

When
Memory Dies



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BOOK ONE

Forgotten Mornings

'And I saw in the turning so clearly a child's
Forgotten mornings when he walked with his mother
Through the parables
Of sun light . . .'

Dylan Thomas

MY MEMORY BEGINS, as always, with the rain – crouched as a small boy against the great wall of the old colonial building that once housed the post office. It frightened me, the great monsoon down-pour, and saddened me too, threw me back on my little boy self and its lonelinesses, the growing things in myself I could not tell others about, the first feel of the sadness of a world that kept Sanji from school because he had no shoes. And I welcomed the lightning then, not frightened any more, for it would strike me dead and Sanji would have my shoes, and I would be sad no more.

Or I was sad for the trees and the birds and the little kid goat battered and cowed by the rain. I was afraid for the plantain trees, heavy with fruit, now swaying dangerously from their trunks, and I was sorry that the crows, proud kings of the dung-heap, should make common cause with house-sparrows under the eaves of roofs. But suddenly the rain would lift and the trees come erect again, putting forth to the sun which had as suddenly appeared, and the crows would caw once more. And a mist would rise from the hot roads like dawn. It was the seasons' return, in that moment that had gone and come again, it was awe and grief and wonderment crowding in on each other, a first involuntary affirmation of life that was somehow mixed up with Sanji's shoes. It was the first memory of my growing world.

Other seasons I would come to know – spring and autumn and winter – and other countries where shoes abounded. But the things that crowded in on me that day in the rain, and in many rains after, and made me an exile for the better part of my life, were also the things that connected me to my country and made me want to tell its story.

But there is no story to tell, no one story anyway, not since that day in 1505 when the fidalgo Don Laurenço de Almeida, resplendent in gold braid and epaulettes and hat plumed with all the birds of paradise, landed on our shores and broke us from our history. No one story, with a beginning and an end, no story that picks up from where the past left off – only bits and shards of stories, and those of the people I knew, and that only in passing, my own parents and son, or heard tell of, for there was no staying in a place or in a time to gather a story whole, only an imagined time and place. And no story of the country – or, if of the country, not our story but theirs, the *parangis*'. Except that we all bore the imprint of that history, like a stigma, internalized it even, made it our own,

against our will, calling to memory the while to lose it by losing memory itself.

My father worked in the post office, the new post office by the large tea estate, no more than a cry away from the disused building that had sheltered me from the rain that day. He was born in Sandilipay, a bone-dry village in the north of Ceylon, at the turn of the century. His father was an inept farmer on whose *lachim* of land nothing seemed to grow but children, thirteen of them in as many harvests, till the villagers enviously referred to him as 'the man with the green penis'. Only nine of the children, five of them sons, survived childbirth and infancy. My father was the youngest. And on his education my grandfather, awakened to the possibilities of a safe career in the British Raj, concentrated the attention of his passionless years. So that by the time the boy was twelve years old, he was fluent both in English and Tamil, excelled in arithmetic, and was constantly nagged by his brothers for being immersed in a book when it was his turn to feed the goats or milk the cows or run the chickens in for the night.

One day the headmaster of my father's school turned up at the old man's 'farm'.

'Are you Sahadevan's father?' he inquired without ceremony, leaning his bicycle against the well. My grandfather looked up from the aubergine plants he was tending, took in the man with the bike – tall, self-possessed, dressed in immaculate white *verti* and shawl and *banian* – and went back to his aubergines. A rogue, he thought, from town, a trader perhaps, some unpaid bill? He knew the seed merchant, the ironmonger, the pawnbroker, all the people he had business with in town. But this man? Perhaps he was the new pawnbroker. The old man was alarmed at the thought. The drought had already damaged his crops, and there was now this unexpected visitation from town. The seasons on the one hand, rapacious townsmen on the other. He needed time to think, prepare his defence, draw the man on to peasant ground and fight him there. He raised himself slowly, pulling his loin cloth together, and walked up to the well.

'Are you Sahadevan's father?' the man demanded impatiently. And stung by the arrogance in his tone of voice my grandfather quite lost his temper.

'Yes, I am,' he retorted. 'And what is that to you? Besides, I have got a name too, you know.'

'Yes, yes I know that, Mr Pandyan,' the intruder replied easily. 'You see, I am the boy's headmaster. I sent a number of messages for you to come and see me. Now I have had to come all this way.'

'Oh sir, I am sorry,' answered my grandfather abjectly, going into his peasant slouch of deference.

He invited the headmaster to come into the shade, saying that he must have had a tiring journey. And why hadn't he told him he was coming? He would have met him at the house. He hesitated in his embarrassment. What would he like? A little toddy perhaps? He had some fresh toddy. Or would he like some water to cool his face? No?

He began drawing water from the well, washing himself, taking in the new situation. The headmaster, good heavens, the headmaster, come all the way to see him, he who had never been to school!

'Well, sir, you are out of the sun at least. Is your bike all right over there?'

'Mr Pandyan, please, I want to talk about the boy. I have no time to waste. Besides you have got your work to do.'

Sahadevan was in trouble. Expelled, perhaps? My grandfather became wary again.

'You don't have to worry about me, master. Time I have, that is all I have in fact.' He stared at the headmaster hopefully. 'Well, sir, what about the boy? He is a good boy you know, not a trouble-maker or anything like that; maybe he could study a little harder.'

But it was very difficult, he added, to get all the work done on the farm by himself, even with three boys. The eldest had married and moved away and Sahadevan had to help a little, milking the cows and that. 'But I'll see that he works harder, if that is all.'

'Mr Pandyan, if you will stop a minute, I'll tell you what I came to see you about.'

'Yes, yes, that's a good idea,' the old man said, squatting now on his haunches before the headmaster, a supplicant awaiting truth. Sahadevan was a fine boy, the headmaster told him, and an excellent student, the best in the school. It was very creditable that he had been able to leave the village school so early and come to him. He hadn't known a word of English at the time. Imagine that! And in three years he had beaten the rest of his class in English and arithmetic. In fact, he had been recommended for a double promotion.

'Double promotion? What is that, sir?' asked the old man, glowing with pride, the drought forgotten. Another seed had begun to sprout.

It meant that Sahadevan, instead of going from Form 2 to Form 3, would go straight to Form 4, the headmaster answered. My grandfather jumped up in delight, reaching for his pot of toddy. 'And that means he will leave school earlier and help me on the farm?'

'No, no, Mr Pandyan, he must not become a farmer,' the headmaster replied anxiously. 'He is an extraordinarily bright boy. He must go to

a proper college, in Colombo. That is what I came to see you about.'

Sahadevan, he explained, was college material. St Benedict's or St Joseph's, they were the best, if they would take him. But the old man would have to find the money. In fact they might even try to get him a scholarship or at least a bursary. 'The sooner he goes the better,' he finished.

College material? the old man reflected. Well, well, well, the headmaster was right, education was a great thing, a great thing. Perhaps the boy would enter government service, who knows, a government agent one day even, eh? Yes, yes, the headmaster was right. Of course his other sons could help him manage the farm. It wasn't much of a farm anyway. And truth to say, he wasn't a very successful farmer either. Yes, by all means, let the boy have education. Perhaps he might even become a headmaster.

Rising, he took a swig from the pot and held it out to the headmaster, who turned it down. He sat on his haunches again.

'But, sir,' he complained despondently, 'there's no money. I can sell my wife's jewels, but there is only the bangles left now. And my eldest daughter, she is getting on, you know.' He shook his greying head. 'Twenty-two and no man in sight. I haven't a dowry to give her, except a bit of this land, and you know that's not very much.' He drank from the pot again. 'Where will I go for money, sir, even if he gets that scholarship or something, how will I feed him and buy him shoes and things? Of course there's my wife's brother, the dry fish trader—'

'I know, Mr Pandyan. I know Mr Segaram well.'

'Sahadevan can stay with him. But we never got along, you know. He always wanted to adopt Sahadevan, because his dried-up wife couldn't have any children herself. I told him he could have one of the girls, or even the second boy who is not very good on the farm. But no, he wanted Sahadevan.'

'Mr Segaram is one of the old boys of our school, you know, and he has given the school a lot of help.' The headmaster hesitated. 'He was down to see me last week, in fact, and I told him about the boy.'

'You did?'

'Don't misunderstand me. Sahadevan was only mentioned in the course of conversation: he is very good at science too, you know. I told Mr Segaram about trying to get him into St Benedict's.'

'That bloody fool. What does he know about education?'

'Mr Pandyan,' said the headmaster, with some warmth, 'Mr Segaram is prepared to keep the boy, support him, provide him with school uniform, shoes, meet all his school expenses—'

'He bloody well won't, headmaster! He bloody well won't! No boy

of mine is going to be obliged to that bloody trader! Dry fish, is it? He has made his money on dry fish? And now he wants to make my son a dry fish merchant too? And marry him off, I suppose to his wife's niece? Oh no, Sahadevan will go to that college – you arrange it, you arrange it – you arrange that scholarship thing, and I'll find the money for school expenses! I will. Somehow.'

'Be reasonable, Mr Pandyan,' replied the headmaster angrily. 'Your son's future is at stake and all you can think of. . . . What has Mr Segaram done to you?'

'Done to me? Done to me? He tried to play me out of my dowry, that's what, and then he tried to buy my land.'

'Yes, but that was a long time ago. He has changed. So must you. If he wants to help the boy, let him. Even if you find the money for the school uniform and books, where's he going to stay? Besides, Mr Segaram lives so close to St Benedict's. The boy walks seven miles to school every morning and evening now. St Benedict's is only a mile from Mr Segaram's house. Come on, Mr Pandyan, be reasonable.'

And watching my grandfather weaken, he added that there was nothing like education in this world. Surely he could see that for himself. It was a wonderful chance for the boy. Besides, he couldn't go on working all his life. Sahadevan would look after him, he was sure of that, a very thoughtful boy.

'Oh, all right then, headmaster. But mind, Segaram must come and ask me himself, none of this go-between business. It is not as though he is doing me a favour, you know.'

The headmaster nodded. 'I understand,' he said.

'Does the boy know?'

'No, not yet. I thought you should be the one to tell him, Mr Pandyan.'

And so my father went to 'college', St Benedict's College, a school run by Catholic brothers in the north of Colombo. He did very well at his studies there too, winning the school Scripture and general knowledge prizes in his last year. But after passing his School Certificate examination, he had to leave, as neither his uncle nor his father could support him any longer. The old man's land had all gone as dowry to his two eldest daughters; two more of his sons had married and gone away, the other had been crippled by a fall from a palmyrah tree (the story was that he drank the toddy even as he tapped the tree, a job which he should have left to the low-castes anyway). Two daughters, the twins, remained unmarried. Even the mud house in which my grandparents lived had fallen into decay. And Segaram had been slowly pushed out of his dry

fish business by the Anglo-Fish Corporation.

For a time my father helped his uncle Segaram with his ailing business. But when a few months later the Anglo-Fish Corporation had finally swallowed Segaram up, my father was taken into the firm, from the generosity of their heart, the company made out, though Segaram knew it was to win his customers over to the firm. And for a while it looked as though my father would make his mark in business: he was good at figures, was straight and firm in his dealings with customers and worked as devotedly for the corporation as he had for his uncle. 'That boy has a good head for business,' Mr Thomson, the director of Anglo-Fish, was heard to say. 'He will be running this firm one day.'

But Grandfather Pandyan wanted the boy beside him. He was getting old and the heart had gone out of his fight against land to which he no longer belonged, for it no longer belonged to him. He now managed what he once owned in return for a portion of rice and a handful of vegetables. His sons-in-law, both townsmen, cared nothing for the land but still claimed their share of the produce at harvest time. Not only did they refuse to put money into seed or fertilizer, but they accused my grandfather of neglect and downright theft whenever their portion of the produce fell. Kept from loving and caring for his land, and watching his family fall apart, the old man had taken to drink and to bed. My grandmother sent for Sahadevan. Mahadev would have done as well: as the eldest it was his duty to take up his father's burden, but he had a family to support and a job to mind. As works overseer (albeit subordinate to his father-in-law), hiring out labour on contract to the government for road-works, he had to keep constant watch over his labourers to make sure the job was done in time. Pandyan's second son was a cripple and spent his time in social activities around the temple and in prayer. The two other boys lived in their wives' villages some twenty miles to the north, drinking their dowries away. So it fell to Sahadevan to mind the farm and care for his parents and unmarried sisters. Besides, everyone looked up to Sahadevan, his brothers-in-law too, for had not Sahadevan passed his School Certificate? And he was no slouch as a farmer either: if anyone was able to get any money out of the land, he could.

For close on two years Sahadevan worked night and day to make the farm pay. He managed to make some small profit in the first year and, even more remarkably, persuaded his brothers-in-law to put some of their profit back into the farm. But twice the rains had been late, and labour was hard to come by.

'Those damn low-caste fellows can get better jobs in town now,' observed Pandyan bitterly. The Roman Catholic priests, he complained, had promised the *nalavans* that they did not have to be submissive and

obedient to be born to a higher caste in their next birth. All they had to do was to convert to the true faith of the Roman church and they would go to heaven.

For a while Sahadevan held out against the odds. But at the end of the second year, his brothers-in-law wanted the farm sold so that they could marry their sisters off: cash and not land had become the more attractive dowry. Besides, old Pandyan was getting anxious about his two unmarried daughters. Sahadevan would have to find a proper job, one more suited to his English education. A clerical job, hopefully, in the service of the central government in Colombo. There were openings there for bright young Tamils, the British seemed to favour them, and a government job carried the type of prestige that would restore the respect in which Pandyan's family had once been held. And then there was all that security.

Respect and security. Old man Pandyan fingered them for a moment – they were not the things he had quite wanted from life. As a young man he had rejected them both. He had fought and accepted and revelled in the recurring drought and the untimely rain. He had wept when the crops failed him and rejoiced when they broke through the barren land against all the dictates of heaven. And he had celebrated his own strength at having brought them through against the will of the gods before whom only a moment before he had lain an abject supplicant. Up one moment, down the next, an endless love affair with the land and the sky, without a progression or an end, and yet moving in a spiral upwards through a re-revolution of time.

Now the land had been taken from him. His rhythm was broken. Time had become one-dimensional, unilinear. He was at outs with the world.

But with his son he found another rhythm, a way of keeping step with the new order of things, another measure of time. It was not altogether to his liking, but as he saw this other seed sprout and grow and battle with its own world, he determined to keep faith with it.

Respect and security. He would accept them for the sake of his daughters, to wed them better; for himself even, though not for his son. But there, he knew, he need have no fear, for even into this new order of things, enclosed though it was, Sahadevan would bring his own measure of disorder and protest and rebellion. Sahadevan would break through, like corn.

In the certainty of that continuity, Pandyan rose from his bed and walked tall in the promise of Sahadevan's days, wearing now a *verti* and shawl, as the father of a prospective government servant should, and sporting a rolled-gold wrist watch.

My father was nineteen when he returned to Colombo once more, this time to take up a post as a 'clerical servant' in the telegraph department of the postal service. His uncle Segaram offered to put him up, but Sahadevan wanted to be adult and free and found himself room and board with a Sinhalese family a few miles from his office in Slave Island. At first he worked hard and studied long into the night for his departmental exams: he was still too fresh from the poverty of his village to spend money on the pleasures of the city. But he liked to fall from time to time, as he put it, indulging in a beer now and then with his friends from the office, visiting the bioscope on occasion and even betting on a horse one day. All the little things which as a schoolboy at St Benedict's he had promised himself he would do when he was grown up and had money of his own. But he still managed to send some money home to his parents, and even a sari or two to his sisters.

Gradually his 'extravagances' got worse. He developed a taste for cards, beer gave way to arrack. The remittances home began to fall off. And though he applied himself to his work at the office, he paid no heed to his studies. But to his surprise, and that of his friends, he passed his departmental exam at the end of the first year and was confirmed as Junior Clerk, Grade IV, which meant of course that he would be entitled to one week's leave in the year and a free railway 'warrant'. On the strength of that, Sahadevan decided to visit his folk.

He bought apples and grapes for his sisters, who had never even seen them before, a *verti* for his father, a shirt for his brother and a Bangalore sari for his mother, and all manner of sweets and chocolates and biscuits as befitted a man returning from the capital – all on the money he had borrowed from his friends against his next month's pay.

The journey to Jaffna took a whole day and his neat white suit and polished brown shoes were bedraggled and dirty by the time Sahadevan entered the last lap of his journey, in a bullock-cart, to his village, some ten miles from the railway station.

As they drew away, the carter looked covertly at the youngster seated beside him and thought he knew his face. The pug nose and the broad forehead topped by a shock of black hair seemed familiar to him. Surely it was . . . no he could not be certain, and these townsmen were not a communicative lot. But it must be . . . he had the same build as the old man, medium height and sturdy as a bull.

'It is Mr Pandyan's youngest son, isn't it?' the carter finally burst out, unable to contain his curiosity. But Sahadevan, immersed in the thoughts of his homecoming, did not respond, and the driver quickly lapsed into conversation less intimate, remarking that trains were not very reliable, and he must have had a tiring journey. Then, roused to the

slowness of his own vehicle, he yelled at the bull, beating it mightily with his stick and twisting its tail at its arse with a deft flick of his toes. 'Juk, juk,' he shouted. 'Juk, juk, you son of Satan, can't you go any faster?'

'Yes, it's a long journey,' said Sahadevan agreeably. With the comforts of trams and buses behind him, he was becoming used to the cart once more. 'Two whole days on the train, and only five days of my leave left. It's not worth it,' he fretted, trying to remember the driver's name.

'Oh no, don't say that, master,' replied the carter, certain now that it was Pandyan's son. There was no mistaking his voice. 'You have been away a long time, a whole year, and your folk have missed you. Very proud of you too. Your father started on that new well with that money you sent him. I was helping him. The water in the old well was getting salty and -'

'Velan, it's Velan, isn't it?' yelled Sahadevan in sudden recognition, his veneer of city reserve falling completely away from him. 'Yes of course it's Velan. You had gone to live in your wife's village when I came back from Colombo to run the farm. No wonder I couldn't remember you. I haven't seen you since I was a boy, and you recognized me?'

The driver grinned and passed two fingers through his shock of greying hair. 'Well, young master, I carried you around as a boy, didn't I? And you haven't changed all that much, still got the old man's features, and his temper, I dare say. Remember that time he took a stick to you because the cows hadn't been milked all day, and you ran up the mango tree? Ha ha, I'll never forget that!'

'Yes and he didn't know that I was stuck up there and couldn't come down even if I wanted to, did he?' Sahadevan too was grinning now, the memory vivid in his mind.

'Go on! He knew all right, the old fox, but he wouldn't let on, not he! Pretending he'd wait there all day just to punish you. Yes! If I hadn't come along, you'd both be there still, such stubborn people, both of you.'

Velan continued to reminisce. There was that other time when the young master ran away from school, he recalled, and Sahadevan chuckled. Well, fancy him remembering that. He was observing the way the driver's eyes narrowed as they peered into the past. In the village there were only memories and people, the man told him, weddings and funerals and feuds. It was different for city folk. They had so much to do and no time for anybody.

'But I knew the city couldn't have changed you. You are still one of us, *thambi*,' he assured Sahadevan.

And so restored to his old relationship, Sahadevan began to bombard

Velan with question after question. Why was he driving a cart? What had happened to the farm? His wife, how was she? And his son, it was the boy only, wasn't it? When had he come back to Sandilipay?

A shadow passed over Velan's features, lined now, and pinched in pain. Dead, he sobbed. Both his wife and son. Some long and terrible fever. Enteric, perhaps.

The sadness in his eyes deepened.

'My wife, she was expecting another baby, perhaps a son to help with the farm – who knows?'

He wiped the tears away. She died in hospital, he said. The city hospital, mind. He shrugged with resignation. The doctors couldn't do anything. Perhaps he should have listened to the native physician.

He struggled to keep his tears back and it was a little while before he could continue. 'I couldn't stay on in the farm after my wife died,' he said more calmly. 'So I sold it and bought this cart – set up in business, you might say.' He gave Sahadevan a wry smile: the truth was hard to bear, even harder to tell. But he saw Sahadevan's eyes mirror his grief and gave in. 'Land without sons, *thambi*, what use is that to anyone?'

Sahadevan was silent. He couldn't say anything. What was there to say? They continued their journey in a communion of sorrow.

'He is here, he is here. Colombo uncle is here!' His nieces ran into the house to tell their grandparents. Their baby brother had been left behind and, picking up the straggler, Sahadevan followed close behind the others. His mother came rushing out from the kitchen to meet him, wiping her hands on her sari, smiling and crying at once. His father had put aside the paper he was reading and came forward at a more leisurely pace, waiting his turn to embrace his son. His sisters and brothers-in-law were there too, as well as his cousins and aunts. Even his brother had broken with his temple routine to receive him. And Rover, his old mangy dog, shook the fleas off him to go and greet his master. They were all there, just to celebrate his homecoming!

His mother's eyes widened in alarm. 'Oh look at your nice suit, all splattered with mud! Why didn't Velan bring you right up to the house?'

He tried to put her at ease. Enveloped in the folds of her sari, she was smaller than he remembered.

'The lanes are all muddy, *amma*. The cart couldn't get through. Anyway, it's only a short walk from the main road.'

His mother offered him a towel and *verti*. 'The well's over there,' she pointed, 'behind the *cadjan* fence, the new well, your well. I'll have some soda water to drink when you come back in.'

'Soda water?' bristled the old man. 'Soda water? He is not in the city,

you know. Fetch him some toddy, some fresh toddy. Kunju, go and get your uncle some of your father's toddy, if he hasn't finished it all,' he mumbled.

Sahadevan shed his suit and shoes behind the curtain that separated the men's room from the women's and put on his *verti*. He picked up the towel and walked to the well, looking once again at the familiar trees around him. He could still smell his mother's cooking. He came back from the well refreshed, and joined his father on the verandah over a pot of palmyrah toddy.

'You have not completed this addition to the house, then?' he inquired.

'No, son,' Pandyan wiped the toddy from his moustache. 'There was the well to finish, and the roof of the old house to thatch, and your mother has been having those attacks again. Mahadev sends some money too, you know, but somehow it all goes.'

'But you were anxious to get this part of the house finished for Saraswathi's dowry. Why didn't you tell me you needed more money?'

'You are doing your best as it is. And look at you, so thin and gaunt. In fact, once the rainy season is over and this part of the house is done, you needn't send us so much money. You must look after your health, son. That's more important than getting Saraswathi and Lakshmi married off. Anyway there's no hurry to discuss these matters now. Finish your toddy. Then we'll go and eat.'

The menfolk were already seated cross-legged on the floor of the kitchen with their plantain leaves before them, waiting to be served, when Sahadevan came in behind his father.

'Mind your head,' Pandyan warned his son, but too late: he had forgotten to crouch through the door. Rubbing his forehead ruefully, Sahadevan sat down, to find that his mother had taken his plantain leaf and replaced it with a plate resting on a stool.

'What is all this, then?' growled Pandyan. 'Plates and stools, and what next? What is the matter, woman, do you think your son has forgotten to eat off a plantain leaf?' And as his wife hurriedly took away the stool and plate and put a leaf before Sahadevan, he added, 'He only works in the city you know. He doesn't have to follow their ways.'

'Yes, of course -' Sahadevan began, when Rama, the religious brother, broke in.

'Why didn't you go to the shrine room after your bath and put holy ash on your forehead?' he asked.

'I forgot,' replied Sahadevan lamely, more in apology to his mother, who was devout without being intolerant. No one paid much attention to Rama anyway.

As his mothers and his sisters served up the piping hot rice with *dhal* and *brinjal* and fried fish and prawns, Sahadevan realized what an occasion this was. Rice and one vegetable, if that, was all they usually had.

'Eat up, son,' his mother said plying him with more food. They were his favourite prawns.

'No, *amma*, really. I have had my share.'

