway. It's too steep, too narrow and precipitous. You can take him to your plot of land the next time he comes, during the daytime."

"Yes, the next time I come to Kandy, I will visit you," my brother promised.

" Can I come to your estate, Mahatthmaya? In Mahawa?"

"Yes, Mudiyanse, come , you will be welcome. You can eat plenty of fish from the wewa and rice from my fields. Yes, come, you will be welcome."

"You are sure Mahtthmaya? I can come, can't I ? It must be a good life there with your paddy fields, the coconut plantation, the mango and guava trees. When the loku mahatthaya was alive I would eat the fruit he brought from the estate, mangoes, woodapples. But see my own plight. My own people have deprived me of my inheritance, my share of the paddy fields, so many bushels of paddy. I am not even allowed to go near my paddy fields. I'll come and live with you on your land in Mahawa."

I had grown more and more convinced that Mudiyanse was not the pissu miniha, the mad man, that the others called him. He had more knowledge and intelligence than many of the people

I mingled with both on the Housing Estate as well as from the village. He was less selfish. He had no greed for the possessions of others. He had displaced no one. He himself was the one who was displaced.

He had more knowledge of the land, of birds and animals than many of the people I mingled with. He had so much understanding of plants and their growing. " If only," I thought, " he had his own plot of paddy, if only he could gather his harvest, thresh it on the kamatha if only ...." his woeful pleas always went unheeded. People had ceased to listen. To close their ears, shut him out of their lives. All he wanted was that plot of paddy field to till, to plough, to garner his grain but no one understood. The obsession was graven into his mind, his brain. He was essentially a goviya, a farmer. That was on affirmation of his roots, the inheritance of the land to which he belonged. To which he was so deeply attached.

He loved the village and would never leave it. Yet, here he was, eking out an existence, plucking fruit, selling fruit. He was often played out of his dues. A man would come and pluck all his avocado pears from his trees promising to pay him and never turn up again.

For years now I had heard of Mudiyanse talking of this paminilla, his petition, of the bushels of paddy denied him, of the father who carried him in his arms all the way from Pillawela to Selawatta after his mother's death and of the thambili tree by the house in which he lived. That was where his father too was buried, under the thambili tree in his wadiya, the plot of land close to where Mudiyanse now slept all night, for his habitation was more of a lair than a home. It was just a fragile shelter covered on all sides with dried coconut fronds to keep out the rain or the cold night air. Mudiyanse would always have to eat the rice not from his own fields which he longed to plough and till,

but from the fields of others. He ate this rice to satisfy his hunger but to him it was bitter rice. He wanted more than anything else, to work in his own fields. He wanted to drive his buffaloes along the grassy paths, he wanted to sow the seed and gather the harvest, thresh the grain and carry it to the rice mill in Mawilmada but this he was ever to be denied. It was the one all consuming desire in his life, until the day, the moment of his passing away from samsara, the cycle of existence. He was doomed to carry the weight of the heavy sacks of paddy, the bounty of other peoples harvests on his shoulders, to be milled. No, the rice he brought back was never his own. In his mind the fields belonged rightfully to him. The obsession corroded his mind. Not only was he made to sign away his inheritance from time to time but he was also taken away one day, from the village , to the Mental Asylum, by his own kith and kin where he was given electric shock treatment as a result of which he said he lost his teeth.

" The piece of rubber they inserted kept slipping out of my mouth. I felt all my teeth rattling and when I awoke out of my deep unconsciousness it was into a new world". But it was a world that embodied its unique vision only for himself, peopled by beings with whom only he could hold concourse with. They were not the ordinary beings who went about their own prosaic and mundane lives. It was a world into which no one else had entry and the language he used was a special language. The crowd which milled and thronged about him, impeding him, obstructing him, hurling the stones of their words against his body, could never have understood that tongue. Only the creatures of his imagination were real to him and did not contend with him about his ownership of that small green paddy field whose harvest he was never able to reap, whose rice he was never able to eat. So he talked to the creatures of his imagination endlessly as he dug the earth, planted the seed, plucked the fruit and no one said,

" It is not yours. You have no rights. You have no Deed to prove ownership You have no inheritance. You do not belong. You are an outsider. No woman will live with you. You will never have heirs to carry your name. You are a solitary being. You are a pissu miniha. A man who is mad."

In his world all these words were banished. He walked with a free , casual, almost kingly gait. Never once did he cringe and stoop his shoulders to the great and powerful ones around him.

When I first came to live in Watapuluwa, filled with the American-style houses which were fashionable at that time, I occasionally noticed an innocuous looking individual who walked apart from other carefully avoiding the bold encounter. Nor passing the time of the day with any other passer-by. I sensed his difference right from the start because of that strange alert silence, the silence of the wild hare, which he possessed. A wild hare which moved among the grasses, not in search of prey, but alert to the dangers of being preyed upon. He would emerge suddenly out of the thickets like one of those wild, gentle creatures as did the wild mongoose that darted across the road and vanished into the clumps of sunflower bushes and ala kola which flared open like cobra hoods. Even then. I felt the stirrings of a kind of pity within me for this nameless being, this unknown man who seemed somehow alien and apart. It was later that I learned his name, " Mudiyanse." He came from the village that lay behind the artficial facade of this Housing Estate, this new kind of settlement on the banks of the Mahaweli ganga, with houses stuck like awkward protuberances in the landscape. Like boils and warts waiting to burst into suppurating sores with the poison embedded in those neat and orderly -looking dwellings. They were houses with pretensions. The natural houses which merged with the earth of the village lay beyond the borders and boundaries. Man-made barriers fenced off the wilderness where the true life of the village lay.

Mudiyanse had cut the sod and levelled the earth for most of the new owners to build their houses of brick, stone and concrete. He chopped wood, he cut, trimmed and trammeled the wild strangling undergrowth that insidiously tried to creep back and throttle the new abodes. He used to act as caretaker or watcher for the houses that were coming up, guarding other peoples belongings and territory. In his innocence he did not question his displacement as a result of the new inroads made into the life of the village.

As time went by, I gradually began to listen to his voice which was pitched at a slightly higher key than was normal, climbing a different scale following its own musical notation with the slightest edge of hesitancy, travelling in a realm of nature, of bird cries and animal calls. Gradually he began to come into our garden, to cut grass or pluck fruit and I heard for the first time, a word that took shape and began to grow upon my ear, within my consciousness in its constant reiteration, in its obsessive re- echoing ... a word that knocked hard against the realization of an urgent plea- paminilla, paminilla. It was a word that remained embedded in the walls of memory like stones in the coral, lime and stucco of the redoubts and fortresses of the European invaders.

He talked to the wind. Sometimes I would listen and gradually his life began to unfold before me. He forced upon us a recognition of himself, he compelled us to recognize his existence. As he spoke one day, standing beside the araliya tree, the past, his life, began to unravel itself, like a Birth story, a Jataka tale. It began to dawn upon my consciousness that this was a man who was travelling in the ocean of samsara. This was a brief sojourn, on this earth, through this passage with all its travails, all its trials and tribulations. He was truly an innocent. One of nature's innocents. He had no evil in him at all and a

childlike nature that asked for very little from life. It was the others who hurt him, sensing his vulnerability and his lack of strength, physical strength, to avert the attacks on him. He hadn't any self defence to protect himself from their jibes. He was not like them, not like the people of the village. They found his inner strength and his power to survive unacceptable. They ignored his human lineaments and called him kimbula, crocodile. The animal image had its special connotations of fear and threat. They distorted his appearance which possessed a fineness concealed beneath his disguise. They need never acknowledge his power as a human and so they thrust him out of their community into the world of the predator. There was safety for them if only he resembled them, spoke like them, practiced their guile. Yet, Mudiyanse understood the earth, the plants the herbs that grew around him freely. His wounds healed with the juices he pressed upon them just as I did as a child with the hulanthala, a wild herb.

The saddest thing that had happened to him was the day he was manacled and taken away from the village to the Mental Asylum in Angoda.

"Why did they take you?" I asked.

" I don't know why," he said. " I used to wander about in the village plucking breadfruit and here and there a coconut. The people began to say "pissu. pissu." I was not mad at all. I can't understand what happened. One day they fastened manacles on my wrists and I was taken away. They wanted my lands, my paddy fields, that's the reason they had me taken away. While I was there in the asylum my whole body would tremble when I was subjected to the electric shock treatment My teeth chattered and shook. Some of the others never regained consciousness or so it appeared to me. Those of us who came out of it were given milk, eggs, good, nourishing food. No, I wasn't mad. Even my

woman was chased away from the village. She was an orphan like myself. I met her one day on the bund of the lake when I was strolling along. I said to her, " Will you come and live with me, cook my food, wash my clothes?" "Yes", she said. " I have no home, nowhere else to go. You look a kind man, one who will care for me. Men have hurt me. Look, look at the scars where they have beaten me. We are both all alone in the world." She came with me to the village and we lived together. But she was an outsider. She did not belong to this village. These people were afraid of outsiders. They were afraid of what my sons would do if they were born in this village. It would mean that there would be claims to the inheritance. They would be strong enough to stake their claims.... so they took me away. Nor did they allow my woman to live in peace. They drove her out of the village. When I returned she had disappeared. I never went in search of her again. She was lost to me forever. Since then I have never had a woman to be my partner, my companion. She would have helped me in my field, transplanted the paddy stalks, winnowed the grain, dried it on the spread mats and pounded it for me. My pot of rice would have been placed on the fire. We would not have gone hungry. There is plenty of jak, breadfruit, coconuts in my garden. The only piece of land I now have is where my hut is, beside the thambili tree. From here, I can see the fields stretch before me.... my fields.... the fields that belong to me.

It was only my family who listened to him. We knew what it was to be displaced, of losing our land bit by bit, of always having to live in rented houses as tenants, at the mercy of landlords. But we could talk, people would listen and sympathise. Mudiyanse had no one. Some one would throw a stone at him and run away. Another would climb his fruit trees, pluck his mangoes, his breadfruit, his avocado pears and cheat him of his money Yet another would address him in derisive tones, mocking and taunting him.

"Ah, Mudiyanse....?" Laughing at him, provoking him to hurl back the goaded invective of speech. Others drawled out a reply in exaggerated tones. He could never even allow his fruit to ripen on the trees. He had to pluck them before they were mature or they would be taken in stealth.

No, Mudiyanse was not mad at all. He never had been. Somehow he had returned, he had learned to survive in his dwelling by the thambili tree where the guardian spirit of his father protected him. His roots were deep, deep in the ancient village among the rustling reptiles that uncoiled their length and sheltered along the grassy banks, the great hooded nagas in the anthills and the kamatha, the threshing floor. His foot-tread was among the king crows with their ruby eyes, the wild hare in the coverts and the mangoose lurking in the clumps of wild flowers and grasses. A small well gave him water. Sometimes, if it was choked with mud, he would take water from our taps.

He was a man who had no image to pursue. He had no material possessions. He did not want their burden because he could not expend the effort of looking after things which other people would covet. He wore a shirt until it became sweat stained and earth brown. Sometimes he wore two shirts if it was cold and rainy. After some time he discarded the shirt, hanging it on a branch of the araliya tree and forgetting all about it. He grew with time to be like one of those old weathered scarecrows that flapped its loose sleeves in the wind, islanded and alone among the green acres of paddy with the birds screeching about its head. The caps and hats I gave him to protect his head from the sun as he walked in the garden were thrown on the bank, the sharp-bladed gardening knife buried in the grass. His sinewy limbs emerged from his loose khaki shorts. He wore odd leather shoes on his feet without laces. Yet like the scarecrow he had his feet deeply rooted in the earth of the field. When he took the lonely path back to his abode he feared neither reptile nor scorpion. If he had no light to illuminate his way he stepped out unafraid into

the darkness and vanished into the night. Sometimes we gave him a bit of candle in a coconut shell but he really had no fear of the dark even though he walked through the wilderness late at night.