'There is plenty left for us,' said Saraswathi and Lakshmi in unison from the fireplace at the back of the kitchen, where they were dissecting a big ripe jak fruit. 'And the children have eaten.'

'Guess what you are having tomorrow,' said the old lady. She served Sahadevan yet another spoonful of rice.

'No more, please. I can't eat any more, I'm full,' pleaded Sahadevan, covering his leaf with his hands. 'Well, what are we having tomorrow? Not *kool*?'

'Yes, *kool*,' said his mother proudly. Her eyes shone. '*Kool*, with crabs, nice young ones, and beans and fish-heads and jak seeds and prawns and —'

'Oh, *amma*. You shouldn't have gone to all this bother. And they are all so expensive now,' Sahadevan protested.

'You don't have to worry about that, son,' said Pandyan. 'Your no-good brothers are sending some of the stuff from town. They couldn't take time off their drinking to come and see you, but they still want to remain in your good books. They haven't sent us a bloody thing up to now. Though I bet they'll be coming to you for some money sooner or later.'

'How are they?' asked Sahadevan.

'Don't speak to me about them, son. The sooner they are forgotten the better.' And the old man, finishing his meal, rose and left the kitchen.

'He can't sit very long on the floor nowadays,' explained Sahadevan's mother, squatting before him. 'You will go and see your brothers, won't you? They are also my children, after all.'

Sahadevan looked long and lovingly at his mother. Her face had not changed much over the years. A few more lines and wrinkles perhaps, but the strength was still there, and an inexplicable softness that pain had not dimmed or poverty hardened. It always amazed Sahadevan, this gentle strength of hers. His father's more rugged toughness he could understand. It had to do with his battle against the land and the seasons and his pride as a provider. But it was she who had to make do with what he provided, bear his thousand children, yield to his slightest whim. Or so it would appear. But beneath it all, Sahadevan knew, they had another unspoken life which wove them together. He had seen it

that time his mother was ill with pneumonia and Pandyan would not leave her side, tending her as he never tended his field, nursing her all through the night and day, partaking of her pain and yet bearing down on her to live with the strength of his will. Sahadevan was ten at the time, but somewhere in his boy's mind he had known that if his mother died his father would never be the man he was.

'What are these attacks you have been having, then?' Sahadevan asked his mother.

'Oh, they are nothing, son. Just some dizzy spells. Your father makes too much of it just because I fell one time at the well and cut my head. But that was a long time ago. He wrote to you about it. I am all right now. Anyway it's all in His hands.'

'Yes,' said Sahadevan impatiently, brushing God aside for the moment. 'But what do the doctors say, or are you still taking native medicine?'

'Something to do with the blood, the hospital said, asked me to eat properly, do less work, not go to the well. They are town people. What do they know of our life? Maniam is much better. He gave me some herbs and things, and that horrible concoction I take every morning. But it's doing me good. See, I'm fatter already,' and she stood up to show herself better.

Sahadevan looked at his mother's body, wearied with incessant child-birth. There was certainly strength there. Once, he remembered, it had had a bearing about it, to match that noble face; but now it just looked used up, and the burden of carrying it around had begun to shadow her eyes with pain. Sahadevan could not stand it, but at the same time he knew that it was from hardship and grief and the bearing of children that she had winnowed the stuff of her life. She could rest her body now; her daughters would do the work.

And he provide?

Sahadevan was filled with the shame of his own extravagances. His meagre remittances home had hardly eased his parents' poverty. The 'new house' – no more than a rectangular structure partitioned into two rooms and a verandah opposite and parallel to the old house – remained unfinished, his twin sisters unmarried. And yet his parents hailed him as their benefactor. It was to him and Mahadev, they said, that they owed everything. The only thing that worried them now was the dowry for the girls. Once they were married, the old couple could die in peace. But at the same time Sahadevan must not neglect his health through providing for them. All those shirts and saris and sweets he had brought: there was no need for that. Money did not grow on trees. Besides, Mahadev was a fully-fledged overseer now and the money he sent would provide

the cash part of Saraswathi's dowry, and once the 'new house' was finished, she could easily find a suitor. Mr Reddy, the marriage-broker, had assured them of that, and once she was married off, it would smooth the way for Lakshmi, who had the same fine features as Saraswathi but, as the darker of the two, would not attract eligible young men. A widower, perhaps, who would be satisfied with part ownership of the old house. But there was no real hurry. Sahadevan must look after himself first, find proper lodgings. Living with a Sinhalese family was no good, they didn't eat properly, their cooking wouldn't be to his liking. Perhaps he should go and live with some of the Jaffna boys who had rented their own house in Kotahena near his uncle Segaram's place. They had their own cook too, a Tamil, and shared all the expenses. A 'chummery', yes, that was what they called it, a 'chummery'. Perhaps that was where Sahadevan should go and live.

In the days that followed Sahadevan became familiar once more with the hardships his folk had to endure. They did not starve, it was true, the old man still grew the few vegetables they needed on a small bit of land behind the house and there was enough money to provide them with rice once a day, but in sickness they had to forego some of that to pay for medicine. The roof of the kitchen was leaking, and its mud walls had begun to crack. The three chairs they had (for visitors) had been repaired beyond redemption, and even the mats they slept on had gaping holes.

How could he have lost touch with all this, wondered Sahadevan. Perhaps it was his job that did this to him. Working for a monthly salary seemed to break the connection between work and need, and turn his wants into needs. He had to get a hold on himself, get his life back into some sort of order.

He went back to Colombo determined not to fail his parents' hopes. He gave up his lodgings in Slave Island and went to live in the chummery in Kotahena, where he was to spend the next two years leading a more frugal life, a studious one, even. He sent more money home, passed his departmental exams, found promotion and visited his folk every six months as he now had two railway warrants a year.

At first he liked the life. It returned him to the austerity of his years on the farm and enabled him to fulfil his growing responsibilities. Like a man, said 'Uncle' Nayagam, the chummery's elder, a short, pudgy man who seemed never to have been young. 'And a fine example to us all,' he added graciously. But the praise made Sahadevan apprehensive. He did not want to be a man like 'Uncle' Nayagam was, a man waking, working, praying, eating and sleeping to the clock, a pre-ordained and mechanical man whose seldom joy was his annual visit to his wife in Jaff-

na and his constant sorrow the fact that all it had yielded was another baby. And so he never got around to bringing his family to live with him, which was why he had rented the house in the first place, and settled for a family of chums instead, on the understanding of course that they would leave (as chums would) the day he brought his wife and children home.

But that day never comes, does it, Sahadevan asked himself ruefully, wondering whether he too would end up like Nayagam. The government service was full of them, men who had left their wives and children back in some remote village in the north and gone off to serve the British Raj in some God-forsaken part of the country, opening up roads and railways and post offices. Constantly on the move, with a camp-bed and a tin trunk for comfort and company and a yearly rail pass to connect them to their families. Some never saw their families at all. Like his cousin Velu. He was a road builder up-country – engineer, they would have called him if he was qualified and white – and every time the government wanted to carve out a road through the jungles they sent for him, pushing him farther and farther inland until one day he completely vanished from view.

No, he did not want to end up like Nayagam or Velu, Sahadevan told himself. He would want his family with him, when he married. Like his Sinhalese mates in the post office. But it was easy for them. This was their part of the country. They had lived here all their lives. They had friends and relatives here and the villages were not too far removed from the towns anyway. The towns in fact seemed to have grown out of the villages as naturally as the buying and selling they were so good at, and even the railway lines that broke through coconut land and paddy field looked a natural part of the landscape. But in his part of the country, the railways had pushed the villages violently aside and set down towns at random with no more purpose than to transport landless farmers to the south.

And here in the south, where the land was green and lush, the seasons more tempered and life less harsh and unyielding, Sahadevan felt himself drawn into another way of life which was not all hardship and duty. He learned again some of the joy he had known from wrestling with the land as a farmer and had lost in the work of pushing a pen over interminable ledgers, but this time from a growing acquaintance with leisure, learning that evenings were not just for overtime and Sundays for study but perhaps also for sitting on a beach by twilight, or playing ping-pong at the YMCA, or merely talking with friends over tea. It was slow and painful, though, this acquaintance with divided time that separated labour from life and created nothing. But the other, that saw time as a

continuum of work and pay, Nayagam's time, seemed even more deathly, as his Sinhalese friends were quick to point out.

'You Jaffna fellows live a dreary bloody life,' Tissa had remarked in the office canteen one day. Seeing Sahadevan stiffen, he had quickly added, 'I don't mean you. You at least have a drink with us now and again. But those other chaps in your boarding. What joy do they get out of life? Especially that married fellow, Nayagam?'

Tissa had just been appointed staff representative on the canteen management. He was tall, thin and bespectacled, and handsome in a spare sort of way.

Sahadevan gave him an uneasy look. 'We have all got our folks in the village to support, Tissa, relatives, poor relatives. How can we let them down? I couldn't have gone to college without their help, you know.'

'Yes, yes, I understand all that, Saha,' answered Tissa impatiently. He straightened his tie: he was on an official visit to the canteen. 'We are not exactly rich ourselves. My father has to look after two other families apart from his own, and we have only a small bit of coconut land. So all right, maybe the land is more fertile here in the south. But the point is that you don't have to be so bloody dismal about it. I went to Jaffna once you know, to a village, I had another Tamil friend just like you, he got transferred to Dimbulla, and I didn't see any of this there. Of course the people were poor, but they still got a kick out of life, and so generous they were. They seemed to enjoy giving what they didn't have. But when you Tamils come to Colombo, you get so mean and small, all the life seems to go out of you, and you huddle together in bloody caves.'

A few weeks later Tissa invited Sahadevan over to his parents' home near Kalutara. Within hours of meeting Tissa's family, Sahadevan felt more at ease with himself than he had for a long time, whether at the chummery or at his uncle Segaram's house. Tissa's coastal village, with its coconut palms, flowering rhododendrons and green vegetables, its tiled roofs and cemented verandahs, was nothing like his own. And yet there was a familiar warmth and hospitality and an easy-going acceptance of him that he had not known since he had left Sandilipay. Quite easily and simply Sahadevan slipped into Tissa's way of life, got to wearing a *sarong*, which he found less inhibiting than the *verti*, developed a taste for the milder Sinhalese curry, and saw in Tissa's sister a brasher beauty than he had been accustomed to. Even the buggy in which Tissa and he had gone from the station to the village seemed somehow familiar, and the gathering of Tissa's uncles and aunts and cousins and nephews and nieces reminded him of his own reception in Sandilipay. Tissa himself seemed a different man, not cock-sure or cheeky any more, but

respectful to his elders, considerate of those younger than himself and helpful to all, giving to each his value and his place. It was a pattern of relationships Sahadevan understood but not one that he would have readily associated with Tissa.

By the time Sahadevan returned to Colombo a week later, his ideas about southern folk had already begun to change. They were not as uncaring and self-indulgent as he had previously assumed. Though they had cause to be; their land was kinder to them, their hardships less fraught. Perhaps that explained their outgoing natures and their easy acceptance of life's vicissitudes. His own folk by contrast were impassive and dour, their relationships more principled, their kindnesses more harsh. They gave as the southerners gave but, unlike them, they knew the cost of their giving.

Gradually Sahadevan began to loosen up. He was still conscious of his duty to his parents and sisters, but he was now able to take this in his stride, not expecting that he would lose sight of it just because he spent some of his leisure with his Sinhalese mates, swimming in the sea or loafing in the countryside or just playing with their children. He took his friends home to the chummery to give them 'a taste of good Tamil cooking' or a lesson in vegetable gardening. And they in turn brought to the chummery a gaiety that even Uncle Nayagam reluctantly gave in to.

Two years later, the chummery broke up. Some of Sahadevan's friends had already left on being transferred out of Colombo, and now Uncle Nayagam, having finally given up his dream of bringing his family to Colombo, took up a minor position closer to home. Sahadevan went to lodge with Tissa's uncle and aunt, the Wijepalas.

2

NO ONE KNEW Mr Wijepala's first name – or, rather, no one cared to remember it. For Mr Wijepala himself was reputed to have discarded his first name, Samuel, and, with it, his Christian forebears. Close friends knew him as S.W., but to everyone else he was Mr Wijepala.

He was a fierce old man, with over forty years' service in the railways and still very active in union work. The rumour was that he had been one of the prime movers of the rail strike of 1912, but people remembered him for the charges of racial and religious bigotry he had laid against his employers before the Royal Commission of Inquiry the following year. Ironically, though, it was his own reference to the Com-

missioners as *para suddhas* (bastard whites) that had drawn the public's attention to his evidence and made him a national hero. His bosses' attempts to get rid of him thereafter had become something of a continuing saga but, at sixty-one, S.W. still remained in service, unpromoted but unsacked. He was too experienced a fitter and foreman for the Railway Board to want to lose him, and to sack him would be to rally his fellows to a cause far more rousing than any the Workmen's Association could think of.

Sahadevan knew little of all this when he went to live with Mr Wijepala and his wife; they had no children. All he had seen of S.W. on his visits to see Tissa was the severity of the man, his detachment and his silences, the tall sergeant-straight figure, and the bushy eyebrows set in a hard crag of a face. His wife, Prema, on the other hand, was round and roly-poly and affable, and treated Sahadevan to the sweets and savouries that she was for ever making for her nephew.

On the morning Sahadevan had arrived at their house, S.W. had absent-mindedly opened the door to him and, gathering him up and his bag, delivered them unceremoniously to his wife in the kitchen, saying, 'Ah, Prema, here is Sa, Sa . . . Tissa's friend.' He looked as though he had been disturbed in the middle of something, and Sahadevan did not pay much attention to his behaviour. But his indifference did not get any better in the weeks following and Sahadevan began to wonder whether he had done the right thing in moving in with the Wijepalas. It had been Tissa's suggestion from the beginning. He himself was moving out, to Kotte, where he had been transferred, and found the journey from his uncle's home too arduous. Besides, Auntie Prema, he had maintained, could do with a boarder, and she had a soft spot for Sahadevan already. In any case, it would be good for Saha to be challenged by a man like his uncle.

But so far, Saha had seen little of S.W. And when he did see him, at dinner-time mostly, it was around the newspaper which S.W. read as he ate. In the mornings, the old man had already eaten and left by the time Sahadevan sat down to breakfast, and at the weekends S.W. was invariably closeted with his friends from work.

Prema had noticed Saha's growing disaffection with S.W. and, hoping to get the youngster interested in her husband's work, would send Saha into the meeting room with the tea. But Saha refused to be curious, and angrily Prema turned on him one day.

'You know who there, hah?' she burst out in broken English banging the teapot down on the table in front of Saha. 'Do you? In front room? Hah?'

Saha shook his head disinterestedly. All he wanted was his tea.

“Hamban” William, that’s who.’

Saha shook his head, stubbornly this time. Whoever this Hamban person was, it did not excuse S.W.’s behaviour.

‘And Vadivel, and –’ Prema stopped. It suddenly occurred to her that the youngster’s obstinacy was not altogether unmixed with ignorance, and he was too hurt by S.W.’s attitude to ask. ‘You don’t know, hah?’ she lapsed into Sinhala and, sitting herself down beside Saha, she poured out his tea for him. Hamban and Vadi and Marshall and that lot, she explained, were S.W.’s friends from the old strike days of 1912. Almost ten years to the day, she reminisced, counting out the years on her fingers as though each of those years had some special meaning for her. Marshall Appu, in fact, had only just returned from forced exile, yes, the government had banished him into the wilds of the Eastern Province as punishment for his activities. Her eyes softened as she spoke of him. And then there was Sam Perera, and Kalu Banda from the last rail strike two years ago, good caring men, and a couple of others Saha wouldn’t have heard of either.

But Saha was all ears now and Prema, encouraged by his attention, went on to talk about S.W.’s own part in the strikes and his growing bitterness at their failure. ‘That is why he and his friends are trying to get a proper union going,’ she ended. ‘Don’t you understand? It’s his life work, and he is afraid he won’t live to see it through. And while he is doing that he has no time for anyone. Not for me, not for you, not for no one.’

Sahadevan looked chastened.

‘But he is not always like that,’ Prema went on. ‘This is a particularly bad time, what with the petition and all.’

‘What petition?’ asked Sahadevan.

‘Why, to the Railway Board,’ explained Prema, ‘over that plateman Sirisena who was run over by an engine,’ and Sahadevan gathered that S.W. was drawing up a compensation claim for the man’s family. The management had denied liability, blaming the accident on the worker’s carelessness, but S.W. and his friends were claiming that the man was exhausted from being forced to work three consecutive shifts, and it was the engine driver, Mr Russell, who had been inefficient and careless.

‘Six children, he have, Sirisena,’ Auntie Prema broke into English in moments of anguish as though to stem the pain, ‘and his wife is, wife is, how do you say, one leg. . . .’

‘Cripple?’

‘Yes, cripple.’

Sahadevan was shocked. ‘But they can’t do that,’ he protested.

Auntie Prema nodded her head as though to say, oh, yes they could,

and picked up her sewing. It was a Sunday morning, and every Sunday Prema spent the first two hours after breakfast at the sewing machine, sewing children's clothes. She had no need to any more, but it was a habit that had stayed with her from the time when S.W. had been suspended on half-pay and she had to sew for their living. She was a good seamstress, and people still sent her orders, and she could not turn anyone down, particularly the ones who could not pay.

The sewing machine stood in the dining room by a large window. And it was there that Prema sat and gazed out on to the world between bouts of sewing, thinking her thoughts and sometimes dreaming. This morning she had been interrupted by Sahadevan who had lingered on at the dining table after breakfast, and Prema, noticing that the youngster was troubled, had turned to speak to him. But now she turned her chair back on him as though to say the conversation was over, she had work to do.

She could be as brusque as her husband, Sahadevan reflected, but somehow he didn't feel shut out by it. There was something affable and warm and cuddly about her. He watched her now, rearranging herself in her chair and trying to get her feet back on the treadle, and smiled. It was like that first day when he had moved in or, rather, been delivered to her in the kitchen. She was frying something at the time and without turning round shouted to Saha to have a *kokis* from the plate on the table. She had known him from before, she seemed to be saying, and what had changed now?

'I love *kokis*', Sahadevan had exclaimed.

'Yes, Tissa told me,' the old lady had replied, and gone on cooking. And it was only when she had finished lowering the last batch of *kokis* into the frying pan that she turned round and looked Sahadevan up and down.

'Hmm, too thin,' she muttered in Sinhala, 'must build you up, otherwise your mother won't recognize you.'

Sahadevan burst out laughing.

'So you understand Sinhala,' she observed.

'I can speak it,' Sahadevan boasted. 'A little,' he added cautiously. 'Will you teach me, Auntie?'

She nodded and said in halting English, 'You teach English to me then, yes?'

She put some *kokis* in a biscuit tin and pushed it towards Sahadevan.

'Give them to Tissa when he comes to work,' she said.

'But Auntie—' Sahadevan began.

'Yes, of course, he doesn't work with you any more. What am I thinking of?' She beat her forehead with the palm of her hand. 'I am

getting old. If Tissa was still working in the post office, you wouldn't be living here, would you?' she laughed.

But Tissa did still work in the postal service, Saha corrected her, only he had moved to the Kotte branch. And he was doing odd jobs for Mr Goonesinha and that Youth League thing in his spare time. Didn't Auntie Prema remember? Mr Goonesinha had given him rooms above his office.

The information did not interest Prema, though. All she was concerned about was Tissa's ability to look after himself. He had never been out of her sight since he had come to live with them as a boy, and she had done everything for him.

'I don't know how that boy is going to feed himself,' she muttered, sitting herself down at the little kitchen table in front of Saha. 'I bet your mother must be wondering the same about you.'

'No, she knows I am in good hands, Auntie,' Saha began and stopped, putting his hand to his mouth. 'Oh lord, I forgot. Tissa said he's coming on Wednesday, for dinner.'

'Oh he did, did he? And not a word to me? We'll see about that.'

But Tissa did not turn up that week or in the weeks following. At first he sent messages through Saha to say that he was busy at the moment but would be coming to visit his aunt very soon, and she should not worry on his account. And when the messages ceased, Saha invented them. After a while Saha stopped hearing from Tissa altogether and, fearing that he might be ill, went to see him, only to find that his friend had taken leave from work and gone up-country with his 'Chief'.

'It's all right, Saha,' Auntie Prema reassured him. 'You are a good lad, but there's no need to cover up for him. I know him.' Saha swallowed hard and decided to have it out with Tissa when he returned to Colombo that weekend. S.W. might be self-contained, but Auntie Prema needed to see Tissa, fuss over him, give expression to her love. And Saha realized embarrassingly what a poor substitute he was.

He did not like quarrelling with Tissa; it always ended in a shouting match, with Saha accusing Tissa of irresponsibility and Tissa condemning Saha for being 'so bloody stodgy'. But this was one time when Saha felt he was not fighting for himself, and something had to come out of it. He thought up a strategy and decided to set the scene by presenting himself dramatically at Tissa's room early on the Sunday morning. And with that in mind he went to bed early.

But when he woke the next morning, it was not to the crow of the cocks, but to the steady scratching of a cat or rat somewhere. The sun was already up. Sleepily he reached out for the clock. The scratching noise had ceased, to be replaced by a rapping on glass. Startled, he sat bolt

upright in his bed to see Tissa framed in the window.

'What on earth —' muttered Saha, and leapt out of bed. But Tissa put a finger to his lips, motioning Saha to silence, and signalled to him to open the back door. Hurriedly Saha put on a shirt and, passing a comb through his hair, crept out of his room and down the passageway, past the kitchen and Auntie Prema, to the back door, which he unlocked, quieter than a mouse. He was congratulating himself on having negotiated the journey so silently when he heard Auntie Prema call out, 'Ah, Saha, you are up.'

'Yes, Auntie?' said Saha entering the kitchen.

'Will you take this cup of coffee to your uncle in the front room, son, and while you are there you can collect the cups and saucers. They were up till late last night.'

'Oh they were, were they?' boomed Tissa, bounding in through the door and lifting Prema.

'Put me down, put me down!' cried his aunt, beating at him half-heartedly with her ladle. 'Put me down, you silly boy.' And when he finally did, she arranged her sari decorously around her and rapped him on his knuckles growling, 'No respect, that's what it is, no respect. The boys these days.'

'The boys these days, the boys these days,' sang Tissa, dancing a jig around her, even as she tried to get back to the cooking.

'You won't get any breakfast,' she warned Tissa, and he stopped in mock dismay.

'No breakfast? Oh Auntie,' and he threw himself on the floor.

'Oh, get up, you silly boy. I'm making —'

But Tissa had got up by then and, looking over his aunt's shoulder, exclaimed 'Ah, *rotti* and *sambol*. I'm hungry. Where's Uncle?'

'In the front room. Saha was taking his —'

'Here, Saha, let me take that.'

'*Dhadi-biddi, dhadi-biddi*, always in a hurry,' growled his aunt, but Tissa had already left the kitchen, with Saha in his wake.

'You go in first and collect the cups,' he said to Saha at the front-room door. 'I want to surprise him.'

The door was ajar, but Saha knocked and went in. S.W. was seated with his back to the door looking over a sheaf of papers. He looked up when Saha came in and acknowledged his presence with a nod and a smile. Saha started to gather up the cups and saucers on the farther side of the room and watched Tissa come in through the door, place the cup of coffee on a side table and, creeping up behind S.W.'s chair, put his hands over his uncle's eyes. The old man sat up, startled, and then settled himself back in his chair again, smiling.

'Silly fellow,' he said, pulling Tissa in front of him. 'Where have you been all these weeks? Don't you write any more?'

Tissa mumbled something and S.W. laughed, but Saha was not listening. He was lost in amazement at the change that had come over the old man. The lines had left his face or, rather, had rearranged themselves into smiles; he looked gentler, softer, almost skittish, foolish. Saha frowned.