What had his own kith and kin done to him? Why had they taken away his share of the land? That field had been his rightful inheritance and yet the land had passed from hand to hand and now it was no longer his. Would a father have denied his son one acre out of the many acres he possessed? Mudiyanse's memories were still so strong, of being carried all the way to Sellawatte where his father had looked after him in the house built by the thambili tree. There was talk of a second bed where the offspring of that marriage had brought others onto the scene. Mudiyanse had brothers and sisters. They all had their shares of land apportioned out, their fields, buffaloes, cattle. Mudiyanse did not even have a rightful path to his home but had to go through our garden.

Sometimes, listening to his importunate pleas about his paminilla we tried to help him.

"At least show us the deeds, Mudiyanse," we would say.

"What Deeds do I need? All that land is mine. My own people have taken it all from me. Didn't my father carry me and bring me all the way to Sellawatta and build his house here?Wasn't he buried under the thambili tree from which I still pluck the golden bunches of nuts?"

The earth he slept on groaned with his sorrow. When he was hungry and we gave him a plate of rice he would say.

"If only I had the paddy from my fields, I would bring you some of it"

By.way of thanks for the food he received he would say, "Then tomorrow I will bring you some kurumba, young coco-

nuts. "We accepted his acknowledgement in this way. His words concealed his embarrassment at taking something for which he could not repay by way of kind. Yet we had much to learn from him.

What was the necessity of having so many possessions? Hadn't we been burdened by them time and time again during the racial and ethnic upheavals? It was easier, much easier to let it all go as he had done. When it rained he got wet. He burned in the hot sun. He slept on a bed the frame of which was made of sticks placed on four poles of wood with some straw for a pillow. The mosquitoes harassed him at night. Yet he worked hard cutting grass, carrying sacks of paddy for those who had their feudal lands in the village. He worked till late, compulsively, regardless of time, the sweat streaming down his body. I would try to get work for him in the homes of my friends. He did things that were often contrary to what they wanted. He had uprooted all the blue grass at Bianca's which had been so carefully planted.

"Mudiyanse, what have you done?" She exclaimed when she returned from school.

"Don't worry. I'll replant it all. It will grow again, " he said.

He replanted it, blade by blade but it never took root again.

His self dialogues went on interminably. Sometimes aloud, sometimes muttering under his breath.

"Mudiyanse, what is all this again about your paminilla, your petition and your ferocious threats of cutting up people?" I asked.

" Don't you know what they have done again? Taken my paddy. Not given me my share of the harvest. I'll cut them all up..... wait and see...."

In the end the talk of the paminilla become a way of announcing his arrival.

"Yes, Mudiyanse, I understand. It's the way of the world. None of us get our due shares of anything. Look at me.... have I a house or land of my own? No, I too possess nothing. Others have taken what belongs to me, deprived me of an inheritance. We suffer for it. I cannot stay permanently in anyone's house... asked to go at the will of the landlord.... but what can you and I do? Who will listen to us? At least you have a little patch of earth you can call your own, I have nothing... anyway,are you hungry? I'll bring you some food. Here's a book you might like to read. You have no light in your hut."

"Ah, I remember the days when I was sent to Kapugoda priest's temple by my uncle, Appuhamy was his name, who was the Arachchi Mahathmaya. I was well looked after, there was plenty of paddy in the atuwa where it was stored. I ate rice fresh from the harvest with a curry of coconut milk and maldive fish. They wanted me to be a monk. The next day after I arrived in the temple Kapugoda Hamuduru called me and said.

"Mudiyanse, all that land is overgrown with thorny bushes, the grass grows wild, clear it...."

"I wanted to read, I wanted to study the Tripitaka, the teachings of the Buddha, not to do all this labour of clearing land and sweeping the compound, fetching water from the well..... so the next day I came back. Left the temple. Returned home." My daughter was listening to our conversation.

"They must have sent him to the temple because his horoscope was not favourable", she said.

Would it have been better for him to have remained there, I wondered? Was that the kind of safety and protection that he needed? Or was his karma, his fate, different?

Every morning he would come to our garden and call out "Mahatthmaya?"

"Say something to him. He has to communicate." My daughters pitied him.

He would sit quietly reading a book.

"Aren't you giving Mudiyanse some tea?" One of the girls would run to the kichen to put the saucepan on the one burner kerosene stove. I poured the tea, first putting fresh tea leaves into the pot and stirred the milk and sugar into a cup. He would never drink the tea which Freda who cooked for us, made. He felt that the tea leaf was stale, the water not boiled sufficiently, that she was sparing of milk and sugar - who knows? Perhaps she felt that it was not worth the trouble of making a special cup of tea for him. I took special care, always, for Mudiyanse.

"Don't worry, nona is making the tea. You can drink it without fear," my husband would reassure him. If sometimes I didn't have the time and Freda made it he would grimace, perhaps take one sip and pour the cup of tea into the drain.

"Look at his man," Freda would complain. "Wasting a good cup of tea. He doesn't trust me at all. Mudiyanse, that was a fresh cup of tea I poured you, not kahata, plain tea. I added milk and sugar.

" I can't drink it."

"Wait, wait, I'll make you another cup....." I said.

Only then would he be satisfied that it was brewed by me.

Sometimes he would bring us a polos, a tender jak fruit.

"Mudiyanse, come, have a plate of rice."

He was proud to bring thambili, avocado, jak, even pineapple. He had green fingers. Whatever he planted, grew.

We tried to help him. My father sent a letter to the Government Agent in the Kachcheri.

Dear Sir,

This man Mudiyanse lives in Watapuluwa village. His house was blown away by the recent cyclone. He needs help to rebuild his structure.

Yours truly....

There was no help forthcoming for Mudiyanse. Even when he had a frail structure to live in , there were no doors, no windows, no locks, no possessions, not a piece of furniture. We once gave him an iron bedstead and a mattress but even that was stolen. He never knew where the next meal would come from. Sometimes he uprooted manioc yet he knew that as long as we were there he would never go hungry.

"Today I didn't have a single meal of rice."

I would quickly serve him from the food left in the pots- rice, dhall , mallum, fish whatever we had cooked for that day. And tea, with plenty of milk and sugar. He would sit and eat but always reserve a portion of his food for his dogs. Even when he went to the dansalas during Wesak he would bring several packets of food back for his pack of hungry dogs.