'Have you taken Saha in hand yet?' he heard Tissa say.

'No, he's been lucky. I have been busy with this petition. It's finished now.'

'Will it work?'

S.W. made a wry face and shook his head from side to side.

'And the union?'

'Coming along.'

'Will that work?'

'No, not if that devil Manning has his way.'

Sahadevan was surprised at S.W.'s vehemence. But he remembered Auntie Prema telling him how the new Governor was deliberately setting the workers against each other, Tamils against Sinhalese and Sinhalese against Muslims, and S.W. was afraid that everything he had worked for in his life was coming apart.

'The Chief says that only a general strike can stop Manning's nonsense,' Tissa told his uncle. 'That's why we have been going around speaking to workers in the government factory, the harbour workers and even workers in Brown's and Walker's.'

'And?'

Saha was not sure, but S.W., he thought, sounded disinterested.

'Oh, he got on very well with them.' Tissa went on to describe the meetings. Some of them had to be clandestine of course, but they had laid the foundation for a genuine workers' union.

'But Goonesinha is not a worker,' protested S.W. 'How can he lead the workers?'

'He is not leading them, uncle, he is organizing them. The bosses are frightened of him, they will listen to him when they won't listen to you and Hamban and the rest.'

'Hmm! So we have got to hire our leaders now, have we?' S.W. grumbled. Saha did not know what they were talking about and, picking up the last of the cups, left the room.

Lying in bed that night, Saha began to think about S.W. Pandyan had always maintained that his son was a good judge of people, but Saha wasn't so sure any more. He had certainly not got the measure of S.W.

He had not got on with him; he would have liked him even less had not S.W.'s devotion to his wife, undemonstrative though it was, made him suspend judgement. Besides, he owed it to Auntie Prema to like the man. She was such a loving, uncomplicated person. To be human seemed the simplest thing in the world to her: she was for all time and all places. S.W. wasn't. He was of the towns, of the city, of places that made things, not grew them, of fights against people, not the weather. That, perhaps, was why he was so grim, unrelenting of himself and of others.

But that day Sahadevan had seen S.W.'s other side. He had tried to talk to Tissa about it when they went walking on the beach that evening, but Tissa would not be drawn. All he would say was 'That is Uncle all over, his bark is worse than his bite.' It never occurred to Tissa that Sahadevan might be unhappy living with S.W. and wanted to understand the man. Tissa just got on with life as though there was nothing to it; he was like his aunt in lots of ways. But Saha had to know, had to know things, people, facts, relationships. He was never satisfied till he had peeled away at the onion till it was no more, and then he threw it all up and went back to God: there was no explanation, only faith.

Strangely enough, it was his visit to temple the following Friday that opened S.W. out to Sahadevan. He had accompanied Auntie Prema to the Vihara a few times but had not gone to worship at the Sivan Kovil till he had a letter from his father saying that his mother had been taken ill again. S.W. had noticed the holy ash on Sahadevan's forehead and had sensed that the lad was troubled.

'Just go,' he said suddenly at dinner that night.

'Uncle?'

'Go and see your mother.'

'How? I can't take leave.'

'I'll get you a doctor's certificate.'

'But I'm not ill.'

'Your mother is.'

'What about my duties—'

'Your duty is to your mother.'

Sahadevan was shocked that this stern, upright man should want him to tell a lie and neglect his duties, but coming from S.W., it could not be wrong. He left for Sandilipay the following morning.

His brother, Mahadev, met him at the station. He looked drawn and tired.

'How did you know I was coming?' asked Saha.

'Mr Wijepala sent a wire,' replied Mahadev and led him to a hired car.

'Can we afford . . .' he began and stopped. What was Mahadev doing

here? Why had he come all the way from up-country? He went cold: his mother was dying. Mahadev, the first-born, had come to light the funeral pyre.

'Is she . . . ?' he asked, a catch in his voice.

'She's waiting for you.'

'Why wasn't I . . . ?'

'She got bad suddenly. No one thought . . . I happened to be in . . .'

Neither could finish his sentence. They had been closest to their mother.

'Heart?'

'No, just a cold, went to her chest.'

'Hmm.'

'Her body couldn't take it, the doctor said.'

The car rushed headlong into the evening, the driver pushing the hours back. He was a friend of the family.

'Exhausted. That's what she was, exhausted,' Sahadevan cried out suddenly. 'We worked her to death, all of us. You, me, all of us,' he wept.

The car had left the main road and was making a slow descent into the unmade lanes. Sahadevan got impatient and, jumping out of the car, ran ahead. He arrived at the house out of breath and, taking a moment to compose himself, entered his mother's room.

His father was seated beside the dying woman, looking dazed and frightened. His sisters Saraswathi and Lakshmi stood resignedly at the foot of the bed, and a strange young man stood by the window, crying softly. Sahadevan knelt beside his mother and took her hand in his. Instinctively he stroked her fingers, noticing how long and thin and artistic they were, and how brittle and broken her nails. Her knuckles were turning grey and he put his mouth to them. She opened her eyes then and slowly, as though from a will beyond her body, brought them to focus on her favourite son. She tried to speak, but her voice failed her. Sahadevan held up his hand: there was no need. She shook her head: this was something she had to do, and gathering the last of her strength she gestured to the youngster by the window to approach her bed.

'Son,' she said, turning to Sahadevan, 'this is -' she smiled a wan smile, 'this is . . . ' the words came slowly, 'your half-brother Para . . . Para . . . ' And then in a rush, as though her time had run out, 'Be good to him . . . look after your sisters.' The smile froze on her face. She was gone.

The girls began to wail and the lad cried inconsolably. Pandyan took them all in his arms. He was himself once more, himself and her, both at once. Sahadevan left the room and walked out into the compound.

Mahadev was lighting a cigarette and offered him one. Sahadevan indicated that he did not smoke. They walked in silence past the plantain

trees and the dying hibiscus that had suddenly bloomed, to the old well, and sat on its jagged rim.

'The water's down,' observed Sahadevan listlessly.

'It's this damn drought,' cursed Mahadev, lighting another cigarette from the butt of the first.

'You smoke too much,' Sahadevan said without conviction.

'Uh-huh,' denied his brother uneasily. 'Only today.'

A squirrel scampered up a coconut tree. Sahadevan threw a twig at it.

'Who is this chap then?' he blurted out. 'Para? Where did he come from?'

'You are in a cruel mood,' observed Mahadev. 'What do you mean "come from"? He was here all the time, only you didn't notice him.'

'Huh?'

'You remember when we were little and mother was ill, a boy would come with a steaming basket of *hoppers*?'

'That was him?' Sahadevan was surprised. 'I was always late to school and never saw him properly.' He cast his mind back and remembered thinking that the boy was too neatly dressed for a hopper-boy and looked more like a proper schoolboy.

'But how does that make him our half-brother?'

'Father was naughty,' giggled Mahadev, and went on to explain how Pandyan had fallen in love with the new midwife who had come to deliver Sahadevan. It had been a difficult birth, and their mother would not have survived it had not Ponnamma nursed her through. Pandyan, as usual, had been helpless while it went on, and Ponnamma had nursed him too. The result was Para.

Mahadev got up and stretched his limbs. He was quite a bit taller than Sahadevan's five foot six, but he stooped a little and wore a large drooping moustache under a hooked nose – all of which made him look a sad and melancholic man, which he wasn't.

'She was devoted to father, you know, Ponnamma, and would not marry again: her husband, a bloody drunkard, had fallen into a well and died the previous year. And when she got pregnant, people stopped employing her as a midwife. That's when she started taking orders for *hoppers*.'

'Did you know her?'

'Yes, Mother used to send money and clothes for the boy through me. They were great friends, the two women, though they only saw each other at temple on festival days. Great woman she was, wouldn't take a cent from Father, and never complained.'

'Where is she now?'

'She died about ten years ago, and Para went to live with her sister in Kopay.'

'That's why I've never seen him.'

'Oh no, he used to come and visit Mother at least once a month when we were in school.'

'Remember market days?' Mahadev went on, 'when Father went to town? He used to take Para with him. That's why he never took any of us.'

Sahadevan began to like his father more. He had always thought him a straight and upright man, not that his father had held himself out as such, but it was nice to know that he could unbend a little, fall a little. Sahadevan chuckled to himself: in a sense it was all his doing.

What he could not understand, though, was how his parents had kept it a secret for so long. He asked Mahadev, and Mahadev puzzled over the question, because he had not seen it as a secret, no one had, least of all their mother or father. He scratched his head. Or if they had kept it secret, it was because it was not a secret between them and, therefore, not worth talking about.

'Oh, you know what I mean,' he said. He sat down beside Sahadevan and lit up another cigarette. 'Mother knew, and everybody knew that Mother knew, so what was there to talk about?'

'Must you smoke so much?' Sahadevan demanded irritably, and Mahadev stubbed out his cigarette. He wondered sometimes who was the elder brother.

'There are some people coming to the house,' he said, peering through the trees. 'They must have heard already.'

'Where are our towny brothers and sisters, then? And Rama?'

'Rama went to temple to do a *pooja* for Mother. The others, well, they didn't know she was taken bad, did they?' Mahadev never spoke ill of anybody, least of all 'the townies', as Sahadevan called them. He had, after all, had the care of them when they were young.

'Perhaps we should go in.' Sahadevan got up to go when he saw Para coming towards them, without apparent haste but at some speed. For a short and stocky man, he moved deceptively fast. A hard man to contend with, thought Sahadevan. But as he drew closer, Sahadevan could not help noticing that he had the open and engaging face of his father.

'*Annai*,' he said, addressing Mahadev but taking in Sahadevan too, 'shouldn't we be sending for the priest and the *dhobi*, and seeing to -'

'Yes, yes, of course.' Mahadev interrupted as though he had been caught in a grave dereliction of duty. And then more hopefully, 'But you are the one who knows about these things, Para. Why don't you make the arrangements and we'll go along with them. Father is in no

state. . . ' He broke off and looked at Sahadevan who quickly nodded his agreement.

'Yes, all right,' smiled Para. The old lady had wanted to be cremated without fuss or ceremony, and he could now carry out her wishes.

'Hello, what's this?' exclaimed Sahadevan, as a raindrop fell on his head. He held out his hand and looked at the sky, black with ominous clouds. The brothers ran towards the house as the monsoon broke and fetched up on the kitchen steps.

Inside, the girls were making tea for the friends and relations who had come to pay their last respects to their mother. Out on the verandah, with the spray on his face, stood Pandyan, legs astride, arms akimbo, peering far away into the rain.

'If this goes on, our crops will be ruined,' he said as the boys ran into the house.

'But, Father, you have no —' Sahadevan began, but Para stopped him with an anxious look.

'He goes absent like that sometimes, doesn't he?' Para explained tactfully, as they went into the house to dry themselves. 'It happened when my mother died also.'

'Yes, I am sorry. I remember now,' replied Sahadevan. He finished drying himself and threw the towel over to Para. Mahadev had already gone out to meet the visitors. 'You care about him, don't you? Despite —'

'Who? Father? Yes. Your mother made up for him.'

'But that's her.'

'No, it's him too, otherwise she couldn't do it.'

Quite a philosopher, our half-brother, Sahadevan mused. 'We had better go and say hello to these people, I suppose,' he said aloud.

'I have to see about the priest,' replied Para.

'In this rain?'

'Yes, *ammai*, it can't wait.'

For two days, the rain beat down incessantly. The lanes became impassable, and the funeral had to be delayed. People who had come to mourn for an hour stayed on for what seemed an unending wake. Sahadevan was at his wits' end. The food was running out and the house was littered with sleeping people. Para and Mahadev had gone to see about a hearse. Saraswathi and Lakshmi were constantly making something to eat for someone or other. Pandyan was in and out of his head. And all the while the towny brothers and sisters sat around their mother's coffin, dutifully weeping the night away.

By the time Para and Mahadev returned on the evening of the second

day, Sahadevan was desperate enough to bury his mother in the back compound and be done with it. She certainly would have smiled at the notion of sprouting among the aubergines: she was never a great one for formalities. Sahadevan laughingly suggested as much to his brothers when they reported that they could not get a hearse to come up to the house. Not even a double-bullock cart with its high, steel-rimmed wheels could get through the lanes in this weather. When they had tried to hire one, they had been told to come back after the rains had ceased.

'But that's absurd,' shouted Sahadevan in frustration. 'We can't keep Mother here for ever. This whole thing is becoming a farce, it's making a mockery of her life. There must be some way . . .'

'There is,' interrupted Para briskly. 'We can carry the coffin on our shoulders. To the cemetery. Today. Now.'

'In a procession, yes.' Sahadevan was relieved. 'It will be a dignified end to Mother.'

'All of six, seven miles?' demanded Mahadev. 'Women and children?'

'Yes, why not?' Sahadevan had a glint in his eye. 'They can either go with us or go home. There'll be nothing here for them to stay for. Either way we get rid of them.'

'Father?' asked Mahadev.

'Father is tough. He can manage it,' said Para and Sahadevan agreed.

'The priest is not going to like it,' was Mahadev's final, albeit half-hearted protest.

'Hang the priest,' retorted Sahadevan boldly and looked to Para for approval.

'Let's ask Father anyway,' said Para.

Pandyan resisted the plan at first but was quick to go along with it when he discovered that the townies would be going straight on to their homes after the cremation. He could not abide them at the best of times, and their relentless sorrowing was more than he could bear. The loudest protests came from Rama, the temple brother, but he was silenced by his father with the wave of an imperious hand.

Sahadevan left two days after the funeral. The rains had settled down into a steady drone by then and the railway track at Elephant Pass had been restored. Mahadev saw his brother to the bus that would take him to Jaffna station. Para, passing them by on his bicycle, waved Sahadevan a last farewell.

'Quite a chap, our new-found brother,' observed Sahadevan. 'And Father was a surprise too, wasn't he?' He laughed.

'Oh you think so, do you, about Para, I mean?' Mahadev responded with alacrity. 'Why don't you help him find a job then? In the railways, perhaps?'

Sahadevan looked at his brother quizzically.

'As an apprentice or something,' Mahadev went on.

Sahadevan still wasn't sure what his brother was getting at.

'Your friend, Mr Wijepala, he could fix it.' Mahadev came to the point at last. 'He's got influence.'

'You are mad,' expostulated Sahadevan. 'I can't ask him a thing like that. He is much too correct.'

'Like Father?' Mahadev laughed.

3

IT WAS STILL RAINING when Sahadevan's train got into Colombo. At Kelaniya, four miles from the city, the river had overrun its banks and the train crawled gingerly over the bridge. In Maradana, an electric pylon had been struck by lightning and the tramcars had stopped running. By the coast, where the Wijepalas lived, the seas had risen grey and sullen, washing away miles of railway track.

By the time Sahadevan reached home it was nightfall and the old couple had gone to bed. Sahadevan crept noiselessly into his room and, throwing his wet clothes off, fell into an exhausted sleep.

He woke with a start, the following morning, to the raucous voice of a street-vendor shouting his wares. He looked out of the window. The sun was up, the rain had ceased, the road before him was streaked with watery light. 'Lovely,' he muttered, and threw himself back into bed: it was Sunday, and he could have a lie-in.

There was a knock on the door.

'I know you are up, Saha,' called Auntie Prema. 'Come and have some *hoppers*, hot.'

Within minutes Sahadevan had washed and shaved and presented himself at the kitchen table.

'You look cheerful,' remarked Prema. 'Is your mother all right?'

'No,' replied Sahadevan guiltily. 'She . . . she . . . passed away.'

'Oh lord!' The ladle fell from Prema's hand.

'It's all right, Auntie, really it is. I got there before she died, and she was able to speak to me. But if Uncle hadn't made me go' Tears rose to his eyes as he remembered. 'Where is he?' he asked, brushing his tears aside.

Prema put a plate of *hoppers* in front of him. 'Gone to repair the tracks,' she said.

'On a Sunday?' yawned Saha, and Prema smiled.

'Eat and go back to bed,' she told him. 'We can talk later.'

But tired though he was, Sahadevan could not get to sleep. Pictures of his childhood kept flashing past his eyes. His mother was there in all of them. In the foreground of his life at first, but slowly receding as the years went by, till, by the time he had left home to go to school in Colombo, she had become a vague presence in the background somewhere, a sort of aura that surrounded them all but had no life of its own, no definition. He hated that in him now, that losing sight of her, not coming to know her.

What was she like? What were her fears, ambitions, what did she want for herself? Not for him, he knew that, not for his brothers and sisters, he knew that too, but for herself? What did she want to become, how did she want to grow? Because she did have a wonderfully instinctive intelligence that sized up people and situations far more quickly and acutely than his father, than Mahadev, than any of them except Para perhaps. But Para wasn't her son. And that, come to think of it, was like her too, caring for the boy, and his mother, her husband's mistress! But he didn't know it then, did he, that it was like her? What a waste.

He had better speak to S.W. about getting Para a job. He fell asleep.

S.W. came home tired and irritable that evening and was in no mood for conversation. He spoke to Sahadevan at dinner, commiserating with the lad on his mother's death. But when Saha tried to thank him for sending him to Jaffna, S.W. retreated quickly behind his paper. And it was several days before he came out from behind it. The track had been repaired by then and, better news still, the compensation for Sirisena's family was coming through: the Railway Board had enough trouble on its hands without courting a strike.

Sahadevan thought it a good time to approach S.W. with his request.

'Uncle,' he began one night at dinner (the best time to speak to S.W., he had discovered). 'What sort of qualification do you need to get into the railways, as a mechanic, I mean, apprentice mechanic?'

'Why? Are you thinking of coming down in the world?' S.W. guffawed. He was certainly in a relaxed frame of mind.

'No, no, it's not for me.'

'Well, Fifth Standard Maths should do, and English of course, and an aptitude for hard work.' He laughed. 'Who is it for?'

'My half-brother.'

'Half-brother?'

'Well, yes,' replied Sahadevan and went on to explain how he had come by Para. The old man enjoyed the story hugely and was amused at Sahadevan's embarrassment in the telling.

'You are a bit of a puritan, aren't you?' he teased Saha. And when the younger man looked aggrieved, he added quickly, 'No, no, don't misunderstand me. There's nothing wrong in being principled, so long as you are human with it. How old is he?'

'Twenty-one, a year younger than me.'

Prema came in with the coffee and sat down with them at the table. There were only the pots to wash up, she said, and she would do those in the morning. Now was her time to sit with the men and talk. She offered her husband a mango that Saha had brought from Jaffna. S.W. bit into it without ceremony, the juices spraying all over his face.

'Ah,' he sighed with contentment, 'there's nothing like an *ambalavi*, is there?' He pretended to offer Saha a bite and proceeded to eat the lot, sparing only the skin and stone which he had already sucked to the bone. Having finished, he sat licking his moustache speculatively, till his wife shooed him off to the kitchen to wash his mouth and fingers.

'I went to Jaffna, once,' he said, coming back and sitting down to his coffee, 'on some maintenance work, and I'll never forget the mangoes I ate there, the best in the world. Eh, Prema? I brought you some, didn't I?'

'And ate them all,' laughed his wife. 'But that's the only one for you today. The others are not ripe yet.'

'Is there more? Ah, Saha, you are a good lad.'

Sahadevan smiled and imagined that Auntie Prema had winked at him, except that she could not wink to save her soul. They fell into a cosy silence.

S.W. finished his coffee. 'Too much poverty there,' he reflected.

Sahadevan looked up from his cup, but said nothing. The old man was remembering, not speaking to him.

'Unnecessary poverty,' S.W. went on, toying with his empty cup. 'Too much land and too little water.'

Or water at the wrong time and in the wrong places, thought Sahadevan, looking out on the rain.

'And there I was, helping to erect a railway when I should have been digging wells or building tanks.' He looked up and saw he had aroused Sahadevan's interest. 'Not right, is it, eh?'

'No, sir,' replied Sahadevan, himself remembering now. 'It is not right at all.'

'What shall we do about it then, eh? Believe it is our *karma* and put up with all the hunger and misery?' He seemed to be talking to himself. 'Hope to do better in our next birth? Leave it to God to put things right in some Christian heaven?' He turned to the younger man. 'What shall we do, son?'

Sahadevan shuffled his feet uneasily under the table. S.W. was raising questions that had lain coiled up within him for ages, for fear of an answer.

'I don't know, Uncle,' he said miserably, 'I don't know.'

'Don't you think —' Prema stared at S.W. and he stopped in mid-sentence. They fell silent again. Prema got up to clear the table and S.W. reached for his paper.

'I suppose you are right,' Sahadevan muttered to himself. 'We should be changing things, not putting up with them.' He was thinking of the faces he had seen at his mother's funeral: resigned, empty faces. These were people he had known all his life and they, like his father, had fought the land. But now that the land had been taken from them, they had given up on themselves, and lived through the sons they had farmed out to government service, on the monthly postal orders they sent them. Like his father. The village was dying: there was no vitality in the place any more, only venality. But how could he change things? It was the same all over Jaffna.

'Maybe I should go and work with Brother Joseph in Karaiyur,' he said aloud, 'with the low-caste fisher folk. That way I'd be some use to somebody.'

S.W. saw that the boy was troubled. The old skin was beginning to break.

'What good is that, son?' he asked gently. 'Brother Joseph may be a good man, and caste is a terrible thing, especially among you Jaffna folk. But what is he doing it for, and where is he taking them?'

'Not for money, that's for sure,' Sahadevan bristled with loyalty for a priesthood that had given him education. 'He hasn't a shirt to his back, and he spends all his time teaching them to read and write with only the Bible to help him. Why isn't that any good?'

'No, no, don't misunderstand me,' S.W. was quick to reassure the youngster. 'I was not trying to run down Brother Joseph or what he is doing for our poor. But who made us so poor in the first place, if not our Christian rulers, in the name of Christianity?'

Sahadevan looked blankly at S.W.

'I am not talking about individual missionaries, but about missionarism. Religion, son, is not just a matter of gods and worship; it's a whole way of life, a whole way of thinking. And that is why the *suddhas* are so keen to convert us to their way of thinking, to their religion.'

He himself, confessed S.W., was a baptized Christian. His father had been converted in the mission school he went to. There was no other way he could get schooling. The old man paused.

'Now, why do you think that was, son? What happened to all the

temple schools we had? Why do we have to give up the faith of our fathers in order to learn? And why do we have to learn in English and not in Sinhalese or Tamil?

S.W. leant forward, his shoulders hunched, waiting for an answer. Sahadevan took a deep breath. He had only a vague understanding of what S.W. was driving at.

'To get better jobs?' he stammered. 'To get into government service?'

S.W.'s eyes flashed. 'Whose government, Saha? Not ours, is it? It is the *suddha's* government, the *vellayan's* as you say in Tamil, the white man's. And for whom? For the *suddhas* in England. And what for? Where do you think all our wealth goes? Certainly not to our labourers and peasants. And see what the *suddhas* have gone and done to the land.' There was a sadness in his voice. 'Once we were the granary of the East, now all we have to eat is tea, and rubber.'

'Yes, all right,' resisted Sahadevan, retreating into the safety of the history he had been taught at St Benedict's. 'But what about all the money we get from selling tea and rubber?'

'We, we, we,' the old man was nearly desperate with anger. He did not seem to be able to get through to the younger man. 'What "we"? We produce the tea but we don't get the money from it. The *suddhas* do.'

'But they built the roads and the railways, didn't they?' Sahadevan made a last stand for St Benedict's and education.

'Yes, son, they did,' replied S.W. The anger had left him; he was not going to win Sahadevan over in a day. 'I am not saying that everything they did is bad,' he explained patiently. 'But we must ask ourselves why they did it, we cannot just believe what they say. They say they are bringing civilization to us, with railways and roads, when what they are really doing is transporting the wealth out of the country. I am not saying,' he went on, 'that railways are a bad thing; after all, I am a railwayman myself, but we would have come to it in our own time, at our own speed.' What they wanted, S.W. added more reflectively, was their land for growing food and their rivers for irrigation. Then they could think about railways and things. It wasn't the right time. Like a *namban* mango, they had got ripe before time. The rhythm was all wrong, they were no longer in tune with themselves.

S.W. got up and went to the sideboard, looking for his half-finished cigar. That was another thing he had picked up a taste for when he went up north, Prema whispered to Sahadevan: cigars, Jaffna cigars. S.W. resumed his seat and lit up his cigar. 'Do you know, Saha, what happened after the last railway strike in Colombo, some years ago?' He took a long

drag on his cigar. 'They were paying us starvation wages and treating us like animals. We couldn't take it any more, and finally, in despair, we found the strength to strike.' He paused. 'And you know what they did?' he went on. 'Your friends, the priests, the mission schools, the churches? They forced the Catholic workmen to go back to work, and then when the government was looking for the ringleaders, to sack them or to send them off to godforsaken parts of the country, the Church forced those workmen to give the names of the trouble-makers to the government.'

S.W., Sahadevan knew, was one of the trouble-makers who had gone unscathed; it was even rumoured at the time that he had got conveniently ill on the day of the strike. But his damning indictment of the Railway Board to the Royal Commission had laid such rumours to rest. Sahadevan was curious to know the details: S.W. might not open up to him again as he had done tonight. But just as he was about to ask the old man, Prema, who had remained silent throughout the conversation except to prompt her husband now and then, suddenly burst out, 'Him leg broken with, with - *udhalla*, you know *udhalla* . . .' Her English broke down at that point and she turned to her husband. 'You tell. . .'

'Crowbar,' explained S.W. 'They broke both my legs the day before the strike, some of the bosses' men, with a crowbar, not *udhalla*.'

'But that's another story,' He rose from the table. 'I'll tell you about it some other time.'

Sahadevan followed the old man out of the room on to the unlit verandah. S.W. arranged himself in his favourite chair and lit a fresh cigar. The youngster stood by the door, unable to leave the conversation and yet loath to disturb the old man.

'Uncle,' he broke out enthusiastically. 'Those booklets that Tissa lent me. Oh, I didn't tell you about them, did I? About Christianity and Hinduism and things. He got them from you. Could I look at them again?'

'Who were they by, can you remember?'

'No,' replied Sahadevan shamefacedly. 'I can't even remember what they look like. I just took them to please Tissa. But one was called *Superstition and Christianity*, I think.'

S.W. nodded: the title sounded familiar. But they were not books on religion so much, he observed, as a way of fighting the *suddhas* through religion. That was the only way at the time. Hadn't Saha heard of Navalar and Dharmapala and Siddhi Lebbe?

'Not really, Uncle,' mumbled Sahadevan.

'There were others, too.' S.W. reeled off yet more names. 'Arunachalam, Pinto -'

'Ah, Pinto,' Sahadevan began proudly, but seeing that the old man was easing himself into his tale, he apologized for the interruption and sat down on the steps of the verandah.

Prema joined him on the stoop and, gazing up at the night sky, muttered inaudibly. Sahadevan leant forward to catch her words. Just then the moon, lifting itself up from a cloud, caught her in its light, and Sahadevan could not help noticing how ugly her face was in repose: featureless and pudgy, like the rest of her. And he realized then that it was her smile that made all the difference. It was her smile that somehow rearranged her face at a moment's notice and made it so beautiful, made all that pudginess comforting, like her, and comfortable.

S.W. cleared his throat. Had Saha heard of the famous Panadura debate? he asked rhetorically and chuckled. He must have been twelve at the time, yes, 1873, it was. His father took him to hear it, a public debate: Christianity versus Buddhism. The Church was always doing that sort of thing, daring the Buddhist clergy to stand up for their religion in open discussion. But this one was more like a duel than a debate, with each side putting up its own champion: Rev. de Silva for the Christians and Bhikku Gunananda for the Buddhists. De Silva, unfortunately, was no match for Gunananda, who held up the whole Bible story to ridicule.

'Ah, it was a grand fight all right,' he repeated, 'though I didn't understand a word of it, and my father, who was a Christian convert, did not know which side he was on.' He laughed boisterously. 'But I could tell we were winning from the excitement all around me, and it got to my father too.'

'But why did it all start then, suddenly?' Sahadevan asked. 'The British after all had been around for quite some time, and the Dutch and the Portuguese before that.'

S.W. did not answer for a while, and Sahadevan, seeing only the occasional glow of his cigar, could only guess at the older man's mood. When he finally spoke, it was as though from a distance, as though he were wearied or saddened (Sahadevan couldn't say which) by the younger man's question.

'It did not all start then, suddenly, as you say,' S.W. replied resignedly. 'There were rebellions going on all the time.' He paused. 'But your school history books wouldn't tell you that, would they? After all, they are written by the English. Soon no one will know the true story of our country.' He sighed. 'No history, no heroes. I wonder what your children and Tissa's will do. Invent their own histories, I suppose, to suit their own purposes.' He lapsed into silence.

An owl hooted from somewhere behind the moon. Sahadevan peered across the garden into the shadows of the plantain trees, trying deter-

minedly to locate the cackle of a nightjar, but hearing still, in the dark behind him, the old man's lengthening sorrow.

A flame burst in S.W.'s hand as he re-lit his cigar. 'You had better go to bed now,' he said. Sahadevan rose from the steps obediently. 'Yes, Uncle,' he submitted, trying to keep the disappointment out of his voice: he had been given new eyes to see with and he did not want them closed again. He took S.W.'s hand and kissed it. 'Goodnight, Uncle,' he said, and went off to bed.

But sleep would not come. Memories and visions chased each other looking for resolution. He remembered now how he had thrown himself into the Scripture lessons at St Benedict's. But although he had won the Scripture prize and had come top in the two compulsory subjects, English and Maths, it was his friend, Sebastian, who had been awarded the scholarship. He had smarted under the injustice of that even then, more so when Brother Joseph had humiliated himself pleading Sahadevan's cause with the Director. The latter had been adamant: Sahadevan, he said, was not an 'all-rounder', whereas Sebastian had extra-curricular interests like singing in the choir and serving as an altar boy. Besides, Brother Joseph's expectation that Sahadevan's excellence at Scripture would make him a good Catholic had not been borne out. Even giving him the prize for Scripture was a mistake, the Director had gone on, it had not helped to draw the boy into the Church. Of course Brother Joseph was to blame. Did he now expect the Director to compound Brother Joseph's mistake by awarding the scholarship to a non-Catholic? That really was going too far. Brother Joseph was already too unorthodox in his views for the Director's liking. Perhaps he would be better off working with those poor people he was always talking about. That, rather than put silly ideas into his students' heads.

Brother Joseph's evident disappointment had taken the edge out of Sahadevan's own bitterness. The priest had got himself into trouble over him. It was the first time a non-Catholic had won the Scripture prize. But to have expected him to win the scholarship as well! Thinking back on the incident now, he realized that it was just the sort of unreality that Brother Joseph dealt in. He had even expected that the new Director, an Irishman, would be more liberal in his policies.

It was typical of Brother Joseph, though. He was always going on about the Irish rebellion and the end of British rule and things like that. And even during Scripture lessons, he would tell stories about the rebel heroes of his youth, mostly ordinary people who had to fight to survive, for Brother Joseph himself came from an impoverished Sinhalese family. But the man he admired most of all was Dr Lisboa Pinto, who cared for the sick and the poor in his surgery at Dam Street, and damned the

Catholic Church (Saha could see Brother Joseph suppressing a mischievous smile at his own silly joke) because they did nothing for the people of Ceylon. 'A good Catholic, that man,' Brother Joseph would observe, 'not Roman, but Ceylonese.' The type of man, Sahadevan now realized, that Brother Joseph himself would have liked to be, and it would also explain why the priest had finally given up the priesthood and gone to live and work with the fisher folk in the north. He was a good man, but. . . . And suddenly Sahadevan sat up in bed.

'Of course, of course that's what he meant,' he muttered to himself. 'Yes, yes, that's it, that is it! Missionarism and not the missionary. That's the problem – not the individual, but the . . . but the . . . whole thing, the whole set-up, that is what Uncle S.W. was saying.'

And with the peace of a man who has finally got the world in his sights, Sahadevan fell asleep.

4

TISSA WAS IN LOVE AGAIN. With a Muslim girl this time, he confided to Saha, and this time it was serious.

She lived in the tenements across the road from the union offices. Of course they had not spoken to each other yet, but their eyes had met and talked many times. Even this morning, when she was putting out the rubbish. In fact, this morning had been different: they had exchanged smiles. He had crossed the road on his way to work just in time to catch her at close quarters, and she had smiled, lowered her head shyly and smiled, at him.

Tomorrow he would speak to her, now that he had got the timing right. The only trouble was that there were people about at that hour of morning, and her father or one of her brothers might see him accosting her. Oh yes, she had three or four brothers, and he didn't want to get her into trouble because of him. They seemed to be strict Muslims. But he had an idea.

'What idea is that, then?' asked Sahadevan.

'You come with me.'

'*Whaat?*'

Tissa let his friend get over his surprise before repeating the request.

'To do what?' Sahadevan protested.

'We can go on union business. Find out where the men work, and talk to them about joining the union.'

'So why do you need me?'

'My Tamil isn't very good, and they may not speak Sinhalese. And there's always the chance that I might get to talk to her while you keep them busy.'

'Her? Oh, her!'

Reluctantly Sahadevan agreed. He thought the whole scheme too wild, but there was no budging Tissa. He either went along with the plan or forfeited Tissa's friendship, for a month at least. He had been in these situations before with Tissa, but nothing so outlandish. Generally it was a cousin here or the sister of a friend there, somebody within reach. But this was straying into unknown territory. You couldn't go messing around with Muslim girls without getting into trouble, and tenement people at that. They were very protective of their women, and Tissa would be lucky to get off with a thrashing.

But that only seemed to give an edge to Tissa's excitement. He did not care if he got beaten, he said with a sweep of his hand. She was worth it. Her eyes . . . once Saha had looked into those eyes he would know she was worth it. And her face, her face, was like a . . . like a lotus. So open, so fresh. Saha had simply no idea what it was to be in love: he was so bloody old-fashioned and staid.

'Hmm', murmured Sahadevan, remembering Rani, his first great love. It had never come to anything. What would have happened, he wondered, if Rani had turned up at the palmyrah grove that night? They would have been caught, of course, and he would have got thrown out of the house, out of the village. His father would have been disgraced and his mother could never have looked anybody in the eye after that, and his sisters never found a husband.

Rani was 16 at the time and he not much older. He had just returned from Colombo to look after the farm. He had seen Rani before, of course, when as a young girl she used to come to their house to do menial jobs for his mother. But suddenly, in the two years he had been away, she had grown into a woman. And he had hardly recognized her when, returning from his bath at the well one morning, he saw her in the kitchen compound, pounding rice. Transfixed, he stood behind the clump of plantain trees watching the music of her movements as she raised and dropped the long, wooden pestle into a mortar that came up to her knees, her body swaying and bending, gently, rhythmically, with the movement of her arms. Every so often her hair would come undone, shedding the jasmine she had placed there, and cascade around her shoulders – and impatiently she would knot it up again, nestling the pestle between her breasts the while. Or she would pause between strokes and remain quite still, resting her face against the pestle, her raised hands gripping it above, pulling her breasts tight against the coarse cloth

of her blouse. He moved closer, sidling along the wall of the kitchen. She saw him and quickly returned to her work. He hurried into the house.

He took his bath at the same time every morning thereafter, and every morning he stood by the banana grove to gaze at her. She knew he was there, and let him know she knew it, so that he could gaze at her at will. And that made him more brazen still, till he fetched up by the kitchen window, just fifteen paces from her. She lowered her eyes, would not look at him, and he remembered then that she was an un-touchable: he could only take her with his looks. He wanted more, to get closer, talk to her. He began to tend the kitchen garden, pottering around the aubergines and the *bandakka*, till his mother shooed him off to work. He tried to speak to Rani from behind the bitter gourd creeper, making faces at her, and at last she smiled a huge smile and went back to her pounding. Her smile killed him, it was as giving as her mouth, the lower lip so rounded out and sensual that he wanted to suck on it till he lost his senses.

He could bear no more. He had to touch her, feel her, smell her. He stopped her in the lane one evening, on her way home. She fled, limping. She was lame. He turned back, sadly. But the next evening, following her at a discreet distance, waiting for a lonely stretch of the lane to speak to her, he watched her buttocks rise and fall to the rhythm of her limp, and joyed in it. Suddenly she left the lane and turned into a thicket of palmyrah trees, and he was hard pressed to follow her. When he emerged from the wood, she was gone, but before him lay the mud-houses of the *nalava* settlement. He could go no further. He turned back home.

The following day, he put a note in her hand. He could not pretend to tend the kitchen garden any more. His mother was becoming suspicious. But he had found a ventilation hole in the shrine room which overlooked the kitchen compound and from there he watched his Rani pound and winnow, rest and dream (and dream him into her dreams?), till he felt his excitement grow and sing and die in his hand.

He put another note in her hand, and another. She smiled and shook her head: she could not read. But she secreted them, like a vow, in her bosom, and gazed longingly back at him.

Desperate, he trapped her in a bend in the lane at dusk one evening, and held her wordlessly in his arms, crushing the world out of her that kept him out. And for a moment, caressing his mouth with her lips, she gave herself up to him, lost herself in him. But a dog barked, and she broke away, but not before he had made her promise to meet him in the palmyrah grove that night.

She never came, not to the grove that night, or to work for his mother, thereafter. She was taken sick, they said. And he never saw her again. But the scent of goat-dung and jasmine haunted his senses still.

It was then that he had wanted to chuck up the farm, and go and work with Brother Joseph among the fisher folk in Karaiyur. He even wrote to the priest, and received an encouraging reply. But just when he was about to announce his decision to his father, the old man was taken ill, and Saha gave up his mission.

Perhaps it was just as well. It would have sent his father to an early grave, and ruined his sisters' prospects of marriage.

There were no such claims on Tissa, though. His father had done well out of the timber business, which he had passed on to his two eldest sons, and Tissa's only sister had been betrothed to her cousin from the time they were children. Tissa had wanted to study or enter politics and, refusing to have anything to do with business, had ended up in the care of his father's brother, S.W. S.W. of course had encouraged his nephew's independent spirit, and let him plough his own furrow. There was little that Tissa did that did not meet with S.W.'s approval. He even turned a blind eye to his nephew's amatory escapades. An affair with a Muslim girl, though, was another matter, especially if she was poor and proud and her family opposed to it. It was the sort of combination that could turn Tissa noble, and serious. And S.W. would certainly not want that. Nor would he expect Saha to. But what could Saha do? Tissa gave of his loyalty easily, and he expected his friends to do the same.

'OK, OK, let's go and get it over with,' Saha gave in.

'Get it over with?' Tissa was angry. He banged his mug down on the table of the café opposite the union offices, where they were having tea. 'What do you think this is, a tooth extraction?'

'Oh, shut up, Tissa, you know I didn't mean it like that.'

'What then?'

'Well, I don't know, nothing. Forget it.' Saha put his doubts aside. 'When do you want to go?'

'This evening.'

'OK. What's the old man's name?'

'Mahmood.'

But when they went round that evening, the Mahmoods were not at home. An old lady, probably Mahmood's mother, answered the door.

'It's Friday,' she said matter of factly in Tamil.

'Oh, sorry,' replied Saha, 'We'll come tomorrow.'

'No, Sunday.'

Saha nodded and left, dragging Tissa with him.

'What was all that about?' asked Tissa.

'It's Friday, idiot, and they've all gone to the mosque. She wants us to come back on Sunday.'

Saha was doing overtime that Sunday and could not go. But Tissa, encouraged by the old lady's invitation, went on his own, and was received warmly by Mahmood. As it happened, the old man and his two eldest sons were only too glad to talk to Tissa about their problems at work. They all had jobs in the government factory, except the youngest boy who was still at school. They didn't mind the long hours, they told Tissa, or even the low wages, but the working conditions were terrible. Mahmood had held up his left hand to indicate that he had lost two of his fingers on a defective lathe; he had complained about it to the foreman a hundred times but to no avail. No one really cared. Even the Workers' Federation people did not bother to take up such cases: there was a chap who had lost his leg, never mind his fingers. Oh yes, they would go along with anything that could help them. Tissa had left promising to get back to them after speaking to the Chief.

'How did you manage to speak to them?' asked Saha.

'Oh, the man spoke fluent Sinhala.'

'And the girl?'

'Who? Soonoo?'

'Ah, it's Soonoo now is it?'

'No, I couldn't speak to her. She gave me a big smile, though, when she brought in the tea.'

'Why, where was her mother?'

'I got the impression that she had died, a long time back, and the grandmother looked after them.'

'So you don't need me any more, huh?' Saha pretended to be wounded.

'Who can tell?' answered Tissa fingering his newly grown moustache. 'Of course I'll let you know how I get on.'

But Saha was transferred to Veyangoda for a spell of acting duty the following week, and did not see or hear from Tissa for several months. By the time he got back to Colombo, at the end of September, Tissa had lost his job at the post office.

That was the first thing Auntie Prema told Saha when he got home. How the poor boy was managing, she did not know. And despite all her entreaties, he would not come back home. He was working full time now for that mad man Goonesinha. It was all his fault, anyway, that Tissa had got the sack.

Unable to make much sense of what Auntie Prema was saying, Saha went to see Tissa the following day directly after work. But Tissa was not in his rooms, and Saha was about to leave when a young lad of

thirteen appeared at the bottom of the steps and summoned him to the offices below.

As Saha entered the office he noticed a large brass plaque on the door which read 'Ceylon Labour Union'. Tissa was seated at a desk at the far end of a large room (everybody else seemed to have gone home) and got up to greet Saha, hands outstretched in mock ceremony.

'How can I help you, sir?' he smiled unctuously. 'Have you got problems at work? Are your bosses not nice to you? Has your wife run off with your employer? Won't you take a seat?'

'Oh, shut up, Tissa,' Saha beat his friend's hands away and took the chair in front of him. 'What have you been up to, now?'

'You mean, the moment your back is turned—'

'Dry up, will you? I am tired.'

'I got fired, that's all.' Tissa took off his glasses and began cleaning them.

'Why? How?' Saha drove the questions at him irritably. Tissa rose from his desk, and going to the back of the office, called out to the youngster to bring in two cups of tea.

'That's Sultan,' he said, 'Soonoo's brother.'

Saha did not respond. He was waiting for his answer. Tissa sat down at the desk again and fidgeted with a paperweight.

'I know Auntie is mad with me,' he murmured, 'but I expected Uncle to understand.' He put the paperweight, determinedly, beyond his reach. 'It was all over this poll-tax business, wasn't it?' he added uncomfortably. 'We couldn't let it go on.'

Sultan brought in the tea and lit the lamps.

For a long time now, explained Tissa, the Chief, Mr Goonesinha, had wanted to do something about the two-rupee head tax that the government charged every adult male. And seeing what Gandhi was doing in India, the Chief and his friend Corea decided that their Young Lanka League should also start a civil disobedience campaign and refuse to pay the tax. The penalty, of course, was six days' hard labour on the roads. And that was what they had done, six days of hard labour, on hot Colombo roads. Tissa dropped his head and hung out his tongue in remembered weariness. And then smiling uneasily, he said:

'It was damn funny, I suppose, to see us trousered johnnies working alongside labourers. But they appreciated what we were doing. I am sure you would have joined us if you were here. You have such great admiration for Gandhi.'

Not to the point that he would get fired, Saha observed cynically. He had a father to support and sisters to be married. But Tissa refused to be put out, and suggested that Saha might join them next year. Oh yes,

they were going to do it every year till the poll tax was abolished. It was back-breaking work, though.

'You don't know what it is to work on the roads, Saha: raw, physical work.'

Saha raised his eyebrows. 'You should try working on the land,' he said.

'But these people don't work for themselves,' Tissa retorted angrily. 'They have nothing, and you should see their living conditions. I have been to their homes. Even Sultan's family in their one-room shack have a proper roof over their heads. But these people, these people. . . .' he spluttered. Unimpressed, Saha was about to make a sarcastic remark congratulating Tissa on discovering the poor, when he saw that his friend was genuinely distressed, and nodded his agreement instead.

The Chief couldn't stand it either, Tissa went on, he was so moved, that man. Tissa shook his head from side to side as though he just couldn't believe how moved the Chief was. That was why he had broken away from the Workers' Federation and started his own union, a real workers' union. These guys at the CWF, snorted Tissa, were a bunch of middle-class do-gooders who used the workers' cause to get into government. So, what's new, thought Saha, but aloud he said:

'I was wondering what that Ceylon Labour Union board was doing on the wall outside.'

'Ah, we are a proper union now, and our membership is growing rapidly.'

'And you? What are you?'

'I am a sort of man of all work, and general assistant to the Chief.'

'You get paid of course?'

'Not yet, but I have the rooms upstairs, and a bit of money for food and things. That's more than enough for me.'

'Well, you had better come and explain all this to Uncle.'

'I tried once, already, but . . . I don't know, Saha. He doesn't seem to like the Chief.'

'You will have to try again, then, won't you?'

'Why, has he said anything?'

'No, not about this, but Auntie is not the only one who misses you.'

Sultan came in to clear the cups, and Saha got up to leave. Tissa suggested that he stay for dinner. He got his meals from Sultan's house, he explained, and the old lady always sent more than he could eat. Saha demurred: Auntie Prema was expecting him.

'But we haven't seen each other for six months,' protested Tissa.

'That reminds me. I was going to ask you—'

'I'll tell you only if you stay.'

Sultan was standing at the door, the cups in his hands, waiting to hear the outcome. And Tissa, playing on Saha's weakness for spicy food, urged the lad to tell his friend what they were eating that night.

'*Biriyani*,' the youngster blurted out, and greed leapt into Saha's eyes.

'Eat a bit here, and then go home and eat a bit more,' Tissa tempted him, offering him a solution which tempered greed with duty.

'Yes, why not?' Saha replied with what was for him a grand gesture of abandon.

'Go now?' asked Sultan. Tissa nodded. 'And bring book?' Tissa nodded again, and the boy ran out, the cups clattering in his hands.

'What book?' asked Saha.

'Oh, I give him English lessons after dinner.'

'He has big eyes.'

'His sister's.'

'So, then, what's happening?'

'I thought you'd never ask.' Tissa looked aggrieved.

'You know me, I was waiting till you were ready to tell me. And knowing you, I know you will.' And they both laughed at that.

'She is engaged.'

'*What?* Already?'

'Not to me, you fool. To her cousin. Not engaged, what do you call it? You know, like "promised"?''

'Betrothed?'

'Yes, that is it, betrothed, to her cousin. Her mother's brother's son, that is. It was her mother's wish before she died.'

Tissa spoke matter of factly, even smugly, thought Saha, not as though he had just reconciled himself to the situation but had accepted it whole-heartedly. That, however, was not the man Saha knew. Tissa was not one to give up on an affair so easily, he was too unregenerate a romantic for that. The smile of a girl could lure him into a dragon's lair, the curve of a hip send him into wild desire. But when it came to the crunch, he never did anything. The act was not the thing. To do was to stay. Fancy was all, and flight was necessary to fancy. Nothing should hold for ever. Give me my moments, he once declared to Saha in the throes of a new and yet-green love, and you can have my years. The chase was a series of moments, and Soonoo's betrothal to another kept his fancy in perennial flight. He fell in love with her every day, wooed her anew every day, dared every day the cunning of her grandmother's vigilance, the terror of her father's discovery, and found clandestine pleasure in bringing up Sultan, his undefined brother-in-law. And she, he confided to Saha, loved him in her own way, without betraying her betrothed. He lived far away, in Galle, anyway, working in his father's

copra business, waiting to be twenty-one to own it. And then he would marry. At eighteen, he was two years older than Soonoo. What could she do, woken to love by the promise of it, and wearied of it in the waiting? Tissa was the practice of love that she craved, but not so that she would leave her betrothed behind. She gave Tissa her smiles and a fleeting kiss or two on his cheek, held his hand as for ever, and once, just once, kissed him full on his lips.