Whenever he saw any of us Mudiyanse's voice would go on endlessly. We too listened. "These thieves have taken my paddy again. This time too they have stolen what is rightfully mine. Wait, this time I'll get a gun, a sword and cut them up. Mahatthmaya, tomorrow then, I'll come early, help me to write my paminilla."

"Yes, yes, ..." My husband would say to placate him. "Tomorrow we will write it for you".

A few bricks would help Mudiyanse to build one room but who was there to help him? He kept battering his head against a wall of silence. The rains came, the winds blew, intruders attacked his dwelling which caved in. Its was only a little mud and thatch put together. It could not withstand those hands that tore it apart and left only the rubble behind. He had no walls to protect him now. Nothing. No security. No shelter. Yet he had spent all his day clearing the earth so that others could put up their walls.

Mudiyanse had studied in the Baptist Mission School in Watapuluwa years ago. Where were all those children whom he had learnt with? Grown up, still part of the village? Or had they moved away? Many of them perhaps still lived there but had silently rejected him. They did not claim friendship with him because he was different to them. He remembered one of the harsher incidents of his school days. "I was given several cuts with the cane because I had helped one of the little girls in Arithmetic".

There were very few to help him in his later life when his own needs were great. He used to often say," We did not have so much time to learn because we had to go and buy mung beans, beans and dhall to be cooked. We were served bread and curry, little saucers of curry into which we dipped our bread."

Mudiyanse had learnt to read and write in this school. He learned English too. I gave him many books from my library which he pored over. He loved the books on science, travel, the Knowledge Encyclopaedias. Sitting in a corner of the verandah at the jak wood table where I myself had studied as a young girl, the table which had once been in our dining room and where we

had sat down with friends and family for thousands of meals, Mudiyanse now sat. He would sit there with his plate of food and his pile of books beside him. I would place together with the books he was already reading a fresh stock into which he delved, sometimes reading aloud. When he felt sleepy he would rise to go, wish us goodnight and take his lonely path back to the village.

At the time when he was studying in the Mission School, the land on which the Housing Estate now stood was a cocoa estate which had once belonged to Mr. Hancock. The villagers came there to gather firewood. Mudiyanse, as a child would pluck a ripe cocoa pod. One day he was caught and taken to Mr. Hancock by the watcher. He went in fear and trembling but he was merely reprimanded and sent away. One cocoa pod ! How could it diminish that great global enterprise of colonialism? Mudiyanse remembered those days when he roamed the estate freely, when there was no Housing Estate with its clearly defined paths, roadways and mawathas - Dharshana, Maithri, Jaya, Kumudu. He loved the succulent white cocoa pods, the pulp as fragrant as flowers. Mr. Hancock he watched closely, as the planter went on his rounds, climbing the ridges of the estate. As he walked along them he would take coins out of his pocket and scatter them for the children who either played their own games, followed him or helped their mothers to gather bundles of firewood.

The tiled roof of the estate bungalow could still be seen half a century or more later through the shady trees, their branches overhanging it. The house with its wide verandah which commanded a view of the entire landscape, the cocoa and rubber plantation, the mountains, paddy fields and river stood on an eminence , on a knoll, apart from the rest of the countryside. The tiles were now mellowed a mossy red. The verandah was pillared. A house through which the sounds of insects, owls and

jackals must have drifted through the deep silence of the night. When Hancock stood on his verandah looking down on the Mahaweli he was the king-emperor of those domains. The great rocks which humped out of the water lay immobile like sleeping tortoises that had crawled out of centuries and deposited themselves to sun their shell-backs scored with their corrugated patterns, in the middle of the river. It was a treacherous river with quicksands and whirlpools which sucked in the unsuspecting bather to spew his body out at some other, farther, distant spot. The river wound its serpentine length through the villages that lay on either side of the banks with their isolated huts, paddy fields, threshing floors. The villagers came down to the river where they bathed for hours on end, scrubbing each others backs with smooth black stones. The women's hair streamed wet like strands of river weeds and they held their diya reddas, their tightly wrapped bathing cloths, close to their armpits and breasts feeling the moisture and the sun's heat impregnate their bodies.

Hancock's house was solitary and apart. Enclosed within the grove of trees, the house clung to its privacy and seclusion. The leaves turned colour during the seasons, russet, maroon, orange, yellow with their masses of flowers. At the bottom of the knoll were the dark green leaved cocoa bushes, the cocoa pods changing from green and yellow to a dark purply-red. Behind the estate lay the village with its ancient way of life within an untended wilderness. The people had lived there for generations hidden away in its interior with their lands, their fields, their buffaloes and milk cattle, the village school and temple. Mudiyanse belonged to the village too, and no one had been able to oust him. He had returned as a child there. He held onto his freedom which had temporarily been wrested from him when he was taken away to the Mental asylum in Angoda.

I remember how we had once gone to Vedamahatthaya's funeral in the village, Mudiyanse's village. There were no steps

leading down to Vedamahatthaya's property. He was the ayurvedic physician in the village. We could hardly get a foothold as we cautiously climbed down the slope of sandy earth. We walked along a pathway on either side of which was a wilderness of cocoa, coffee, nutmeg, cloves. It appeared to be covered in a pall of silence and gloom, dark with the heavy green of foliage. Iscolmahattmaya the teacher and a relation of his, Ananda, joined us. Iscolmahattmaya's son had just left the village to join a British ship. His father was the principal of the village school. All the land through which we walked belonged to the Ranaweera family. It had belonged to them for generations, to their fathers, grandfathers and great great grandfathers, long, long before the conquest of the Kandyan Kingdom by the British. Their history perhaps began with the drift to the South West parts of the island with the break -up of the Kingdom of Rajarata and here they stayed and would stay on forever.

Vedamahattmaya had died the day before. He was only fifty-five years old. He left a young son and daughter. They would inherit his wealth, his land, his money. He had built a good strong house for himself and his family.

When we reached the house, his old mother was keening, sitting on the verandah with her head bowed in grief, mourning for the son whom she must now outlive. Relatives surrounded her with their comforting presence. Inside the house, beneath the ceiling covered with white cloths Vedamahattmaya lay, his hands covered with white gloves, the foot-for he had had a wound on it-still with its gauze bandage apparent. He had been a diabetic. His face was dark with death. His wife wept. "See", she told us as she grieved, " See, he has left these two young children. Gone away..."