Saha was drawn into the dream. His life was more humdrum. Only that morning he had received a letter from his father suggesting that he enter into an 'exchange marriage' with one of his sisters.

Sultan stood at the door and gestured to Tissa that he had left the dinner upstairs.

'Why doesn't he say anything,' asked Saha. 'Is he shy?'

'Oh no, he is just playing dumb. I told him he talks too much, and this is his way of getting back at me.'

'He doesn't work full-time here, does he?'

'No, he works in the bicycle repair shop over the road.'

'How old is he?'

'Fourteen, fifteen?'

'And does he know that—'

'He likes me.'

'Hmm.'

'Let's go and eat.'

Tissa led the way out of the office and up the steps to his rooms. Saha had not been inside before and Tissa took great pride in showing his friend around.

'Bedroom, kitchen, toilet and shower,' he itemized as he went along. 'And the sitting room can be turned into a spare bedroom anytime you want to come and stay. And all free,' he added, and Saha agreed to be impressed.

Tissa put out the plates and served out the *biryani*, still piping hot. They ate in silence, except for Saha's intermittent 'oohs' and 'aahs' of appreciation. Tissa, his eyes dancing merrily behind his glasses, kept plying his friend with more food.

'Stop,' cried Saha, his mouth full. 'I'll get into trouble with Auntie.'

'I'll give you a note,' laughed Tissa, and went to fetch the tea.

Over tea, Saha told Tissa about his father's letter.

'But you are too young to get married,' exclaimed Tissa. 'What are you? Twenty-two?'

Saha nodded.

'Yes, of course, same age as me,' Tissa muttered reflectively. 'What about this new-found brother of yours?'

'Who? Para? He is younger than me, and hasn't got a proper job.'

'I thought Uncle—'

Saha shook his head disappointedly. It was ages since he had asked S.W. about finding Para a job. And still nothing. Tissa looked consolingly at his friend: his uncle was not the type of man who was going to ask favours of his employers, he was a bit too unbending for that. Saha was not so sure, though. Besides, it was not so very long ago that S.W. had met Para and been able to size him up for himself. Maybe he'd do something now. In the meantime, Para was working as a night watchman at the Capitol Cinema and sleeping in a cubicle there. Saha lowered his head and patted his hair down with his hands. Tissa smiled at the familiar mannerism: his friend was troubled.

'He can come and stay here till he finds a place,' he offered generously.

'Thanks, but he is too independent for that, too bloody independent for his own good, in fact. He insists on making his own way in life. Even getting him to come and see Uncle was a job and a half. But,' he chuckled, 'the old man seemed to like him for that, and they got on well together. Para comes every weekend now.'

There was a rumble of thunder outside. Saha thought he should be going, but Tissa stayed him with a question that had been troubling him all evening.

'What on earth is an exchange marriage?' he broke out brashly.

'I marry the other guy's sister and he marries mine,' replied Saha flatly. 'That way, no dowries pass between us.'

'I see, no cash, just barter? Trust you Tamils,' Tissa began mockingly but, seeing his friend's troubled look, he changed tack. 'But you are not going to do it, are you?'

Saha shrugged his shoulders and made a face, as though to say he had to find a way out. Money was a problem. Be kept by a rich widow, was Tissa's solution — conventional, but it works, he said, look at Prince Albert. Rob a bank, was Saha's unimaginative riposte. And together they concocted various madcap schemes, and laughingly shrugged them all aside.

Sultan came in with his book and interrupted their chatter. Saha rose to leave.

'Good luck, Tissa,' he said wistfully. 'Enjoy yourself while you can.'

'You are the one who needs the luck,' Tissa replied jauntily, 'I make my own.'

‘WHAT HAVE YOU GOT against Goonesinha?’ Saha blurted out suddenly. He was helping S.W. to put up a gutter that had fallen in the rains the previous night, and the question just popped out. It was not the most propitious of moments to ask such a question, with S.W. balanced precariously on a ladder, trying to get a nail into one of the holes in the bracket. But Saha had been mulling it over ever since his visit to Tissa several weeks ago. Tissa himself had dropped in on his uncle in the meantime, but Saha was troubled by the silences that endured between them. The once familiar camaraderie was gone, and in its place was an almost formal, dutiful uncle-nephew relationship.

It was Tissa’s fault really, thought Saha. He had to idealize everything. It was one thing to be romantic about Soonoo. But the way he was going on about his Chief, one would have thought the man was going to overthrow the British single-handed, armed only with what Tissa kept calling a general strike.

‘Eh?’ exclaimed S.W., dropping the hammer. ‘That was sudden. What makes you think . . . give me the hammer son . . . what makes you think . . .’ The hammering drowned out his voice. He descended the ladder and moved it along, muttering that the whole thing was rusted and falling apart. If only he could get the landlord to replace the lot.

‘Because you and Tissa keep avoiding the subject,’ Saha retorted.

‘What? Ah, I see. I think that will do for now.’ He looked at his handiwork from one angle and then another. ‘Yes, that should do. Let’s go in and see whether we can’t get a drink of *thambili* from your aunt.’

Prema was putting the finishing touches to the Sunday meal when the men came in and sat down silently at either end of the kitchen table, their backs against the wall and facing her. Sweat poured down their faces.

Prema stood in front of them, feet spread apart, arms akimbo, in silent rebuke of their sweaty bodies in her clean kitchen. They hung their heads.

‘Oh, all right,’ she gave in and, fetching two golden red king-coconuts from the store-room, she cut off their tops and poured the water into two large glasses. After which she split the nuts in half and, scooping out the loose, white jelly-flesh into a spoon, dropped it morsel by morsel into the tumblers. She then added fresh juice of lime and one or two teaspoons of sugar, and handed the glasses to the men, who had watched her every familiar move with undimmed fascination.

S.W. drained his glass in a draught and wiped the sweat off his face

with a towel. Saha sipped his drink, passing his tongue sensuously over the moist gel before swallowing it.

'When you have finished,' S.W. told him, 'we shall go into my room and start your education properly. And then you can answer your own question.' He said 'my room' with a special emphasis, and Saha knew he was referring to the shed at the end of the garden, from which the old man emerged as from the sea every morning at dawn. How much time he spent there or what he did in that time Saha could not quite make out, but he had once seen the shed all lit up, at three o'clock in the morning, and concluded that it was some sort of a shrine room, a room for worship and prayer perhaps, and maybe with some books in it. Now he was about to find out. He gulped down the rest of his drink quickly and got up to follow S.W., when there was a knock at the door.

'I wonder who that is,' muttered S.W. disappointedly, as he made his way to the front door. 'Ah, it's you.' He was almost cheerful. 'Come in, come in.' Who could make him so expansive? wondered Saha. 'Tissa?'

Para walked in shyly, flushed with the old man's unexpected welcome.

'Hello Auntie,' he greeted Prema and quietly placed a sheaf of betel leaf and arecanut in her hand. Saha felt a twinge of envy; it always amazed him how Para slipped so easily into a relationship.

'Come on, Saha,' urged S.W. 'We've got work to do. You too, Para.'

'Not till he has had a *thambili*,' Prema protested, but Para declined the offer. He would come and get it when he was thirsty, he said, and followed Saha out of the kitchen.

S.W. led the way to the shed in the garden and, taking a key from the pocket of his shirt, opened the door. No other door in that house was ever locked; the shrine, thought Saha, must be worth something.

'Wipe your feet before you come in, lads,' warned S.W. and, as the brothers entered the room, the old man spread out his arms. 'This is where I collect myself every morning.'

Sahadevan was taken aback. There were no shrines in it at all, it was not a prayer room, not even a picture of the Buddha – just books and pamphlets and newspapers and magazines, all neatly arranged on the floor and on shelves along the walls and some, special no doubt, in a bookcase standing solemnly in the middle.

'What's the matter?' asked S.W., amused by Sahadevan's expression. 'Did you think I distilled arrack. . . .' he broke off chuckling.

'No, Uncle,' Saha stammered. 'I thought, I thought it was a prayer room. I have never seen so many books and papers. . . .'

'Well, I suppose you can say it is a prayer room in a way, if prayer is

reflection,' said the old man, serious once more. 'That is what the Buddha meant, I think, by prayer: not the worship of gods, but the understanding of oneself.' He broke off and picked up a magazine from a pile on the floor. 'Now, Saha, have a look at this,' and he held out a copy of *The Buddhist*. 'It was edited by a Christian you know, a Burgher who fought all his life against missionary education.'

But Sahadevan was deep into a copy of the *Ceylon Review*.

'Uncle,' he exclaimed excitedly, 'Here's something by Dr Pinto, Lisboa Pinto, the man Brother Joseph used to tell us about. Lisboa, that's a funny name.'

'Goan, from Goa,' explained S.W. 'Roman Catholic.'

Saha looked quizzically at the older man, a half-smile on his face.

'It is what a man does that is important, not who he is,' observed S.W.

'And he was a good doctor?'

'A great doctor, lived and worked in the slums, I remember.' He paused and his face sank back into its lines of sadness. 'Poor people, old people, sick people, people without jobs – and even those who worked in the local printing works had never got a proper day's pay in their lives. He looked after them all, fought for them, started a union. . . .'

"Let the rich feel for the poor workman," Saha broke in, reading from the paper, "and help the Ceylon Workmen's Union, and not try to smother in the labourer's throat his first cry for independence." That's lovely. When did he say that, Uncle? What was the Workmen's Union? How did it all start?'

'Hey, hey, hold on, hold on, not so fast. We can't talk about all this in a day. Take it and read it and we will talk some more.'

'The Ceylon Workmen's Union', he continued, 'was Ceylon's very first union; 1894, it was, and –'

'1893, it says here,' interrupted Sahadevan, proud in his discovery.

'And our first real strike, by printers, was in that year.'

'And did they win?' asked Sahadevan.

'No, they lost, they lost that one. But other things came out of it, things like the agitation to change the labour laws and to have more Ceylonese in the Legislative Council.'

'Labour laws?' queried Sahadevan, rummaging through the magazines. 'Why, what did they do?'

'They sent people to jail if they refused to work, or fired them, like they did to William.' And seeing Sahadevan's look of incomprehension, S.W. went on to explain. 'William was one of the strikers, a "ringleader", they said, and they put him in prison – the Supreme Court did – because he went and asked for his wages to go on strike.' S.W. chuckled.

‘Mad fellow he was, didn’t give a damn for the *suddhas* and their laws – fine worker, but they hated him for standing up to them.’

‘What happened to him?’ asked Para, who had sat quietly by in a corner, hanging on S.W.’s every word.

‘When he got out you mean? God knows. He probably went back to his village, and died there. But that’s not so important, is it, Para? What was important was that by standing up to an unjust law, he taught others to stand up too. Just that one act is enough to remember him by. So many other acts flowed from that, so many strikes from that printers’ strike – laundrymen, builders, cycle workers, carters. People were becoming more confident in their own power to change things. And they saw that when they stood together, they had nothing to fear. They became bold and defiant and crafty.’

Para listened with rapt attention. He was a boy again in the village, listening to the tales his father, Pandyan, told him of the epic heroes of the Mahabharata, as he trotted along beside him on their monthly trips to market. Except that the things that S.W. told of were everyday things and the men everyday men, more real, more substantial, and somehow more heroic. Even Saha, who was immersed in *Some Facts of Our History*, put aside his book to listen to S.W.’s tale.

‘I remember the carters’ strike like it was yesterday,’ went on the old man, himself now a captive of his audience, living his time again. ‘There was no other transport in those days, all the goods and produce that the *suddhas* were sending out of the country had to be carried by carts to the Colombo harbour. But they got in the way of the new-fangled trams and motor cars, and the carters were told, that, by law, they could no longer sit in their carts: it made their progress slower, and they were lazy enough already. They should walk beside their bullocks, like the bullocks.’ He raised his eyes and arms up to heaven in a gesture of utter disbelief.

‘Of course, they went on strike, 5,000 angry men and, try as the government would, they could not be divided. They stood together and won. The government revoked the law.’ He smashed his right fist into the palm of his left hand and smiled a victorious smile.

‘And talking about standing up to the law,’ S.W. chuckled, ‘I’ll never forget the day Podi Appu stood up on the shaft of his cart and drove through the streets of Colombo. He certainly was not going to walk with his bulls. I can see him now: his sarong all tucked up, his long hair flowing in the breeze and his stick held aloft as though to beat not the bullocks but the law itself. He was a grand sight, but of course they stopped him, the police. When they tried to take him away – and you can imagine the mood of the crowd that had gathered by now – Podi

Appu pointed out grandly that he had not broken the law, since he was not sitting in the cart, but standing. And the more the police tried to make sense of the law, the sillier they looked, till the crowds began to jeer and hoot at them. In the confusion they let Podi Appu go.'

Saha laughed outright at that, but Para could only smile in relief.

S.W. re-lit his cigar. 'The whole thing was like one of those folk tales about Andaré,' he recalled. 'And by the time the story had been told and retold – even the papers spoke of the carter who rode round and round the Town Hall "puffing a long cigar" – Podi Appu had become something of a national hero, and the strikers had all become Podi Appus. There was hardly a worker in Colombo who did not support the carters' strike after that, providing food and money, keeping out black-legs, everybody willing them to defy the government and the police.'

'They are the real heroes, son,' S.W. mused. 'William, Podi Appu, Vadivel. . . . Not many people know that it was Vadi who kept the carters united against caste differences. They are the real heroes; they and the people, the ordinary people, who suffered a lot of hardship in helping the strikers. It is their sacrifices that made things better for the rest of us. Of course I am not saying that Pinto and Dhanapala and all those educated people did not matter, of course they were important. It was they who started it all in a way. Maybe they did not know hunger like we did, but they helped us to connect it to the *suddhas*. But where are they today, the educated people, I mean? Look at all these Congress chaps, fighting each other to get places, They don't care about the working man.'

Saha nodded his understanding. 'Is that why you don't trust Goonesinha?' he asked, looking up from among the books and pamphlets scattered around him on the floor.

S.W. scratched his forehead and pondered the question a while before he answered.

'I don't know whether I trust him or not,' he drawled. 'All I know is that he is not a worker. And he is trying to organize the workers. From the outside in.' His pace quickened. 'But that is why we failed before, you see.'

'Maybe, this time –' ventured Saha. He was still set on mediating between S.W. and Tissa, and was quite unprepared for the vehemence of the old man's reply.

'This time? This time, we are even less united than before, and he . . . he is calling for a general strike!' S.W.'s voice, usually low and measured, was shrill with anger. But almost at once he shook himself loose of it, like a dog shaking the rain off its coat, and rising from his desk, stretched his arms to the ceiling.

'I am getting rheumatism,' he muttered, and Saha knew that the subject of Goonesinha was closed.

When the strike came, it took even S.W. by surprise. He was on leave at the time, looking after Prema, who had been taken ill on the night of their wedding anniversary, and it was Saha who brought him the news. The railwaymen were coming out on strike, he told S.W. bluntly on his return home from work one evening; he was taken aback by the old man's reaction. Strike? In the railways? His own backyard? And he knew nothing about it? He was angry and hurt, and had difficulty in keeping his voice down. He didn't want to upset Prema. He shut the bedroom door and came back and sat with Saha at the kitchen table. He looked haggard and worn. How was it he had not seen it coming, he asked Saha. Vadi had told him only the other day that there was trouble brewing among the young hotheads, but neither of them thought it would come to this. God knew things were worse for the younger men in the machine shop, but a strike at this time?

He got up and, opening the kitchen door, looked up at the sky. The evening was closing in, the crows were cawing themselves noisily to bed on the lofty mara tree in the distance. A cool breeze wafted in from the sea. He came back and sat down, leaving the door open.

He would go along with it of course, he told Saha, but there was nothing much he could do till Prema was better. Saha nodded. He could always look after Auntie, he said, in the evenings, but S.W. would have none of it. Saha should get on with his studies for the departmental exams. That was his first priority, he should be at his books now. He could do both, Saha muttered to himself as he slunk off to his room. He was worried about S.W. He did not look himself any more. Perhaps it had something to do with Tissa moving slowly away from him, not being his comrade any more.

Funnily enough, it was Prema's illness that had led to the most recent estrangement. Before that, thanks to Saha's intercession, or so Saha thought, Tissa had been drawing closer to his uncle again despite their differences over Goonesinha. Tissa had in fact been so determined to make amends for his past conduct that he made it a point to remember that 1923 marked his uncle and aunt's 30th wedding anniversary, and on a sultry February morning he arrived at their home with sundry presents and a dish of devilled venison – cooked, he confided to Saha, by the fair Soonoo herself. Prema was so pleased to see Tissa seal his peace with S.W. – it was he, really, who had a partiality for venison – that she ate more than was good for her and went down with what she thought was a mild case of indigestion. In the days following, the pain in the

stomach became more acute but, apart from taking the *kasaya* she had herself concocted, she paid no mind to it. Characteristically, she told no one about it either, till Saha, coming home from work one evening, found her doubled up in pain, and sent for the doctor. But all the doctor would say to him was that she needed to go to hospital for further examination. S.W. arrived just as the doctor was leaving and managed to elicit the information from him that he suspected 'some disorder' in Prema's womb, but could not be sure; she would have to be removed to hospital for observation. The tests in hospital proved inconclusive but, suspecting a displacement of the womb, the doctors ordered complete bed rest for Prema.

S.W. had hoped that his widowed sister would come from Galle to help him out, or that Tissa, who was still not doing a full-time job, could look after his aunt during the day. But the sister pleaded illness and Tissa, apart from his regular visits, would not commit himself.

Saha could not understand that. Tissa was devoted to his aunt and, whatever his differences with the old man, he never forgot how much he owed him. It was not as though Tissa did not take the trouble and time to come and visit the sick woman. He came every day, and seldom empty-handed, but he would not stay. He would fetch the medicines from the doctor, clear up and tidy his aunt's bedroom even, when S.W. was out of the way, but he would not stay and look after her. S.W. never said a word, neither reproached him nor thanked him. They seldom spoke to each other now.

Or so Saha gathered from what Para had told him. In his own unobtrusive way, Para had been coming in and helping out whenever he could, and he too was troubled by the growing estrangement between Tissa and his uncle. It caught him in the stomach, like a hunger, he confessed to his brother, though he hadn't known them that long. Something was missing, an arm or a leg, or someone was absent, he couldn't quite explain it. Saha drily replied that Tissa was selfish, that was all. Para was not so sure. Perhaps, he ventured, perhaps Tissa was put off by sickness. Or perhaps he couldn't face his aunt being ill. Perhaps both. It had taken him the same way, Para recalled, when his mother was dying, but he had stuck to it because there was no one else to look after her. Saha was moved, but wouldn't agree; he would ask Tissa the next time he saw him.

But the strike broke out a few days later, and Tissa's visits became less frequent and more fleeting and then stopped altogether. He had work to do, he told Saha, now that Goonesinha had entered the fray – unwillingly, of course, and unwittingly. It was not the Chief's strike and he did not want to interfere. He was just passing by, and the strikers asked

him to take up their cause with the government: they had no faith in the Workers' Federation, they said. So what could he do?

Why is he whipping up all these other people then, in the harbour, in the mills, in the hotels and all those other places, Saha wanted to know. He had come upon Tissa talking to postal workers in the canteen in the second week of the strike, and was determined to pin him down to some answers.

'Oh, come on, Saha,' Tissa disarmed him. 'Aren't you going to buy me a cup of tea?'

Saha hesitated.

'Please.'

'Sit down then and wait for me,' Saha conceded. 'Don't you dare move.' He could not go on being angry with Tissa without getting caught up in his brashness before long. He glanced across at his friend as he went to fetch the tea and could not help thinking that he looked a bit dishevelled and seedy. His clothes looked slept in, and there was stubble on his cheeks. Even his moustache, his pride and joy, looked untrimmed and weary.

'Well?' Saha put down the tea and took up the conversation where he had left off.

'Well what?'

'Why is Mr Goonesinha —'

'Because those bastards in the government cheated him. They used him to call off the strike, and then started negotiating with the Federation.'

'So what?'

'So we are calling for a general strike, that's what.'

'Who is *we*?'

'The Ceylon Labour Union.'

'I see,' said Saha, and dropped the subject. None of this explained why Tissa did not come home any more. He could easily find the time if he wanted to.

'Tissa,' Saha leant across the table, 'I don't know how to say this, but...'

'Just say it.'

'Well,' Saha began tentatively, when a man in a red shirt and sarong came up to Tissa and whispered in his ear.

Tissa put his cup down and got up to go. 'I am sorry, Saha, I've got to rush,' he apologized, 'but, hey, why don't you come to the meeting on Sunday and see for yourself what the Chief has to say?'

'Yes, all right,' Saha gave in. But Tissa was already out of the door. 'I'll see you there,' Saha called out.

By the end of the week, Saha had forgotten his promise. Prema, who had been making steady progress, had suddenly taken a turn for the worse. She could not retain her food and threw up everything she ate. Saha lay awake at night, listening to her retch her life out. And S.W., whose will had carried her, began to wilt through sheer fatigue, till Para began to come in every morning and gave him a chance to get some sleep during the day.

By Saturday Prema had improved and that evening the men sat down to a meal that Para had cooked. He had been boasting for weeks that he was a good cook and had finally been forced to deliver.

'Hmm,' murmured S.W., his mouth full of shark *varai*. 'Lovely. What did you do? Temper it with coconut and mustard seed? Fenu-greek, then?'

Para smiled non-committally: he wasn't giving his secrets away.

'I've got a secret too,' joked S.W. It was the first time in weeks that he had smiled with all his face, lifting the mists from its crags.

'Concerning whom?' asked Saha.

'Our friend here.'

'Me?'

'Yes. I've found you a job.'

'What?' Para and Saha broke out in unison.

'As a tramcar conductor. It's nothing much, I know, and you might have to wait a few months before there is a vacancy, but it will put some money in your pocket and keep you out of trouble.' He was sorry he couldn't get Para into the railways, but his stock there wasn't very high at the moment. His friend at Boustead Tramways, though, had agreed to put Para on the waiting list, subject to an interview, of course.

Para's round eyes rolled out his thanks. He did not care what type of job it was, he assured S.W., so long as it gave him time to himself. He was fed up with pottering around for the manager of Capitol Cinema: he was never his own man and rarely had his own time.

Saha was surprised at Para's vehemence and understood only then how rudderless and listless his brother had been since leaving the village. Come to think of it, the only time Para seemed to be at ease with himself was when he came to see S.W. The two had become firm friends since that first visit to 'The Shed'. The conversation then had been entirely between S.W. and Saha. But the old man had noticed that Para, though excited by their discussion, had been quiet all the time and, later that evening, had asked him why he had said nothing.

'I don't know anything, Uncle,' Para had replied, and Saha detected a note of sadness in his voice.

'What do you mean, you don't know anything? You know a lot.'

But Para had shaken his head and muttered that he had left school after Standard Six.

'So did I, so did I. But I taught myself,' S.W. had almost shouted. 'You can too. You can read can't you? Well then, read, and reflect, and imagine, and become your own school and scholar.'

Para had taken the old man's words to heart, and S.W., in turn, had given Para free run of the shed. Their relationship was like that of colleagues, whereas the old man's attitude to Saha was still avuncular. He listened to them now talking about the tramways and how they should be run.

'They are not coming out on strike, are they?' Para asked S.W.

'I don't think so, but you'd better ask your brother. He is the one who has been talking to Tissa.' It was said flatly, without bitterness or sarcasm. Saha shook his head: he did not know.

'I know what,' Para piped up. 'We can go to the meeting tomorrow, you and me, *annai*. What do you say?'

'Oh Lord, I quite forgot,' replied Saha. 'I promised Tissa I would. Yes, let's do that, if it's all right by you, Uncle?'

'Yes, of course. I forgot too. I want you to go, both of you.' He reached for the butt-end of a cigar in the ashtray. 'You can take my place,' he muttered.

Para didn't quite catch that, but Saha heard him.

'It's no big thing,' he assured S.W., like someone in the know. 'There won't be that many people.'

But on the way to Price Park the following afternoon, Saha began to realize how wrong he was. People were streaming in to the meeting from all directions. There was thunder in the air and the hint of heavy rain, but they still kept coming, in cart-loads. Gram-sellers lined the pavements and red banners hung from the trees.

Para stopped by a *rambutan* seller. He had never seen the fruit before.

'What is that?' he asked his brother, making a wry face at the hairy, red balls dangling from stalks.

'Eat and see,' replied Saha, buying him a bunch.

Para broke the thin skin with his teeth and the juice splashed all over his face. He laughed delightedly, licking his lips, and bit into the luscious white flesh. 'Nice, very nice,' he drooled.

'Don't eat the seed, you fool,' Saha admonished him playfully. 'Here, give me one,' and with an air of superiority he prised the fruit open with his fingers, splashing juice all over his clean white shirt.

Para roared with laughter.

'So that's how it is done, is it?' he teased, and slowly Saha's face creased into a smile and broke into laughter. Suddenly he felt released. This was his carnival too.

'Look,' he shouted. 'Over there, that cart. They are putting on a *nadagan*, with puppets. Let's go and see.' They crossed the road and went towards the park, at the entrance to which stood a makeshift stage, set sideways in an open cart. A curtain ran across the back, separating the puppet master from the puppets, and on the carter's seat to the right sat the drummer and his drum.

The play must have been reaching its denouement as the brothers got to it, because there was silence on the stage and a hush among the audience. Para hurriedly found a tree stump to stand on and signalled to Saha to follow him. But Saha, smiling at his brother's enthusiasm, pointed out that there was no need: the cart itself stood on a knoll and the puppets were three feet high; he could see the action clearly from where he stood.

There were two puppets on the stage, one in a traditional devil's mask, but incongruously wearing a white pith helmet with gold braids around its brim and silver plumes streaming from its crown; and the other in a loincloth, wearing a mask of grief, bending over the stones he was breaking on the railroad with a broken pickaxe. The overseer's whip was raised to strike and the tableau held for a minute. The drums now started on a low ripple and, as they slowly rose, the whip went up in the overseer's hand. But as it came down, to the heightening throb of the drum, on the labourer's back, the man came erect and, flinging his pickaxe aside, seized the whip with one hand and the throat of his persecutor with the other. As the drums rose to a deafening crescendo, he flung them both to the ground. And walked over them. The drums ebbed away into the distance.

The onlookers remained stock-still, not wanting to move. But two policemen, who had been covertly watching the play from behind the trees, now moved out into the open, and the crowd began to disperse. By the time the constables reached the cart, however, the puppets and the puppeteer had vanished and a sweetmeat stall had miraculously appeared, and the drummer was selling toy drums and sweets. The policemen helped themselves to some sweets and passed on.

'Did you see that? Did you see that?' exclaimed Para. 'They are on our side.'

'Our side?' Saha had not thought of it like that.

'Come on, or we'll be late for the meeting,' and this time it was Para who led the way.

At the farther end of the park was a raised wooden platform and seated on the grass around and below it were more people than Saha had ever seen gathered together in one place before. A buzz of excitement passed through him. It was like the crowds that came together on festival days

at Nallur Temple, except that there was no jostle and bustle here, no celebration or worship, only stillness and an air of expectancy, as though they had discovered something in themselves and were waiting for it to be touched awake. Saha could not put words to it. But in trying to explain it to his brother, he managed to explain it to himself.

On the platform was a table covered by a white cloth and draped along its sides was a red banner with big gold letters that read Ceylon Labour Union. Two men wearing red shirts were arranging half a dozen chairs by the table. Another man, who looked suspiciously like Tissa, came up to them and, whispering something in their ears, removed one of the chairs. A minute or two later, four important-looking men ascended the platform and sat down, leaving the middle chair vacant. The crowd waited expectantly, craning their necks to see the man who was going to occupy the fifth chair, when a tall greying man stood up from the table and announced that Mr Goonesinha was 'unavoidably delayed', but they should start the meeting without him because it looked like rain.

Speaker after speaker then rolled out the record of the government's misdemeanours and the workers' worsening plight, till the crowd began to get bored and restless. Some got up and moved around. A few began to heckle the last speaker, who was particularly long-winded. The meeting had gone on for over an hour and there was still no sign of Goonesinha. Suddenly there was a hush, someone had sighted a car, and yes, it was him. The crowd settled down again.

Mr Goonesinha ascended the platform. The crowd began to cheer. Mr Goonesinha held up his hand in salutation.

Saha and Para looked at each other: neither was impressed by the looks of the man. He was short and squat and hefty, with a coarse dark face and the build of a bull. He wore a red shirt under a white drill suit and a red lining ran all around the blanched white topee which he laid before him on the table as he sat down. His hair was thick and black and parted down the middle, accentuating the lop-sided smile that creased his face.

The last speaker quickly finished his speech. The tall grey man rose from his seat. He looked towards the audience, stretched out his arms towards Goonesinha and, as though offering up a benison, announced: 'Our President'.

The crowd burst into wild applause. Goonesinha pushed his chair back and came round to the front of the table, in full view of the people.

'Friends,' he began, 'forgive me if I kept you waiting, I was going about your business.' His voice was deep and round and golden-brown, like a jak fruit in season, and brought a warm glow to his listeners. The

words came out with the simplicity of sincerity. There was no boast in what he said. He had indeed been busy trying to get the workers at Walker's and Brown's, and Hayley and Kenny to come out in sympathy with the government workers, and he would be going on from there to talk to the hotel and shop workers. And so far he had received nothing but support and encouragement. Saha and Para looked at each other again: they liked him.

There was a luminosity about the man as he spoke, as though a light had broken through his dark face, or perhaps it was his eyes that shone out so blindingly. And he himself began to loom bigger and bolder, even beautiful, the longer he went on. The brothers were speechless, the crowd spellbound.

There was no tirade here against the degradation of human life, no record of grievances or pain. He knew that his audience knew all that better than he. He merely spoke of what needed to be done and how to set about doing it. They were a free people who had been put in chains. They must break them. And they must begin where the chains held hardest: with the labouring people. He paused. The rain, which had been beating down steadily as he spoke, began to get heavier, and still no one moved. The only way they could do that, he continued, was to withhold their labour. And that meant all of them, all the working people. That was why he was calling for a general strike. That was the business he was going about preparing. All he asked was that they came along with him.

The crowd rose to a man. 'We will,' they shouted with one voice. 'We will.'

6

THE RAIN CAME PELTING DOWN and the crowd began to disperse. Saha called out to Para to follow him and ran for cover under the platform where those who had sat closest to it had already found shelter.

'Some speech,' said Saha, drying his hair with a handkerchief.

'Some man,' responded Para.

A pimply faced youth next to him smiled and nodded. He was about to say something when his companion, an older man who looked like his father, asked him, 'What was it he said about the estate workers?' His son was not sure, and Saha answered him. 'He said that they were not ready to join them yet, but his friend Natesa Iyer was working on it.'

'No, not that,' rejoined the man.

'Ah, you mean that bit about the labourer is a labourer, not a Tamil or a Sinhalese or an Indian?'

'Yes. That was a bit too much wasn't it?'

'Was it?' asked his son weakly.

'We are not ready for it yet.'

'When do you think you are going to be ready for it – after independence?' bristled Para. 'And you are going to get that all by yourself, are you, without the rest of us?'

He would have gone on, but Saha pulled him away. 'Look, there's Tissa,' he said, pointing to the other side of the platform where Tissa was dismantling the stage. Tissa must have seen them at the same time because he signalled to them to wait for him.

The rain stopped as abruptly as it had begun and people began to move out of their shelters. The clock at St Anne's struck five.

'I should be going,' said Para, 'or I'll be late for work.'

'Wait and say hello to Tissa.'

'No, really.'

'OK, see you soon.'

Tissa joined Saha a few minutes later and together they walked through the park towards the exit. The sun was out now, but arrived weak and damp through the dripping leaves of the trees.

'How was it then?' asked Tissa enthusiastically.

'Fine.'

'Fine? That's all you can say?'

'I enjoyed it.'

'Enjoyed it?' Tissa's voice went up an octave.

'All right, it was rousing.'

'And the Chief?'

'He was good. Clear. Precise and to the point.'

'That's all?'

'And rousing.'

'Bloody hell. What do people have to do to get some passion out of you?'

Saha smiled smugly. He liked to think that he could keep his emotions in check.

'Well, come and give me a hand at the weekend then,' Tissa enjoined him.

'I can't. Auntie Prema is bad again and –'

'Yes, yes. All right,' Tissa gave in ungraciously.

They had come to the park gates by now, and Saha turned to take leave of his friend.

'He should have been on the platform with them, you know. Uncle. That was his friend Hamban William who spoke first.'

'Ah, that's who it was. The second speaker, you mean, not the chairman who got all those cheers from the crowd?' Tissa nodded. 'I thought I'd seen him at Uncle's.'

'How many times I asked Uncle to come and meet the Chief!' Tissa shook his head in bitter regret.

But Uncle doesn't see eye to eye with the Chief, thought Saha, lowering his head and patting his hair down with his hands.

'I know what you are thinking,' Tissa told him, 'but those days are gone. We need organization now, and the Chief is doing it. It's still the same fight though. Why can't he see that?'

Saha said nothing. He heard only the pain behind the words, and the loss of faith. Tissa had looked up to S.W. all his life, and he wanted the old man up there, with the others, on the podium, to be recognized for the fighter he was.

'The least he could have done was to come to the rally.'

Again Saha was prompted to reply, but held himself back. Tissa knew why his uncle could not come, but that did not assuage his disappointment. He had wanted to show off to the old man, show him that he was continuing in the same tradition, and he wasn't there. It was like the time when he, Saha, had won the Scripture Prize at St Benedict's, and had wanted his father to have it, as his prize, for sending his son to school, or at least to be there; but that was impossible, absurd, and he had made do with Uncle Segaram. This, of course, was much more important. It was like an initiation, like when Saraswathi came of age.

'He could have got you or Para to look after her,' Tissa grumbled.

'It was he who sent us.'

'Not the same thing, is it?'

'That's plain silly,' Saha reproached. 'You know he doesn't trust anyone else to look after her. He even thinks she is ill because of him.'

Tissa raised his eyebrows quizzically.

'All that womb business,' Saha flung his arms embarrassedly about.

Tissa looked as though he wanted to believe Saha, but his hurt got the better of him.

'It's his pension, that's what it is,' he said bitterly.

'Oh, don't be bloody stupid,' Saha flared up, and broke into an angry defence of S.W. . . . Of course the old man wasn't thinking of his pension: he still had a couple of years to go, hadn't he? Tissa looked doubtful and Saha changed tack. Why risk it anyway? With his record, he had only to make one false move. Saha stopped. S.W. didn't need that sort of defence. Tissa was confusing him. All the old man was concerned

about was his wife's health, as simple as that. Who would look after her if something happened to him? Who was going to pay all the doctor's bills? And still he had sent Tissa a tenth of his pay towards the strike fund. What more did Tissa want?

'He won't even take extra money for my board and I've got to hide it in the shopping I do for him,' Saha confided. But Tissa remained unmoved.

'If you feel that way about the strike,' Saha cried out in frustration, 'what do you think it is doing to him? He has fought his whole life, and Prema is his whole life, and it must crucify him to be divided like that. And you, you are going to judge him?' Saha looked at his friend in disgust.

'I've got to go,' he said, and turned to leave, when Tissa suddenly flung his arms around him and swung him round.

'You really love him, don't you?' he asked.

'Not as much as you do,' replied Saha in the honesty of his anger. 'Maybe I understand him better.' Tissa's glasses were misting over, and Saha offered him his handkerchief. 'In this thing, anyway. I too have the same, the same . . . conflict.' He paused, trying to give the correct words to his thoughts. 'I don't know what my first duty is, to my own folk or to other people, poor people, like us. I know they are connected, it is the same injustice that gets to me, it is what makes me want to fight. But if I fight too hard and lose my job, who will look after my father and my sisters?'

'Couldn't you do both?' asked Tissa putting his glasses back on and returning the handkerchief to Saha.

'But how can I? At some point they cancel each other out. It is different for you, you have no responsibilities.' And then more generously he added, 'You are different, anyway, more impulsive, purer, in a sense. I go about things more slowly, more deliberately.'

Just then, Sultan came through the gate and stood by Tissa, a bundle of leaflets in his hand and a question on his face.

'Where on earth did he spring from?' laughed Saha. Sultan seemed to turn up when he was least expected. 'I should be going.'

'OK, I'll come home on Sunday. Definitely.'

Tissa did not turn up on Sunday or the weekend after. But by then the strike had grown into a general strike all over Colombo. Goonesinha's plans were succeeding. The workers at Walker's and Brown's and Lipton's and Harrison's came out in support of the government workers in the railways, the docks and the machine shops. People were beginning to see that the fight was not just against the bosses but against the British. And they brought out their old clothes, their family trinkets and

ornaments, and turned them into money to add to the strike fund.

There was excitement in the air, and a distant sound of chains being broken. Saha could not go to work without wanting to join the strikers on the streets: if only the clerks had a union of their own. Para went from house to house collecting food for the strikers, as though it was what he was meant to do all his life. And on the seventeenth day, S.W., at Prema's instigation – she was getting better by the day she assured him – came out to join his old friends, Hamban and Kanda and Podi, in a march through the streets of Colombo that brought the city to a standstill. But the police were out in numbers by then, and the army hovered on street corners, and the heady smell of victory was not unmixed with the bitter taste of fear.

By the end of the third week, the money had begun to run out; the public had no more money to spare, and Tissa, who was in charge of the collection, came home to empty tins. Para reported that food was becoming scarce, and its distribution a hit and miss thing; some families were on the verge of starvation. And the strikers were beginning to tire of Goonesinha's endless negotiations. The inactivity was getting to them and when, two days later, two of the strike leaders from Harrison's and Hoare's suddenly disappeared, the strike began to fold up. The drift back to work began with the commercial firms and soon spread to the docks and railways. The strike ended the following week, in unconditional surrender, leaving the acrid smell of burnt ambitions in the air.

Tissa dragged himself home to S.W., bewildered, bedraggled and running a high fever. He had lost his glasses in a skirmish somewhere and looked even more lost than he was. Saha gave up his bed to his friend and slept on a mat on the floor beside him. Prema tried to bestir herself in the kitchen but gave up. And S.W. seemed to pride himself in his new-found worth as cook and nurse and woman about the house. Some of that spilt over into Saha's life, and he began to put aside his studies to attend to Tissa or to listen to Prema, who got more garrulous as she got better. Para slid in and out, doing the outside chores like some old family retainer. Slowly a sort of peace settled over the household, and by the time Tissa was well enough to return to work, uncle and nephew had been returned to their old relationship, prompting Saha to remark pietistically to his brother, 'You see, all these things are sent to test us. You should read the *Gita*.'

And then, one day, S.W. received a letter, postmarked OHMS, requiring him to present himself before the Railways Inquiry Board to 'answer certain questions appertaining to the recent strike'. At first, he thought nothing of it. He had had nothing to do with the strike, if only because Prema had been ill at the time. And as for going on the demon-

stration, that was nothing: everyone had. The letter was probably a mistake. He wrote to the Railway Board to say so, but got a postcard in reply reiterating the instructions in the first letter.

S.W. was puzzled. The strike had been over for several months now and he had been back at work almost as long. Yet no one in his workplace had a clue as to what the letter was all about, least of all his bosses. He had certainly been outspoken about the men who had been dismissed as a result of the strike, but everyone knew that he had not gone along with the idea of a political strike in the first place. He was a union man, plain and simple.

The Board of Inquiry thought otherwise. They accused him of being an agitator from way back; in fact he had been nothing but a trouble-maker all his working life. He may not have been implicated in the most recent strike – that remained to be seen – but he certainly could not deny his past activities. They were all down in black and white.

S.W. had no wish to deny them. Indeed, he was proud of them. But he had been punished for them already, and he smilingly counted out his punishments as though they were notches on his gun. They had no call to punish him a second time for the same offence, or was that not British any more?

Ponsonby was not impressed. He had been appointed Chairman of the Board by Governor Manning and, like Manning, he hated the natives, but, unlike Manning, he made no secret of it. They stood in the way of progress, he was known to have said, all those thousands of smelly creatures, they did nothing to help themselves, and they still aspired to the rights of the white man. And if they thought that striking was a way of getting there, they had better think again.

He was a short, fat man, with a balding head and a forest of whiskers, and he puffed out his chest as he made his declaration of war, causing the sweat to break out on his fat, florid face. S.W. laughed as he recounted the tale to Saha and Prema at the end of the first day's hearing.

'If only he could see himself as I see him,' he ended good-humouredly.

'Who is he?' asked Saha.

'Ponsonby? President of the Planters' Association. He hates strikes and he has threatened to shoot Natesa Iyer if he so much as utters the word "strike" on the estates.'

The second day went very much the way of the first, with charges being read out and S.W. answering them. Ponsonby again ran the show, but the other two members of the Board did most of the questioning. Ponsonby did not turn up on the following two days, and his colleagues appeared to be more relaxed in his absence, even conciliatory. One of them in particular, the Scotsman, went so far as to offer S.W. a cup of tea

at a sticky moment in the questioning, and to suggest that they should be concentrating on the business in hand, not on past improprieties. He smiled a yellow smile at S.W., who could not help noticing what a nondescript man he was, despite his courteous manner and disarming smile. His companion, on the other hand, looked like a clerk turned gigolo, with his dashing little pencil moustache and slick black hair. He went along, though, with everything that Strachan said. And between them, they put S.W. at his ease.

He agreed with them that the strike was a mistake and, encouraged by Strachan, he went on to confess that his sympathy was with the strikers, not for the strike: this wasn't the time for it. Strachan raised his eyebrows questioningly. The workers were not ready for it, S.W. went on earnestly, and it had to come from them, from below. Strachan looked blank, and Upjohn mirrored his blankness. Out of their own need, S.W. could not avoid his compulsion to explain, fuelled by their own sense of grievance and injustice, not foisted on them from above . . . he stopped. He had said too much.

So it was not just his wife's illness that had kept him from getting involved in the strike, Strachan offered, dragging on his unlit pipe, it was the principle of the thing. Upjohn nodded his pomaded head vigorously, willing S.W. to agree. S.W. held his tongue. Strachan took a match to his pipe, but did not light it. He put his pipe down on the table and looked intently at S.W. From that perspective, he ventured, one might even say that S.W.'s past misdemeanours . . . ahem . . . activities . . . were done in good faith, and therefore had no bearing on the present case. He turned to Upjohn: Mr Ponsonby could not quarrel with that, could he? Upjohn shook his head from side to side and wrinkled his pretty nose, as though to say that there was no chance of disagreement there from the chairman.

S.W. felt uncomfortable. He was sure Strachan meant well and was trying to help him out. But why? Because he disliked Ponsonby? He certainly had not tried to hide his contempt for the bibulous planter. Or because he considered himself a cut above the rest, an Oxford man, and enlightened? Whatever the reason, if Strachan's suggestion meant disowning his friends or his past. . . . He was about to say as much when Strachan held up his hand: no, no, he did not mean S.W. to recant his past. Oh no. What he wanted was merely for S.W. to write a letter to the chairman of the board saying that he disagreed with the strike on principle. That, after all, was the truth, wasn't it? So why not say it? The rest S.W. could leave to Upjohn and himself. They would have a word with Ponsonby. That way S.W. could save his pension and live to fight another day. Strachan rubbed his hands together and chuckled, as

though he had solved an intricate mathematical problem. Upjohn glowed: the case was closed.

'No,' S.W. heard himself say, his voice an octave higher. 'That is not what I said. That's too black and white. You have it all there in my evidence. I have nothing more to say to you. I am leaving.' And he walked out of the chamber.

On the following day, the newspapers carried an interview with Ponsonby who expressed satisfaction at the way the inquiry was going. Some senior unionists, he said, had seen the error of their ways and were prepared to work alongside the government in future. Some of them, in fact, had been forced into strike action against their will by outside forces. It was up to the government, of course, to bring these forces to book.

That evening Tissa turned up on his uncle's doorstep, brandishing *The Trumpeter*. Saha opened the door to him, but he pushed past his friend, demanding to know where his uncle was.

'He's eating,' replied Saha weakly, following Tissa into the dining room.

'How could you do this, Uncle?' yelled Tissa, throwing down *The Trumpeter* on the table in front of S.W. The old man looked up and went back to his dinner. Prema, who on hearing the commotion had come rushing out of the kitchen, followed her husband's example and said nothing. They had been anticipating Tissa's visit ever since the news broke, but they were not sure how it was going to take him.

'How could you?' Tissa repeated himself, walking up and down the dining room, shaking his head in disbelief. Saha could not bear his friend's distress, but found himself sympathizing with S.W. more.

Prema sat down at the table and indicated to Tissa that he should sit down too.

'Don't we allow people to finish eating, any more, before we start fighting?' she asked, placing her pudgy arms on the table.

'I am sorry, Auntie, but this is my uncle we are talking about.' There was a catch in his voice. S.W. put aside his dinner.

'Sit down, son. What is it I have done?'

'This is you, right?' Tissa picked up the paper and stabbed his finger at the report. 'You told them all that.'

'No. They made it up.'

'But they made it up from what you said.'

'Whatever I said, they would have —'

'You are the one who goes on about loyalty.' Tissa was beside himself with grief and anger. 'Where is your loyalty here, to Podi and Vadivel and them? They were your friends, and they have lost everything.'

S.W. bowed his head and waited for the storm to pass, but Prema was roused to his defence.

'So, if your uncle got sacked,' she said bitingly, 'Podi Appu would have got his job back?'

Tissa let out his anger in a sigh and dropped into a chair.

'Or did they have a better chance if your uncle could show the Board that, whatever they had done in the past, they were not the ringleaders this time?' Saha was stunned by Prema's cold logic: he had known neither her coldness nor her capacity for argument before. But it roused Tissa to anger again.

'And disown the strike – and the Chief?' Tissa had not shaved that morning and, seated in the shadow of the lamplight, he looked lean and gaunt and accusing.

'But it was not their strike, it was his. Why should they take the blame for him?'

'What sort of loyalty is that?' There was more disappointment in the question than anger and Prema, leaning towards Tissa, responded in a kinder vein.

'Loyalty to oneself?' She held up the palm of her hand questioningly. Tissa did not say anything. The question lay on the table between them.

'To support something you do not quite believe in, and then go along with it because you supported it,' pressed Prema, 'what is that if not loyalty? To your own truth?'

Good lord, thought Saha, another philosopher, and hiding it all in the kitchen. He looked at S.W. and caught him smiling behind his hand.

Prema got up and busied herself clearing the table. 'Have you eaten?' she asked Tissa. The subject was closed.

'Yes, Auntie,' he replied abjectly, and Saha's heart went out to his friend: he was such a tempest.

S.W. reached for a cigar on the sideboard behind him, and Tissa went off to find him a light. He came back with a box of matches, lit his uncle's cigar and sat down on the chair beside him. Prema brought in the tea. Saha, who had been seated by the window, joined them at the table. The conversation turned to the forthcoming wedding of S.W.'s niece in Galle. S.W. did not want to go; he had long lost touch with his sister and when he needed her to come and look after Prema she had made some silly excuse. Prema said she would make the trip if she was well enough and S.W. proposed that Tissa should take his place.