Ananda came and sat by us " Vedamahattmaya was a wealthy man. Look, all this property is his. He was farseeing.

Before he died, he prepared everything for his family's future. He even had his pension transferred to his wife's name. He left instructions for his wife on how to educate the children and on how to bring them up. He left a large sum of money in the Bank. Just before his death, Kiri Menike, his wife had withdrawn some of it for his illness."

" Was he ill for a long time?" I asked.

"Yes, being a veda, he first tried to treat himself and finding that he couldn't he went to hospital. He was in and out of hospital"

Ananda was a young man who helped all his relations. "I must do everything for the family. Who else is there? The children are still too young. He was a careful man. Also he did not have many friends."

Ananda's sister Sujatha came and sat by me.

"We never come here much," she said. The house is in the interior. If the house was by the side of the road we might have come here more often.

Vedamahatmaya's mother bowed before us before we took our leave.

"Teacher, please keep an eye on Vedamahattmaya's son in school", Ananda pleaded.

I promised. It was the least I could do. We could never forget the acts of kindness of Vedamahttmaya, Ananda, Sujatha. During those troubled days of the ethnic riots of 1977 they had been in and out of our house, mornings, evenings and at night. They would come and sit in our drawing room and talk of innumerable things, mundane things, to allay our fears.

Ananda had said. " Not one person will be allowed to touch our master and teacher."

At night too, we would hear Ananda's voice call out from the road at the bottom of the hill. "Sir, is everything alright? I'll come again tomorrow morning." And so it had gone on for days..... Mudiyanse's elder brother too was an ayurvedic physician. It was this brother the ayurvedic physician who had got him to sign off all his property when he was taken to Angoda. Five years he was supposed to have spent in that Asylum, taken away in chains. Kept in chains. He had climbed that great sapu tree on the property, his niece Dhammika told me years later, to cut a branch for his axe handle. His grandmother had sat under the tree refusing to budge. If he broke the branch, it would have crashed down on her head and killed her. He searched for water to cool his anger and ran to the water tank immersing himself in its cool, cool waters feeling the heat of his anger turn into ice in his veins. He spent days in the river feeling the currents flow over his body until his flesh still simmering with the fires that threatened to consume him felt cool as the stone half-submerged in the water. Water, water, that's all he sought, to put out the fires. He grew violent, they said trying to hit out at anybody in the impotence of his thwarted intent. He couldn't go back to school to complete his examination. They were desperate, his people and so he was taken away. He was never to enjoy the acres of land that belonged to his mother with its two-storeyed house and spice trees, clove and nutmeg. As a baby, after his mother's death, he was carried about in the hammock of his father's cloth until he could toddle about on his own.

Mudiyanse had become so much a part of our lives. He had time on his hands. He was free to do as he liked, go wherever he wanted. He only went back to his little abode at night to sleep. He would come everyday to our home, begin the day with us, end it too. He needed money for his needs so everyday I made an arrangement for him to take food for my father to the house in

Katukelle. At one stage I sent a tiffin carrier with the food for my father after the old servant Alice had died. Messages would come from my father.

"Don't send that man here. He worries me. When the boxes of mangoes come from the estate in Mahawa, he insists on eating them without a pause."

"Have you any more ripe ones?" He would importune.

" I have already given him his share. Don't send him. He keeps pestering me."

One day my aunt Elsie sent me some choice kitul jaggery. She had ordered it specially to be sent abroad but the parcel was heavy and the friend who was to take it had been reluctant to carry it. My father's odd job man and caretaker had decided to hand the parcel over to Mudiyanse although he had been entrusted with the task himself. Some days passed. Mudiyanse did not come home as he usually did. We missed him. Then a postcard arrived. There was no address of the sender, only a message.

"Sir, I am sorry I couldn't come there. I am very ill. I am suffering from the injuries inflicted on me. When I was coming home along the toddy tavern road, I was waylaid by thieves. They beat me up and robbed me of all I possessed. All the jaggery I carried with me was stolen."

The postcard come from Watapuluwa. He couldn't face us. Later we heard that he had sold the hakuru mullas, the choicest kitul jaggery, at half the price in the village.

But he couldn't live without us and gradually drifted back into our lives. The branches of the avocado pear tree were laden with fruit. He climbed up the tree with a basket and rope. He plucked fruit after fruit. He knew instinctively which were the well seasoned ones. I heard voices in the garden. I went outside.

"Mudiyanse, has anyone come?" I asked. There was no one to be seen.

I looked up at the tree. "Were you talking to anyone?"

"I am telephoning a friend who lives on the other side ofthe valley," he said from his perch on one of the topmost branches.

"Hello, Hello. How are you today? When are you coming to see me? I'll pluck some fresh thambili for you when you arrive. I have still to get my paddy. I am entitled to so many bushels. These people are cultivating my fields and will not give me my share." The conversation continued with an imaginary friend. The birds of the air, the plants of the earth had become human to him.

I still imagine I hear his voice calling out to my husband.

" Mahatthaya, are you at home?

How could he have fallen off a tree? Someone told me at the funeral parlour that he had felt his sarong slipping off his waist and tried to hold it up.... the branch he was clutching onto broke and he fell. The tender young coconuts lay beneath the tree. Trees had always been his home.

During the kerosene oil shortage Mudiyanse was sent with the money, and two plastic gallon containers to bring the oil. He disappeared once more. We were desperate to cook the food and had to go in search of firewood sticks to cook on the hearth. There were long queues for kerosene. We gathered firewood from the garden, chopped logs, collected coconut shells and built sundry fires to boil the pot of rice. We suffered. Eyes tearing and smarting with the smoke. Looked around the garden.

"We'll pluck the jak fruit. We'll sell the fruit..."

Rumours started circulating.

Mudiyanse was seen standing in the queue. He was seen in the suburb of Katugastota. In Colombo Street.. Trincomalee Street... at the petrol shed in Kandy.... at an apana salawa, an eating house, at this hotel.... at that hotel.....

He casually dropped in to see us weeks after.