'All right, Uncle, but I don't think Auntie Lourdes likes me very much, not after that –'

'Yes, yes, we won't go into that again,' Prema stopped him and Saha, who was anticipating a juicy bit of family gossip, could not hide his disappointment.

The kitchen clock was striking ten when Tissa got up to leave. S.W. suggested that he stay the night, but Tissa shook his head ruefully.

'Can't, Uncle,' he said. 'I've got to get up early morning. The Chief wants me to go up-country with him to see Natesa Iyer.'

'Important man, eh?' mocked Prema.

'Hmm. Can't do without me,' Tissa mocked back.

'Must be his fluent Tamil,' Saha observed sarcastically.

'No thanks to you,' Tissa upbraided Saha and added, in Tamil, that Sultan was a better teacher than Saha ever was.

'Does Tissa speak good Tamil then, Saha?' S.W. inquired smilingly. 'Better than me?'

'I suppose he does, Uncle, but it is Muslim Tamil,' and they had a hearty laugh at Tissa's expense.

Tissa pretended to be aggrieved. 'Well, the estate workers understand me,' he said, 'and I am better off talking to them than to you lot.'

'That's right son, you tell them,' encouraged his aunt. 'And come again son, in a better mood next time.'

After Tissa had gone, S.W. turned to his wife and said, 'He is still not quite right with us, is he?'

'No, he isn't. He needs time. And he needs to get away from that Goonesinha.'

7

'LOOK AT THIS,' Prema held up a sheaf of papers to Saha as he came into the kitchen for breakfast one morning. 'Retirement papers, Uncle's. Retirement papers. Can you beat that?' She flung the papers down on the table before Saha and fetched him his breakfast. 'What are they trying to do to him?' She sat down at the table and put her head in her hands.

Saha picked up the papers and looked through them. Auntie Prema was right: they had served notice on S.W.

'And he has done nothing, not since that Ponsonby business three years ago, and then they made out that he was on their side. Remember?'

The old lady was distraught and Saha was loath to go to work leaving her like that. The last few years had aged her and the nagging pain in

her womb had diminished her resilience.

'Are you sure you got your dates right, Auntie?'

'Yes, of course, I have,' she retorted testily. 'OK. Where are we now? August?' She made some quick calculations on her fingers. 'He's got at least another 14 months to run, till October, next year, 1926.'

'Maybe they made a mistake,' Saha tried to console her, looking discreetly at the clock on the wall.

'I don't know, Saha, but he's going to go mad. . . .'

'Has he not seen it, then?'

'No, the postman came after he left.' She looked at the clock. 'Go, go, you are late.'

S.W. was indeed mad when he read the letter. There was no doubt in his mind that the department was trying to get rid of him before his time. But he was too weary to enter into yet another dispute, and there was no one left to fight alongside him. His old mates had all been sacked or forcibly retired, and his younger colleagues looked more and more to outside organizers to solve their problems. Early retirement, he began to think, might do him a world of good: let him get back to his books, spend more time with Prema. He agreed to go in March.

But Prema dreaded the day her husband would come home for good.

'There's too much fight in him still,' she confided to Saha one Sunday morning when S.W. had gone with Para to the Pettah market. 'And nothing to give it to.' She shook her head and chuckled. 'He has calmed down now, you know, but you should have seen him when he was young. A real tiger he was. Fought everything and everybody in sight — his father, his mother, the school, the priests. . . .'

'The priests?' Saha was not sure he had heard her properly over the noise of his axe falling on an old tree trunk. It was a bright morning and he was chopping wood for Auntie Prema outside the kitchen door, while she sat on the kitchen step, her face lifted to the hot sun as though in homage for the times she had been well enough to take the heat. 'Priests, did you say?'

Prema nodded. 'Yes, he got kicked out of the church when he ran away with me.'

'Ran away with you?' Saha stopped, his axe poised in mid-air. In all the time he had lived with them, not once had the old couple brought up the subject of their marriage. All that Saha had gathered from the sundry gossip of relatives and friends was that S.W. and Prema were first cousins.

'Did I never tell you?'

'No, never.'

'All right, all right, don't get so mad. S.W.'s father and my mother were brother and sister.'

'I know that,' Saha said impatiently, taking off his shirt and wiping the sweat from his face and chest. Prema went into the kitchen and brought him a glass of lime juice. Saha sat down on the tree stump.

'Well, go on,' he urged her, taking a sip from his glass.

Prema resumed her seat on the kitchen step. She was fifteen, she recalled, when her cousin, Samuel, or S.W., and his father, Sebastian, came to see her mother. Her father had died when she was seven, but she had no recollection of having seen her Uncle Sebastian at her father's funeral. She was to learn later that Sumana, her mother, had been cast out by her family for running off with a basket weaver.

'It's a family tradition, you see,' she smiled, gathering her hair against the breeze that blew over the coconut trees from the sea. Saha watched her closely, trying to imagine what she must have looked like at fifteen. Not so pudgy, perhaps, and slight . . . but with a nice, rounded figure and streaming black hair . . . and those eyes, now dim and wrinkled, must have shone brighter and bigger.

Uncle Sebastian had been the least censorious of the lot, she went on, but he had already moved to Moratuwa to become an apprentice carpenter and took no part in the family feud. Since then his own marriage to a girl from Kalutara had taken him further south and he had lost all touch with Prema and her mother. He did from time to time send Sumana a postal order or two, but however much she needed the money, Prema's mother merely stacked them up in the corner of her hut as a memorial to brotherly affection. She managed though, from her meagre earnings from weaving mats, to send Prema to a village school till she was thirteen. But then Sumana's health began to fail her. Hunger had stretched her thin and she had no strength to fight the malarial fever that gripped her. On her dying bed she sent for her brother Sebastian, gave him back his postal orders and charged him with the care of Prema, making him promise that the child would be brought up in the Buddhist faith.

Prema paused, staring into the distance; with a sigh she picked up the tale again.

Uncle Sebastian had been a fervent Buddhist in his younger days. But as a young carpenter in Kalutara, without connections, and too proud of his craft to do menial jobs, he had found work hard to come by. And for a while he had held on to his principles. But when his wife gave birth to two boys in quick succession, Sebastian fell to making show-cases for the local bakery and boxes for the tradesmen. And then one day passing the town centre he saw a new church and school going up, and he went boldly to the high priest and offered to make him pews

and benches, and a pulpit the like of which he had never seen.

In the months that followed Sebastian began once again to regain the pride in his work that he had so long lost. The pews were his particular pride. Father Damien had been taken with Sebastian's enthusiasm, and gave him a free hand, and after great deliberation Sebastian had chosen to make the pews not of teak, as was customary, but of *nadoon*. Teak was easier to work on and light enough to be moved about, but *nadoon* had a grain and an incandescence which called to the light that broke in through the stained glass windows, and a solidity that went with the eternal.

'That was the way he told it to his sons, you know, the old man, bit of a poet he was.' Prema sighed as though she was sorry that she had not known him better.

By now, Prema went on, Sebastian was drawn by the awe of his craft and of the church – the Buddhist temples were bare to starkness – and when he came to make the benches, of teak this time, for the classrooms, he imagined another life for himself, had he only been educated. There was no future in carpentry, not for his sons anyway, not unless they were satisfied with jobbing. They would go to school, properly, he decided, to an English school like this one, and get work that would at least assure them of a regular income.

He spoke to Father Damien, but the priest was adamant that only Catholics could enter his school, and it was full up anyway. Of course, Sebastian and his family could be converted to the true faith, be baptized as Christians, and then his sons might find admission, when there was a vacancy of course. And so her uncle changed his name from Ananda to Sebastian and renamed his sons Joseph and Samuel. He cheated on the child that followed, though: she was a girl and had no need of education. But by then his wife, who had changed her name to Marie, had become a devout Catholic and insisted on baptizing her daughter Lourdes.

Prema stopped: Saha had got up from his perch and was stretching his limbs.

'Is all this boring you?' she asked.

'No, no. I was getting a bit stiff,' replied Saha, putting on his shirt again. 'But what a real *achcharu* Uncle's family is. Please go on, Auntie.'

'Joseph you have met, haven't you?'

'Yes, I went to their house in Kalutara just after I joined the post office and came to know Tissa.' He picked out a wood chip from his hair. It all seemed such a long time ago.

'Quiet sort of chap, isn't he? Joseph? Unlike your Uncle Samuel.' She giggled. 'I wonder what would happen if you called him Uncle Sam.'

Saha frowned.

'OK, OK,' she composed herself, and fell to musing. 'He had a lovely voice, that Joseph, and when he sang the Ave Maria . . .' her eyes misted over. 'But his wife put a stop to all that, the dried old —'

'Auntie!' reproached Saha, but approvingly: the old lady was showing some of her old spirit.

'But don't you think it's funny Saha? All the women in S.W.'s family, his mother, his sister, Joseph's wife, they are all like that. Dried up. Must be all that Catholic stuff.' Her eyes narrowed as she weighed up the idea.

'Anyway, Joseph was hopeless at school, but he got on with the priests — must have been his voice — and they made him a sacristan. And gave him a house rent-free, and from the money he saved up he bought himself that bit of coconut land you saw, and chucked up the job. He didn't much care for money, but he wanted Tissa to have a good schooling. So he sent him to us when he was nine.'

'Why Tissa? I always meant to ask him, but —'

'What do you mean?'

'Why a Buddhist name?'

'Ah, well. His Christian name is Benedict, but for some reason or other his father gave him the name Tissa as well.' She smiled mischievously and added, 'Maybe, Joseph wanted to get back at his wife.'

Saha went in to refill his glass and came back and sat down by Prema on the kitchen step. But she said nothing, and Saha felt that her mood had changed. Then slowly, she began to talk about S.W., as though to herself, seeing him now in her mind's eye as he was then.

He was the only friend she had when her mother died and she went to live with her Uncle Sebastian. Aunt Marie could not bear to have the basket woman's pagan daughter in her house, and Uncle Sebastian, though a kindly man, was weak. He gave in to his wife on everything, everything, but secretly he lived another life through his son, Samuel. It was with little Samuel that Sebastian sneaked out to temple on Poya days, and it was to him as he grew older that the old man confided both the secrets of his craft and his hatred of the *suddhas* to whom he had to sell his faith. It was Samuel too who stood up to his mother over Prema, whom she had reduced to an abject servant of the family. Old Sebastian heartily loathed his wife and the cruelty she inflicted on the child, but felt helpless to do anything about it. And when Samuel ran off with Prema to become a fitter in the railway workshop in Colombo, old Sebastian found some satisfaction in his wife's misery. But that drove her to church even more, to daily mass and benediction, and this time she made sure that her husband went with her.

'It killed Uncle Sebastian in the end, you know,' said Auntie Prema, 'all that Christianity he had started. Yes, I think it killed the old man in the end. He was happy only when he was with S.W., his favourite son, but his wife never let him see S.W. again after we were married.'

She wiped a tear from her eye with the corner of her sari and then, shaking herself of her mood, got up from the step.

'Good lord,' she said, noticing the kitchen clock. 'Look at the time! Where are those fellows? When am I going to cook? Your brother and my husband are a bad combination. I might as well get the gravy ready for the crabs,' she muttered, busying herself about the kitchen. Saha came in out of the sun and sat at the table.

'Auntie,' he said gently, 'why didn't you have any children?' Even as he said it, he regretted it. Prema was standing at the fireplace with her back to him and he could not see her expression, but her whole body went stiff. Slowly she turned round, her face ashen.

'I am so sorry,' Saha blurted out anxiously, getting up from the table, but she waved him back and sank into a chair. Saha fetched her a glass of water.

'I can't . . . I could have . . .' Prema began haltingly, but she seemed to want to talk and Saha did not stop her. 'It took a long time . . . I couldn't at first, and we tried everything: doctors, *vedaralas*, *thoils*. . . . And I finally became pregnant.'

Her face was beginning to regain its colour, and she smiled wanly. 'S.W. was so happy, you know. He had one more reason to change the world. He would feel my roundness and say, "He at least will be a free man in a free Ceylon!"'

'And then they broke his leg, in the strike. All bleeding and broken he was when they brought him home, and I fainted, fell down the steps. I lost the child.'

She slumped in her chair, and Saha instinctively put out a hand, but she shook her head. It was not for herself she felt unhappy, she said, but for her husband. She had come to terms with her loss, but she doubted whether S.W. ever had. It had come at a bad time for him: the strike had failed, a friend had betrayed him to the bosses, which was how he'd got beaten up even before the strike began . . . and then, losing the baby after all the waiting and the hoping, and with that, any chance of seeing his father again . . . it was a terrible time. Just when he was getting over it, he'd learnt that there was something wrong with her womb, and another pregnancy would kill her.

'People said it was my bad time, *senasura*, but I don't believe in all that nonsense.' Prema broke off and went and stoked the fire under the gravy pot. When she returned to the table, her mood had changed again. 'He

worries about me all the time, now, my husband. He sees I've slowed down a bit, he notices all these things you know, and he worries.' She looked at Saha, and he nodded: he knew that.

'The worst thing is that he's all locked up within himself, doesn't even want to talk to me any more, not about the things that matter to him.' She choked back her tears and angrily banged her fist on the table. 'And I know what that means. He is getting ready to be alone.' Her anger hovered over a sob, and the sadness came back to her face.

'If only I could have given him a child,' she was talking to herself now, 'a son, a daughter, what does it matter. But those *para suddhas* . . .' The tears rolled uncontrollably down her cheeks. 'And now Tissa is gone.'

Ever since Tissa had been promoted as personal secretary to Mr Goonesinha, he had drifted further from S.W., till now, some two years later, he was little more than a nephew to him. For Saha, who had witnessed the friendship between the two men, it was difficult to imagine Tissa as a little boy growing up under S.W.'s charge. But Prema's story slowly opened him up to visions of that other relationship, and an emptiness began to haunt him. His own father, Pandyan, had never been a man to show affection. He took it for granted: if he was a father, he must love his children. Love showed in duty fulfilled. That was all there was to it. Saha understood now why his old man had turned his face resolutely against his townie brothers: they had failed in their duty, and against his temple brother: he had institutionalized it. Duty, for Pandyan, was a simple everyday thing like love. Saha, of course, was the dutiful one, and Mahadev. But somewhere on that line of duty that connected him to his father, Saha had lost that slackness of relationship which would have allowed him to discover the old man for himself, and himself through him, like Tissa had with his uncle. Only, Saha had remained with his father; Tissa was gone. He wished he had had the choice, though.

Para had, that was what was so strange. Perhaps because he was already an outcast when he was born, and Pandyan had no duty to him, and made up for it with a kind of loving, letting Para find his own level of relationship with him. That was perhaps why Para and Tissa were still so . . . Saha looked for the word. Unsettled? He smiled crookedly, while he, of course, had arrived ready-made. Well, he knew that now, and there would be no excuse if he did not bring up his own children differently. Another duty? The smile got more crooked still.

Living with S.W. had made him more reflective, Saha realized, and unlike Prema, he looked forward to the old man's retirement. Perhaps

they could go walking on the beach more often, and talk, just talk: he was such a great teacher. But Prema was right: there was a silence within him now where Tissa had been, and the talking had stopped.

It was the Ramasamy affair that finally did it. Of that, Saha was certain. Up till then, S.W. might have had his periods of silence when he withdrew from the world, but Tissa was always able to winkle him out of himself. The Ramasamy business, however, had hit him hard. And the more Saha thought about it, the more certain he was, especially because Prema would never talk about it. She seemed to make it a point not to, or perhaps she had blotted it out of her mind completely so that she could preserve her husband and her nephew in their old relationship.

It happened in the last couple of months prior to S.W.'s retirement. Ramasamy was an unskilled labourer, in his late forties, who did the cleaning and fetching around the factory workshop. He had been there, as man and boy, for as long as S.W. could remember, and everybody knew him to be an uncomplaining worker. During the rail strike, the bosses, casting around for someone to protect the plant from vandals, raised Ramasamy to the position of supervisor and put him in charge of the machinery. But when the strike was over and Ramasamy was returned to his previous position, he began to jib. He had watched over the machinery night and day and, when work began again, watched its every moving part with unblinking attention. It was his baby now, and no one was going to take it away from him. After 35 years' service, he felt he had a right to a position of responsibility and, besides, he had started sending his youngest son to a proper English-speaking school and he needed the money. The men did not mind Ramasamy continuing to mind the machines – he did that anyway – but the bosses wanted him back where he belonged. No one, they declared, was going to profit from the strike. Ramasamy went off his head, and the department laid him off without a cent to his name: he was a coolie Indian and entitled to nothing.

S.W. took up the case, but got no backing; the Ponsonby 'revelations' had left him friendless. He tried to get up a petition, but nobody wanted to sign it: there were proper channels now for these things, they said. In desperation, S.W. turned to Tissa. Could his union do something for Ramasamy, by way of compensation perhaps: the man was a widower and had five children?

'Yes, of course, Uncle,' Tissa replied. 'That is what we are here for.' He was delighted that his uncle had asked him for help, and S.W., relieved that the asking was over, was even more relieved by the ready response. And Saha congratulated himself on pointing S.W. in Tissa's

direction. The old man had refused to countenance such a move at first, but when everything he tried had failed, he felt he could not sacrifice Ramasamy's future for his personal dislike of Goonesinha. Besides, Goonesinha, as Saha cynically pointed out, was in a pro-Indian mood. He was working very closely with Iyer to set up a union for the plantation workers and had received the Indian National Congress leaders, B.G. Tilak and Sarojini Naidoo, when they had visited Ceylon some months earlier. The Indian freedom fighters, Goonesinha had told them, pointed the way to Ceylon's fight for independence, and the two countries should work in harness.

Tissa was certain that the Chief would look into Ramasamy's case. 'I'll speak to him,' he told his uncle. 'And don't worry. I am sure he'll want to do everything he can.' For the publicity, thought Saha.

The next few weeks proved him wrong. Goonesinha took the case to heart. He wrote to the general manager of Ceylon Government Railways demanding Ramasamy's reinstatement on the basis of wrongful dismissal. When the general manager pointed out that they had not dismissed the man, but that he had dismissed himself by absenting himself from the work he had been given, Goonesinha petitioned the government, asking that 35 years of service should not go 'unrecognized and unrewarded'. He followed that up by going with Tissa to Ramasamy's miserable little shack in the Dematagoda slums and being photographed with his emaciated grandchildren. The next day's papers carried his eloquent indictment of the government for the horrendous conditions that government workers were forced to live in. And when that got no response from the government, except for a coded warning in the *Times* that Goonesinha should not poke his fingers into matters that did not concern him, the Chief brought Ramasamy's case to the attention of the public at an independence rally in Hyde Park the following week. The nation's cause, he proclaimed, was the workers' cause, and the Indian workers' cause the Ceylonese workers' cause.

S.W., who had accompanied Saha and Para to the meeting, said nothing during the speech, and was silent all the way home. It was only when Prema asked him how the meeting had gone that he came out of his reverie to give it a reluctant 'all right'. Prema waited, knowing that her husband's 'all right' was a first weighing-up, and Saha and Para waited with her. S.W. reached for the butt end of a cigar on the window sill of the verandah, and buttoned up his shirt. The evening was drawing in and a chill breeze was blowing from the sea. Prema suggested that they go in, but S.W. shook his head.

'All right,' he said again, but this time it was more positive. He drew on his cigar and let out a deep sigh of satisfaction. 'Yes, he was quite

good, really. I did not expect it.' He went on to give Prema the gist of Goonesinha's speech, and ended by saying that he had particularly liked the way Goonesinha had put Ramasamy's case in context and made it a platform for unity.

'Do you trust him, then?' Saha wanted to know.

'Do you think he is sincere?' asked Para.

'Are you going to tell Tissa?' inquired Prema.

'Hey, hold on, the lot of you. All I said was that his politics sounded right to me. Whether he believes it himself I do not know.' He was about to elaborate when Tissa appeared at the gate. 'Ah, the man himself,' smiled S.W.

'Well, Uncle?' beamed Tissa, depositing a bunch of bananas on his aunt's lap. 'And here are some of your stinky cigars.' He handed S.W. a small bundle wrapped in newspaper. 'You can throw away your butts.' He looked tired, but happy. Saha had not seen him so much at ease with himself for a very long time.

'Satisfied now?' Tissa flung himself down on the verandah steps and looked up at his Uncle. S.W. nodded his head slowly and deliberately. Prema smiled at the reconciliation, and Para smirked. But Saha was surprised that Tissa should have so much insight into the old man that he didn't even have to ask him whether he'd had a change of heart, until he remembered how it had always been like that between those two in the past.

'I know what you are thinking,' Tissa said more earnestly. 'But don't you see, Uncle,' he leant forward and put his hand on S.W.'s knee, 'all he wants is to see that ordinary working people get a decent wage and a decent life, the same as you, only he has to go about it in a more pragmatic way.'

S.W. pricked up his ears at the word 'pragmatic', and Tissa must have noticed it, because he went on to explain. 'There is no point in fighting unless you are going to win, and that needs cunning, strategy, organization.' Tissa's eyes shone behind his glasses, and S.W. sat up in his chair as though to take fresh stock of his nephew.

'He's got two fights on his hands, Uncle, against the British and against the bosses, and yet they are the same fight. Every issue touches on every other issue. And he's got enemies on all sides. What is he to do?' S.W. smiled, not so much listening to his nephew as looking at him: the boy had come of age. Saha understood the old man's feeling, but wondered whether it was not more of a case of the pupil wanting to become the master. Unlike S.W., he had heard Tissa say these things before, only this time he was trying to impress his uncle, take him over. Or was he being unfair to Tissa? Tissa was indeed a showman, and probably a better

student of Goonesinha than of S.W., but today his eloquence seemed to have been touched off by his love for his uncle, and become genuine.

'The Chief says he is riding two horses at once, and a pull on the reins of the one alters the direction of the other.'

S.W. laughed and, getting up from his chair, patted Tissa on the back. 'Come on, let's go in. It's getting chilly. What have you got for the boys to eat, woman?' He propelled Prema playfully forward. Saha and Para looked at each other. The years had suddenly fallen off the old man. The lines in his face had smoothed out and his frame straightened again.

Over dinner, Tissa, encouraged by his uncle's acceptance of Goonesinha, regaled them with stories about the Chief's sagacity and how he had won a whole lot of concessions for workers in small private firms, taxi drivers, hotel staff, printing workers and such people, even without the hint of a strike. The big one, of course, was going to be the docks, and Tissa doubted whether that could be settled without a strike. He looked owlshly over the glasses at everyone around the table in turn. There was no mistaking his importance. S.W. smiled indulgently and Prema fussed over his food.

'And Boustead's Tramways, we have got to do something about them.' Tissa turned to Para who had been working as a tram driver for the past two years. 'Aren't your wages terrible?'

Para replied bluntly: 'Long hours, no overtime, no sick pay, fined if you are late, wages cut for no real reason, it's the same old story. Your union people have come round a couple of times, but nothing has happened.'

'It will, it will, you wait and see,' promised Tissa.

'Coffee?' Prema interrupted.

'Not for me, Auntie. I've got to go.' Tissa got up from the table and went to the kitchen to wash his hands.

'Hey, Uncle,' he said when he came back. 'You know who's coming next month? From London?'

'Who?'

'Guess.' And when S.W. looked blank, 'I'll give you a clue: a famous Labour leader.'

'That Brockway chap?'

'Nooo. Leader I said.'

'Who then?'

'MacDonald. Ramsay MacDonald.'

'Ah, him.' S.W. seemed unimpressed.

'And I am going with the Chief to meet him.'

'You never told me whether you met any of the Indian National

Congress people when they came, like Sarojini Naidoo and. . .’ Saha complained.

‘Oh yes, I did. I got her to sign her book of poems. I’ll show you next time you come to my place.’

‘What was she like?’ asked Para, his eyes alight.