" Mudiyanse where were you? Where's the kerosene? The plastic gallon?

We were only poor teachers. Life was difficult for us. Money was scarce in our household.

He had sold the plastic gallons together with the oil, gone to an hotel, in addition to which he had spent the money for the oil on food.

"Mudiyanse why did you do this to us? The children were hungry."

" I was hungry."

We had to accept his terse explanation.

He sat with a book at the table on the verandah reading and carrying on his monologue. If you answered he would start all over again..." This year too I was deprived of my paddy harvest."

"Mudiyanse, where is you Deed, your oppu"?

He grew heated.

"Of course I have it. It is all my land."

Mudiyanse had stood with me in the garden during the communal disturbances.

"You had better not go in..... there's a man-eating dog there...." He looked on at the scene of turmoil and chaos before

him. There was no treachery in his mind. He would betray no one. He didn't loot anything from the houses which were in shambles.

I was once collecting Andare stories. "Mudiyanse tell me some Andare stories."

"Do you know the seeni kathawa? He told me the story of Andare and the sugar. Andare had ended up eating all the suger. Mudiyanse's interpretation was a very reasonable, a very rational one.

"He was ashamed to tell of his hunger. So he had to pretend. He ate all the sugar himself. He did it because he was hungry."

Mudiyanse loved sweet things..... bread and butter with sugar and jam. He didn't like pol sambol or hot curries. He loved fruit too. A ripe papaw would vanish off the tree.

"Mudiyanse, where is that fruit? We were keeping it till it got a bit riper Did you pluck it?" The milk was still oozing out where the fruit had been snapped off from its stalk.

"Mmm, yes, I plucked it. I was hungry. It wasn't ripe enough. My tongue felt sore after eating it."

"Mudiyanse, how can you say that.... the fruits on that tree are as sweet as nectar. It must have been a delicious fruit." " Hmmmn! he murmured. Not sweet. Not ripe enough. My tongue feels grazed."

At funerals he would appear, standing outside in the garden, peering through the windows. No one welcomed him inside their houses, even if he came as a mourner. Everyone was dressed in white and sat upright and formal on the straight backed chairs arranged for them. Their faced bore a stern, detached expression as if to show how seriously they took death. Speaking only in undertones or standing together in solemn groups, their lowered voices were muted in respect for the body in its bier.

Mudiyanse's clothes were not appropriate for the occasion, they were his workaday clothes from which emanated the fresh smell of earth and plants. Nor was his hair or beard trimmed regularly. When we felt like it, he visited a barber salon in town and his fine smooth skin shone golden and clear. Or he trimmed his hair and beard himself if my pair of sewing scissors was at hand.

"Have you lost a pair of scissors?" He asked casually one day.

"Scissors? I have been searching for it the whole day."

"I used it to trim my beard."

" Mudiyanse, how could you do that? I needed it urgently."

"Well, my beard was overgrown and they wanted ten rupees at the barber salon to shave my face and cut my hair."

My daughter who was helping all this time to search for the scissors overheard our conversation. Her eyebrows went up quizzically.

"I swept away a lot of grey- black hair on the verandah today. It was carefully pushed under the washstand." When I went outside I saw that Mudiyanse had cut all his hair, oiled it and combed it down. His face too was free of hair."

"Yes, I saw the pair of scissors and borrowed it."

Mudiyanse wore out the clothes on his body. He never washed his clothes but then they only bore the stains of grass and earth. When our former neighbour the German, gave him a new sarong, he gave it to my husband for safekeeping. "I have no place to keep this", he said."Someone will take it away. When I need it for the New Year, I'll ask you for it."

Although Mudiyanse was never invited into the houses of the people on the Housing Estate, most of whom were retired Government bureaucrats, it was he who cut, chopped and stacked the firewood for the almsgivings. Yet while others ate their fill of the special meal that had been prepared for the dana, he was sometimes not given a share of it.

"Mudiyanse, you cut all that firewood today and you say you are hungry. Didn't you get a share of the dana?"

He began to speak hesitatingly."..... the others were eating.. It was getting late..... they must have forgotten me..."

Yet he never stayed away from a funeral. He felt it was his duty to go and pay his last respects. Everyone in the Housing Estate knew him and he had at one time or another worked for almost every person here. He would come home and announce that he would be going to the house where the death had taken place.

"Today there is a funeral. I must go."

"Wear clean clothes, trim your beard or else the mourners won't like you to attend it, or invite you inside the house to pay your respects."

"Why, I bathe everyday when there is water in my well. What is the use of possessing anything, of having too many clothes. I have nowhere to keep them."

Mudiyanse would stand silently outside the window and gaze at the corpse. No one knew what he thought of death. He lived from day to day, never railing against life. If he had a philosophy of his own, he never expressed it. It was for us to interpret and translate the thoughts he expressed and to derive meaning and significance for ourselves from his way of life. He

never said, "I am tired". He never spoke of dukkha, sadness, sorrow. He never spoke of santhoshaya, of joy, of pleasure. He accepted life with all its vicissitudes. If had had a sword to cut grass with he used it or else he improvised with a steel blade sharpened against a stone. He worked unendingly and never thought of the hours he spent at his unceasing labour. We had to tell him, " Its time now to stop. Its getting dark. You must be very tired after being at it all day." He would then put his mammoty and sword away, accept his wages and set out to the township for his evening drink.

He knew when the weddings were approaching but then again he would never be invited. He had nothing suitable to wear. When he had earned enough money he would go to town and come back late.

"Mahatthaya..." he would call out. That was his accustomed way of heralding his arrival.

"Mudiyanse, have you eaten?"

"Ah yes, I went to the apana salawa, the Eating House in town. I had rice and curry. It cost me twelve rupees."

"Why so much?"

" I also ate a fried fish, a salaya. I had an egg too. Sometimes it was a laveriya, a stringhopper filled with coconut and honey and a cup of tea.

"Today I have had no work," he would sometimes announce.

"Mudiyanse, are you hungry?"

He did not answer. Silence meant affirmation.

"Would you like some hot tea?"

"Ah yes, tea with plenty of milk and sugar, that would be good."

He would settle down with his tea and his books.

The night wind blew round him. The fragrance of the Queen of the Night was overpowering. The araliya trees were hidden in the dark. Soon he would go back along the grassy path and vanish. We would hear the owl hooting, the nariyas barking, the cries from the threshing floor and the croak of frogs. He was one of the few left to carry on the continuity of a certain way of life, a way of life that would soon vanish with all the changes that were taking place.

We too closed the doors and put out the lights.

Wasn't there a kind of identification of our lives with that of Mudiyanse's own life? We too were striving to survive on the little we earned. Standing for long hours at bus stands, waiting to draw a small monthly wage. We were alien in a society which was close-knit in its clanship of cultures, that kept us on the fringe. We were never invited to the weddings in the Housing Estate. We were never included in the celebration of festivals. The trays of sweetmeats would be borne, covered with the festive white cloth to all the houses except ours. Very occasionally, a tray would come for us at Christmas time. The Christian community had carols by candlelight and "pound and pint" parties and prayer meetings but once those families emigrated to Australia or moved out of the Housing Estate, everything came to a standstill. Where Mudiyanse was concerned he inhabited the periphery, the fringe of both the village as well as the Estate but he was a man who had little need of anyone's acceptance. When he woke up in the morning he did not know whether he would earn enough for a single meal but he knew that with us, he would never go hungry.

"How can we grumble", my daughter would say; " Look at Mudiyanse who somehow survives and shows no greed or desire for anyone's possessions and there's Menika, who doesn't even have a chair in her hut, sleeps on a plank, has three sarees, two jackets, yet smiles and is cheerful. Her one resolve is to educate her son, that's all she lives for." Menika had just come to work for me. She coped without a husband too. Her stay with me was only temporary yet for as long as that stay lasted, I was responsible for providing her with food, money and clothes. Likewise for Mudiyanse - we would provide for his needs as long as he was a presence among us.

When my sister came from abroad on a holiday he commented politely on the weather.

"It's a nice day. The sky is blue. Good weather", he said, thinking it would interest her. He continued in the same vein.

" Ah, a very fine day," and then turning from her spoke in bird language to the magpies, orioles, mynahs and sellalihinis which abounded in our garden.

Sometimes to conceal his shyness, to preserve his self respect and pride when we gave him food, he would say, "Tomorrow I will bring you thambili, freshly plucked from my tree. I have eight good thambili. After all I can give you two can't I? I don't need money for that." Or he would bring mangoes, breadfruit, avocado pears, manioc from his plot of land the extent of which was diminishing daily.

"Sell it and earn some money for yourself. We have enough," we told him.

During the Sinhala New Year someone gave him some newly harvested kekulu rice. He brought is in a bag, took handfuls of it and kept sifting the grains in his palms.

"What am I to do with this? I don't have water in my well to boil the rice. You keep it". He proffered the bag of rice to us.

"Then we shall make kiribath and keep your share," I said accepting his gift. "Don't forget to come tomorrow."

"Yes, he said," I will come early in the morning."

We prepared a dish of milk rice, cut it into diamond shapes and set it in the breakfast table.

Mudiyanse did not come till late that night.

"Mudiyanse," We greeted him," where were you this morning? We have kept your share of the kiribath. Sit down and eat."

So he sat down in his usual corner of the patio and ate the milk rice made out of his gift of kekulu rice.

Whatever he planted grew. His hands were happy when they touched the earth.

"Look", my husband said, the plantain suckers he has set down at that end of the garden, have grown. They have taken root and are going to bear good fruit." The plantain flowers were encased in a sheath of deep purple. A squirrel was sucking the honey from the flowerets. We would share the bunch of plantains with Mudiyanse. He had a right to the plantain combs too.

He had learned to survive. When the old foreigner came to live next door to our house in Darshana Mawatha, Mudiyanse would always go and say, " Sir, how are you keeping?"

This would earn him a cigarette lighter or five rupees. One day he was quite desperate for money. "Pluck some araliya flowers and take them next door," my husband told him.

Mudiyanse plucked a spray of creamy white blossoms and went up the drive. We heard his voice.

"Good morning, Sir. Are you keeping well, Sir ?"

"Ah, good morning, good morning. Thank you, I am quite well. And how are you? The German asked politely.

"Here, I have brought some flowers for you. You like araliya, no?"

After some time he came back.

"Well, what happened? Was he pleased?"

Yes, he said "Thankyou, thankyou very much. " He gave me two rupees. Now I can go and drink toddy," he said gleefully.

A great sense of sadness fills me when I recall Mudiyanse's life. The news of his death was brought to me one morning by his nieces, Malhamy's daughters. He had fallen from the coconut tree. He had already plucked some of the nuts. Mudiyanse had always been a great climber of trees, no one was as skilled and adept at reaching the topmost branches. Even the young men of the village were not as good as he was at plucking mangoes, avocado pears, breadfruits and bunches of king coconuts from the laden trees of the Housing Estate.

Malhamy's daughter had come rushing home to tell me what had taken place. They knew that Mudiyanse had remained a part of our lives even after we had moved from Watapuluwa. He would come walking all the way from town after taking the bus to Kandy whenever he felt lonely or had news to give us or had need of us.

One of the nieces said that the woman for whom he had been plucking the coconuts had taken some of them into the house before all the nuts had been gathered.

"She should not have done so. It is the custom not to take the plucked nuts inside until everything has been gathered together and the plucker has climbed down from the tree. That's the way we do things according to the ancient traditions."

"And moreover. " Malhamy's second daughter asid that the woman, instead of expressing regret or pity had complained saying, "I told him not to climb the tree. He didn't even pluck thambili. Only kurumba, before the nuts were matured." Even after his death she had to justify herself to show that she was not to blame. Mudiyanse himself did not want to admit that he was now too weak, too old from years of privation,to climb trees. But it was something he would never give up. Even where we were concerned, we never accepted the fact that Mudiyanse was growing old. We would say when the rambutans or mangoes were ready for picking, "When will Mudiyanse come? There's no one else who can go up those trees". And when he did I would call out again and again.

" Mudiyanse, please, please be careful, you can eat as many mangoes as you want when you come down from the tree. Watch out, don't climb any higher, that branch may give way. Don't fall, it doesn't matter if you don't pluck any more. What we have is enough," but there was nothing he loved more than sitting on a branch eating the ripe fruit and throwing the skins down. He was in his element then. The tall soaring trees were always places where he could be happiest, away from the earth and stony paths which bruised his feet. Talking to the wind. Talking to himself, the person who hurt him least. From the vantage point of the tree top, the whole world lay beneath him. We were dwarfed and diminished by the stature he assumed up there, far above us, looking down on us, we who could never reach that safe eyrie, never metamorphose as he did into another shape and form.

The last time he had visited us, sauntering into the garden as he usually did with that casual yet regal gait as if he had all the time in the world he had husked some coconuts for me. They still lay in a corner of the verandah, a reminder of that presence which had for so many years, been among us, at all times, both good and bad for there had been that occasion in the dark days of ethnic violence when we had stood in the same garden, facing the mobs at the gate. He had plucked a full harvest of mangoes from the six trees that were laden with ripe fruit. When the mobs came - he did not waver, he did not try to escape, he tried to keep them back. In the end I had to hold my hand like a crucifix to keep the hurtling stone from hitting him. He didn't know what it was all about, all men were the same to him. His only concern, human cruelty to his dogs. He knew cruelty to himself because he was different, because he was "the other," who lived life according to his own terms.

Ah yes, my mind went back to those days. So many years had passed since then. The nuts he had both plucked and husked still lay where he had stacked them. " I plucked four," he told me "and kept one for myself." He had always shared the bounty of our fruit trees, avocado, rambutan, papaws, guavas and mangoes. And it was because of him that we had partaken of and enjoyed those bountiful harvests of fruit. Armed with a sack and a tall pronged stick he would climb the tree with great agility and fill the sack as he picked the bunches of fruit after which he would lower the sack to the ground with my husband's help.

Who would now pluck the mangoes for us in our town house? In' 83 it was Mudiyanse who had piled up the mangoes he had picked off the trees, taking them into the house to lay on gunny sacks to ripen. The day had been bright with sunlight. The squirrels ran up and down branches and scurried along the plantain fronds. As I stood at the gate with my brother, talking

persuasively to the mobs who had come to search out the Tamil houses, Mudiyanse too had broken into our conversation. "There's a ferocious dog here... don't come any further", he had said. "Yes, there's a man eating dog here. "Brandishing the knife he held in his hands, he threatened as a child would, in defiance, unaware how ineffectual his gesture would be to the leader of the mob. It was then that the stones were hurled at him. It was then that I stood protectingly before him. What could I say ? " Leave him alone. He is an innocent man. A harmless man. A man who will not hurt any one"

We were all caught up on this makeshift stage, devising our own lines, lines which were spoken in deadly earnest. We had done with play acting once and for all. Mouthing other people's lines , acting out roles created by others. It was a scene from a play where the action progressed according to a compulsive need to plead for our very lives. And there was an audience too. Ah yes, there was an audience. The onlookers, the villagers had become that audience. They lined the banks and watched and waited. The applause would not be for the protagonists for the protagonist was identified with the, "other", the inimical, hostile forces who were responsible for that landmine explosion in the North. Protagonist, victim, victimiser, the confusion became almost comical in this chaotic and dangerous situation. But we had our roles to play and we set ourselves strategically on the stage, the arena, of the garden.

Mudiyanse was the Elizabethan Fool but the Fool who tried to divert the stream, the dangerous undercurrents, that dragged and threatened to submerge us in violence. The slight diversion, even with that threat of death , in the flung stone, turned the attention of the mob to something which they recognized. Here was a man they thought they could deal with easily, the recognizable "other," the fringe person, the outsider in the

village. The stone would silence him. Or so they thought. They did not realize that his childlike words, naive-seeming, were his protection, part of the ploys that he used in order to survive. I would remember his words long afterwards and ponder on them He had drawn me too into the complicity of finding a way to use my wits, for myself and for others to survive. His words were not to be taken seriously- who would be afraid of the bark or bite of a household pet, a dog? The very comicality of that utterance created both anger and amusement. Here was Mudiyanse the man they thought they recognised- the fool, the man who was no threat to them. No danger to them. He made me realize now and for all time that innocence was a quality that would help us all to survive. Be the Fool. And the stone would strike, draw blood. But within yourself you would remain whole.

Mudiyanse had no hatred, no anger toward any one who belonged to a different community or ethnic group. From that moment onwards, the two of us, standing in that garden, each protecting the other, forged a bond that time could not sever. I could now, finally understand what it was to be the "other", unacceptable to society through no fault of my own. We were made to feel different. We were made to feel guilty. The cause of the guilt and its expiation would be our exploration.

I look once again at the coconuts husked by his hands and think of him. Was it then his karma to die as he did? My hope was that he would not be reborn to live a life that had deprived him of all that he had been denied- friendship, the love of kith and kin, books to read, good food , shelter. Shelter for himself and for his dogs. The dogs who were his most faithful friends. The dogs that he would leave behind in my garden in Watapuluwa when he went on his rounds in search of work or amusement and which I fed together with my own pets. Who would now feed the dogs who were left behind? Especially since we had moved away from

the Housing Estate to the heart of Kandy. Would Mudiyanse find himself in another birth, would he return to this world again? Would he go through this process of Uppajjati, of rebirth.? Would it be for him that state of Punabhava, that re-becoming, a renewal of existence? Who could foretell? Mudiyanse had harmed no one. Rather it was he who had been both harmed and wronged, his birthright and property taken away by greed, duplicity and stealth. He was a pure soul, one who would never be forgotten by me till the end of my days.

"He who looks upon the world
As one would look upon a bubble,
As one would look at a mirage
He goes beyond sight of the King of Death."

"It is still important. It's my true home where I can talk to the birds in my own language.
The flavour of fruit will never change. The mangoes remain sweet. At night the thudding of hundreds of falling palmyrah fruits and mango would keep me awake. In the morning I would run outside to see them covering the ground , the skins split with ripeness , the ants , the bees , the beetles swarming all over them.... and the rustling of the palmyrah fronds when the winds blew through them .... how soothing it was to the ears ....."

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