‘Very modest and strong. She told the Chief how they were going to drive out the British from India armed only with the strategies of civil disobedience and non-violence.’ Tissa turned to his uncle. ‘They say Gandhi is coming next year.’

As Tissa was leaving, S.W. put his hand on his nephew’s shoulder and said softly, ‘I don’t want you to lose your enthusiasm, but don’t get carried away. Take it easy, eh?’

‘Yes, Uncle,’ Tissa replied humbly.

‘And remind your boss about Ramasamy,’ he called after Tissa as he left. ‘Something has to be done soon.’

‘Right.’ Tissa waved from the gate.

But in the hurry and scurry of Ramsay MacDonald’s visit, Ramasamy’s case was forgotten. S.W. kept reminding Tissa and Tissa, to his credit, kept reminding Goonesinha. The Chief, though, had more pressing things on his mind. Mr MacDonald, it appeared, had held out the hope that the next Labour government would set Ceylon firmly on the path to independence and an elected government. It would be a gradual process, of course, but Mr Goonesinha should prepare himself for such an eventuality. It might be useful, in fact, for him to come to London for the next Commonwealth Labour Party Conference around July 1928, and meet some of the Labour people.

Tissa was excited by the invitation. Not only was it a recognition of his Chief as the authentic voice of the working class in Ceylon by no less than the leader of the British Labour Party; he now had a chance of going to London himself. But neither Saha nor Para, to whom he broke the news on their visit to his office, reacted favourably.

‘What happened to all that anti-British stuff, then?’ Para demanded.

‘And working more closely with the Indian National Congress?’ asked Saha.

Tissa looked at him in surprise. ‘The Chief is still going to attend the Congress sessions in Delhi next year, isn’t he?’

‘If that isn’t riding two horses – in opposite directions – I don’t know what is,’ remarked Para acidly.

‘You are being silly again, Para,’ Tissa retorted. He had never quite got along with Para, who spoke his mind too freely, and he did not like his influence over Saha. ‘Saha understands what I am saying.’

Saha ignored the by-play and reminded Tissa that they had come

there to find out what was happening about Ramasamy. S.W. had not heard from Tissa for the past few weeks, and Ramasamy and his children had been thrown out of their house and were now living in S.W.'s shed at the bottom of the garden. All S.W.'s pamphlets and papers had been packed up and put away in boxes.

Tissa avoided the question and called for Sultan to bring in some tea. 'He's working full time for me now. Only 16, but he gets a man's wages,' Tissa confided. 'And you know what?' He leant across the desk to whisper in Saha's ear, 'Soonoo's engagement has broken up.'

But Saha did not respond. He smoothed his hair down, instead, with his hands, and Tissa knew that his friend was back to his single-track frame of mind again. He did 'Ah', though, by way of acknowledging Tissa's confidence and, when the tea had come, 'What's going to happen to Ramasamy?'

Tissa shifted in his chair uncomfortably. 'We have more information about the case now, and it appears that Ramasamy was a blackleg.'

'What?' shouted Para.

'Sh-sh, not so loud,' Tissa enjoined him.

'He was no blackleg,' retorted Saha, 'he was just looking after the machines, and the strikers didn't mind it, they were their machines too.' Saha put his hands to his temples and shook his head. 'But you knew all that, anyway.'

'Yes, but Saha, a blackleg is a blackleg. And you know how the government is always trying to bring in Indian labour to break the strikes. What is the Chief to tell the Union?'

Saha felt sick. How was S.W. going to take all this? And it was he who had persuaded S.W. to appeal to Goonesinha.

'He can't betray the collective interests of the workers, you know,' Tissa went on defending his Chief. 'And if you betray the workers' cause, you betray the nation's cause.'

'Your bloody Chief is a fraud,' Para burst out, throwing back his chair, 'and you are beginning to sound -'

'You had better get him out of here,' Tissa interrupted, 'before somebody throws him out.' But Para had already left.

'Are you going to tell Uncle?' asked Saha as he got up to leave.

'No, it is better coming from you. Besides, I've got too much work on my hands.'

When Saha reported back to S.W. that night, the old man said not a word. Prema had already retired for the night, and S.W. merely folded the paper he had been reading and went off to bed.

In the morning he came up to Saha and embraced him. 'It's all right, son. Ramasamy and his children are leaving for India next week.'

PREMA DIED the following January, and S.W. withdrew further into himself. In the mornings he sat in his empty shed with his memories. The books and papers which he had removed to make room for Ramasamy's family were still in their boxes. In the evenings, he sat on the rocks between the railway tracks and the beach and looked out to sea. Sometimes he forgot to return home, and Saha had to go and fetch him.

Saha ran the house now with the help of an old servant woman. He had passed all his Post and Telegraph exams and was earning enough to pay the rent. He tried to prevail on Para to come and live with them, but Para valued his independence.

Tissa dropped in from time to time to see his uncle, but their conversation seldom went beyond an exchange of pleasantries. For a while, though, after Prema's death, uncle and nephew seemed to be bound together by a deep sense of loss. It was as though they were taking their soundings from Prema once again. But it was for the last time, for, as the days went by, they began to drift apart once more. Saha was saddened by it all: he loved them both dearly and would make no judgement as between them. But he could do nothing about it either.

'It is one of those things,' he told Para as they were going down to the beach one cold day in March to look for S.W. 'No one can do anything about it.'

'Rubbish,' retorted his brother. 'Tissa bloody well can.'

'Oi, where is all this swearing coming from?' Saha poked his brother in the ribs.

'From working on the trams, you old pen-pusher,' laughed Para.

They walked along in silence for a while.

'Why doesn't he, then?' asked Saha, returning to Tissa.

'He can't take criticism. The old man holds up a mirror to him and Tissa doesn't like what he sees. Spoilt bastard.' He smiled crookedly. 'Yes, I know. But we are born flawed, you see, and can see our faults. You fellows can't, you have been spoilt for love, and want approval all the time.'

Saha looked askance at his brother: he had blossomed in the city, got a sort of wisdom out of it, whereas all Saha had got was qualifications.

'I have tried telling him.'

'Well, tell him again.'

'He'll learn soon enough. What Uncle put into him must come out somewhere.'

'No,' Para disagreed, 'not when you have seen the bright lights and

want to get up there. When is he going to London?’

‘In a few months? Next year? I don’t know.’ Saha picked up a stick lying across the railway track and flung it towards the sea, but a howling wind blew it back at him. ‘We’d better cross over, so that we can at least see the train coming,’ he said, shoving his brother onto the other track. ‘Hey, you are getting a bit thin, aren’t you?’ He felt Para’s arms. ‘Are you eating all right?’

‘If that’s a trick of yours to get me to come and stay with you, forget it,’ grinned Para. ‘But I’ll come and keep an eye on Uncle when you go off on acting duty. There he is.’

‘Where?’

‘Over there, by the boats.’ S.W. had wandered off from his favourite perch and was talking to a fisherman at the water’s edge some distance away. He waved when he saw the brothers and began to walk towards them, his long grey locks (he did not bother to cut his hair any more) streaming in the wind.

‘Look,’ he said as he drew closer, holding up a large fish, ‘fresh *parau*.’ He seemed more cheerful than of late. ‘Named after you, Para,’ he laughed, ‘so you can cook it, in one of your hot Jaffna gravies, eh?’

‘I’d be happy to, Uncle,’ replied Para, taking the fish from S.W., as he set off home at a blistering pace. ‘But what’s the hurry?’

‘The owners are trying to take his boat away. Antony’s, the fisherman, and I promised to write a letter to them.’ The brothers looked at each other: was this the turning point?

But, in the morning, when Saha took his tea in to him, S.W. was dead. Para heard Saha’s strangled cry, and rushed into the room, to see his brother kneeling by the bed.

‘Gone,’ he said, as Para knelt beside him. ‘My father, gone.’ He took the old man’s hand and placed it against his cheek.

Para got up after a while and picked up the tea-tray. ‘I’ll go and find Tissa.’

‘No, I will,’ replied Saha and stood up. ‘But how I am going to find him in all that crowd, I don’t know.’

‘You think the march has started?’ The docker’s month-long strike had just ended and they were marching through Colombo that day to celebrate their victory.

‘I don’t know, but if I leave now, I might be able to catch Tissa.’

But by the time Saha got to the harbour, the march was well under way. People were lined up along the streets as far as the eye could see, waiting to cheer the marchers on as they made their way to Galle Face Green. In the distance Saha could hear the sounds of a brass band as the first batch of dockers hove into view, shouting and cheering and

chanting, '*Kowdha Raja, Gooné Raja*' (Who is King? Gooné is King). And on the faces of everyone he looked at, Saha saw the same silly expression of bland happiness. Despite himself, Saha was caught up in the excitement. They had won something that day, each of them – what, exactly, they did not know – not anything definite, but they were going somewhere.

If only S.W. had lived just one more day. For this was his day, the day he had worked for all his life, fought his fights for; how he would have liked to see those faces. It might even have brought him out of himself, finally. He had been so excited when Saha had read out the news to him that the convicts, whom the government had brought to unload the cargo and break the strike, had thrown the whole lot overboard. Saha could still remember his ragged, crooked smile, and the satisfied shake of his head, his eyes sharp as pincers.

Or that other time when the government had appealed to the crew of the Australian ship, Jervis Bay, to clear the cargo, and they had refused when they heard a strike was on. That had sent the old man into a paroxysm of glee. 'Ha, ha,' he had shouted, lifting his sarong and leaping around the dining room. 'You see what workers can do when they come together,' he told Saha, and started croaking the first lines of the 'Internationale'. Saha did not have the heart to tell him that it was the two unions that had come together, Goonesinha's and the seamen's.

The march was reaching Galle Face Green when Saha saw Sultan scurrying past him. 'Sultan,' he shouted waving his arms wildly. 'Sultan, over here.' The lad came scurrying back.

'Ah, Mr Saha, Mr Tissa is over there. Come. . . .'

'No, Sultan, listen. I have got to see him urgently. Tell him to come here. Now, please.'

Sultan saw the gravity on Saha's face and did not pause to question him.

'OK, I'll get him,' he said, and ran off to fetch Tissa.

It was only then that Saha began to wonder how Tissa would take the news. How should he break it to him? Tissa had tried so hard, after Prema's death, to make it up to his uncle, but the old man had remained distant. Then, with the strike going their way, Tissa had hoped that his uncle would relent a little. And just two weeks ago he had come rushing up to the old man with the news that the government's latest trick to bring in blackleg labour from India had failed. Iyer had got them to go back. Iyer, Tissa had declared proudly, was now second-in-command to the Chief. S.W. smiled absently and Tissa had gone away thinking he was back in the old man's favour. But when Tissa had gone, S.W. had sunk deeper into his gloom, muttering 'but Ramasamy was never a blackleg'.

Someone seized Saha from behind. Startled, he turned round to see Tissa's laughing face.

'Isn't it great?' he asked. 'The march? I am glad you came.' Just then the brass band struck up 'It's a long way to Tipperary'; Tissa looked proudly at his friend. 'See what international working class solidarity can do.'

'Take us all the way to Tipperary?' inquired Saha drily, and regretted the remark even as he made it. This was no time to be upsetting Tissa, and Tissa, as usual, was so carried away by what was happening that he had not stopped to ask why Saha had summoned him so urgently.

'Come on, let's get out of here,' Saha, took Tissa by the elbow and steered him out of the crowd.

'Hey, where are we -' Tissa began to remonstrate when Saha bit out impatiently at him, 'Stop talking for a minute, will you?' Tissa stopped in his tracks and Saha turned him around to face him. 'Uncle . . .' he said haltingly, 'Uncle passed away this morning.'

Tissa went rigid and his eyes glazed over. He slumped down onto the pavement and stared blankly before him, and slowly the tears began to come. Saha sat down beside him.

For a while Saha stayed on at No. 29. He had lived there for the better part of his adult life, had grown up there, in the real sense, been formed there. It was his other father's house. He was loath to leave. The place was full of memories, full of their presence, S.W.'s and Prema's. He had not missed her when she had died. It was now that he missed her and, missing her, missed S.W. even more. But the house was empty too. No one came any more. The front room was bereft of argument, the shed empty of learning, there was no life in the kitchen. He did not know what to do.

Tissa rescued him, insisting that Saha go and live with him. The Union had moved its offices and Tissa had rented a house in Slave Island. But it was too big for one person, and too expensive, and he wanted Saha to help him out. It was closer, too, to Saha's place of work, he pointed out, and why spend all that money on No. 29? Saha saw the sense of it, only he was not sure how he and Tissa would get along after all these years.

But his fears were unfounded. Tissa was still a very engaging person and Saha was the soul of consideration. They agreed broadly on everyday things and found the cook to their satisfaction. And they laughed over the same things. Only when it came to S.W. did a silence fall between them, except when Para was there to break into it wilfully.

Recently, though, Saha had begun to think that S.W. might have

misjudged Tissa's loyalty to the Chief. It was not as though Tissa had not always acknowledged that he owed everything to his uncle. It was he, above all, who had put together for Tissa the broken history of his country and shown him a way out of the past. And yet it was he who'd kept pulling Tissa back into the old ways of doing things. That had been Tissa's complaint all along, and events were proving him right. The workers were becoming more confident, there were strikes everywhere and they were beginning to bite. The government was afraid of Goonesinha and, when he got together with Gandhi, on his visit to Ceylon, to raise the cry of '*Swaraj*', the government panicked into thinking that there was revolution afoot.

There was still that business of Ramasamy's deportation, though. That stuck in Saha's craw, till Tissa suddenly one day confessed to the shame of it. 'We all make mistakes,' he admitted dejectedly.

Saha's worry now was his sisters, Saraswathi especially. Every proposal for her had fallen through. Lakshmi, curiously enough, had received only one proposal, but that looked as though it might be successful. Saha, however, had had so many disappointments on Saraswathi's account that he was not prepared to entertain any hopes on Lakshmi's behalf either. Once Lakshmi was married, though, he could begin to think of his own marriage. And all the while, there was Pandyan, frail and ailing, holding tenuously on to his life, like an anxious farmer to good weather, till all his children were gathered and housed.

Marriage was in the air that year. In January, Tissa returned from his Christmas visit to his parents full of his cousin Beatrice. She was a cousin many times removed, really, but they had lived next door to each other and played together as children. She had been more fun than the boys, Tissa recalled, and he used to go and see her every time he went home. But at 13, she fell in love with the nun who was teaching her and, in shame, decided to enter a convent. Tissa had not seen her since then, and had known of her only through rumour. He was not a little surprised, therefore, when emerging from midnight mass on Christmas Eve (he went to church once a year to please his mother), he was accosted by a thin, dark woman, dressed in a plain red sari.

'Tissa, isn't it?' Tissa gawped at her. 'You don't remember, do you?' The lights in the church corridor were quite bright but Tissa peered at her as though it was his sight that was at fault and not his memory.

'It's not . . .' he faltered. 'No, it's -'

'Beatrice.'

'Oh yes, Beatrice. Beatrice?' She laughed at his astonishment, a merry tinkle of a laugh, and he recalled her immediately.

'I thought -'

'No, I am a teacher now. Here in our old school.' Tissa's eyes took her in secretly, almost as tall as him she was, but plain and flat-chested. He sighed inwardly, this was not his day.

'Did you like the service?' Her voice was nice, there was sex in it, but, before he could answer, his mother came up. Beatrice turned to speak to her and the scent of sandalwood wafted past his nose. 'Your son didn't recognize me, Auntie,' she complained.

'How could he? You've grown into such an attractive woman.' That was overdoing the nicey-nicey bit, thought Tissa: was his mother trying to sell him something? But Beatrice was not taken in.

'Never mind that nonsense, Auntie,' she chided the older woman. 'What did you think of Father Cassidy?' and they fell to talking about the new priest. Tissa stood politely by, looking at the girls coming out of church the while. They all seemed so dull and docile. Beatrice, at least, seemed to have some spirit in her.

He saw her a few times after that.

Saha listened patiently to Tissa's tale, glad that his friend had enjoyed his visit home. In the past it had been a painful duty. But he did not set great store by Tissa's interest in Beatrice. It would pass, like most of his other enthusiasms. Besides, he was too involved with Soonoo to take up with anyone else, and she with him. Her fiancé, tired of waiting to get married – she had kept on postponing it on one pretext or another – had broken off their engagement. And Tissa, Saha suspected, had something to do with all of that.

Saha had seen Soonoo only once recently. Tissa met her clandestinely most of the time and, on the rare occasions when he brought her home, chaperoned by Sultan of course, Saha pretended not to know. But on that one occasion, he had come face to face with her as she was leaving, and was quite stunned by her beauty.

'There is something about her, you know.'

'Yes . . .' Saha began absently before he caught himself. 'What? Who?'

'Beatrice,' Tissa answered blithely. 'I don't know what it is, but there is something about her that gets me. Here.' He held his crotch and laughed uneasily. They were walking along the beach at the time and an old woman stared at him. Tissa ignored her and gestured towards a rock. 'Let's sit here a bit.'

'I can't understand it, Saha. She is dark, she is plain, she is flat. And she is as pious as hell: mass, benediction, novenas, Legion of Mary, confessions . . . Christ, what the hell has she got to confess?' Tissa picked up a stone and threw it at the waves. 'But she looks at me, and I'm finished.' Saha looked at his friend more closely. This was a bit more serious than he thought. But then Tissa always got him thinking like that. He

had better let him talk her out of his system.

'And she talks all the time. When we are alone, anyway, as though she is afraid . . . no, not of me, but of herself, afraid that she might give herself away, give herself to me, physically, the moment the chattering stops.'

'What about Soonoo, then?' Saha interrupted.

'That has got nothing to do with this,' Tissa retorted irritably. 'I love Soonoo, but Beatrice . . . Beatrice rouses me. One look from those slowly blinking eyes and . . . and . . . it's like an invitation to come in, but the rest of her is like a warning to keep out.'

'Must be the nun in her,' remarked Saha.

'Soonoo doesn't do that to me. Can't you understand?'

'Oh I see. So—'

'Now don't you go getting sarky with me, you little . . . you know jolly well that I am going to marry Soonoo once I—'

'What about her parents?'

'I have helped them a lot, haven't I? They'll close their eyes to it. And her brothers don't mind.' Saha still looked doubtful and Tissa, getting up from his rock, threw his arms out to the sea and the sky. 'Or I'll fly away with her.'

'When?' Saha pressed prosaically.

'Some time this year. It's a leap year, after all.' Saha looked sceptical. 'All right. In June then, when I come back from London.'

Saha saw little of Tissa after that. A new constitution was being mooted for Ceylon and Tissa was out campaigning with the Chief. And Saha himself was constantly on the move, doing odd stints of acting duty as postmaster in various outlying districts of Colombo. They were not assignments he particularly craved, but he had to undertake them if he was going to get a permanent postmastership, so he did not mind them at first. He liked seeing new places and meeting new people. But it began to pall after a while. He was never in one place long enough to savour it, and filling in for another man was not his idea of fruitful work. Travelling to and fro, besides, left him very little time to himself. He had not been to see Para in months and he was reluctant to ask Para, who was studying for his clerical service exams, to visit him.

It was with a sense of being liberated, therefore, that he seized on Mahadev's invitation to come up to Nawalapitiya to discuss a marriage proposal for Saraswathi. The intended worked in Nawalapitiya, wrote Maha, and his parents were coming up from Jaffna to visit him: it would be a good opportunity to meet them all and come to a quick settlement. Perhaps Para would like to come too.

Para leapt at the chance. He had never been into the hills before and was dying to see that part of the country, which was so different from his own. Besides, he was fed up with his job and needed a break from his studies.

Colombo was dull and grey in the early morning light as the brothers climbed aboard the train to Nawalapitiya. Saha was afraid that they would have rain all the way up, but Para was too excited to care. As it turned out, however, the weather changed as soon as they were out of Colombo. The sun rose, bright and warm, and lit up the flat coconut land through which they were passing.

Para had grabbed a corner seat by the window and Saha settled down opposite him.

'I wonder what this fellow for Saraswathi is like,' he reflected. 'Maha doesn't say much, does he?' There was a moment's silence before Para caught up with him. 'No,' he agreed, his eyes glued to the window.

'Except that he is in his late thirties and the horoscopes match,' Saha went on. There was no answer from Para. 'Do you think he is too old for her?'

Para, one eye stuck on the changing scenery, grunted something incoherent. Saha gave up.

'OK, OK,' he smiled indulgently, 'you can go back to your sightseeing, you *godaya*.'

Para settled gratefully back in his seat and looked out of the window once more. The landscape was different from anything he had known before, or imagined, and he did not want to miss any of it. Saha followed him with his older eyes, reliving his own first visit up-country all those years ago.

The train had left the plains by now and begun its slow climb through the hills towards Kandy. The land stretched green with rice fields to the very edge of the horizon and was dotted over with women in cloths and blouses of varying hues, planting paddy. The mists were lifting from the farther sky and a shadow appeared on the horizon, and then another and another. Para peered at them, unable to make them out, and was turning to Saha for an answer when the sun broke through and lit them up.

'Look, look,' Para cried out involuntarily. 'Mountains.'

'Ssh,' warned Saha, putting a finger to his lips and looking apologetically at the other passengers. But they all smiled their approval: the boy must be from the north, and an elderly woman in a Kandyan sari advised Para to hold his breath: there were more mountains to come, and closer still. 'The trouble is we get used to things and don't see them any more,' mumbled her companion, gazing longingly at the face of the woman beside him.

The train entered a tunnel and a bit of coal-dust flew into Para's eyes. Saha got up and slid the glass shutter into place. The climb was getting steeper now, and the paddy fields were giving way to fruit trees and shrubs and flowering plants. Para wanted to know the names of them all, and everybody in the compartment pitched in with their contribution.

'Arecanut,' said one, spelling out the word, almost, and pointing to a tall, thin, stately palm with a tuft of leaves and fruit at the top and all trunk below.

'That I know,' grinned Para.

'And bread-fruit,' gestured another towards the broad-leafed trees beside it.

'Flamboyant,' announced the beautiful lady, pointing to a tree that sprouted flowers of scarlet in a ceremony of display. 'And there, there, oleander . . . and ah, the jacaranda.'

'Jak.'

'Magnolia.'

'Guava.'

Saha sat back and watched his brother drown in the sounds of the names and the colours of the flowers. The vegetation was falling away now, and the mountains loomed before them, draped in mist. And in the chasms below, between the trees, ran a brook or a river, or gushed a sudden spring. Para's expression had changed. There was a wistfulness there that Saha had not seen before. Perhaps he was thinking back on the water courses they had to hew out of the rough Jaffna earth to water their meagre fields. And here: all this wild fertility, and an extravagance of water.

At Peradeniya, they got down to change trains. Most of their companions were going on to Kandy. The elderly lady pressed a mango into Para's hands as the train moved off.

The station-master came up to Saha and told him that the up-country train was delayed. He couldn't say for how long: there had been an earth slip further up the line, and the tracks had to be cleared. He wore a white drill suit and a black tie and looked important. Luckily, he added, the track had not been washed away like the last time. He was claiming too much knowledge, thought Saha, to be the actual station-master. Peradeniya, besides, was an important rail junction: no native could be station-master here – a Burgher maybe, but not a Sinhalese.

'I think I'll join the railways,' Para broke into Saha's thoughts. 'As an engine driver. No, a guard. I want to see my country.'

'You will have to get your CSE first,' replied Saha drily, sitting down beside his brother on the station bench.

'That's what I am doing, aren't I?' challenged Para.

'Fine, fine. Do it,' Saha returned the challenge. 'In the meantime, put this on.' He took two pullovers from his bag and handed one to Para. 'It gets quite cold up here.'

The cardigan hung loosely on Para, and Saha noticed how thin his brother had become in the last couple of years. Long and irregular hours driving trams had taken the fat off him and left him looking leaner, almost gaunt. But his energy was as boundless as his enthusiasm. Saha felt quite old beside him, sometimes, and gone to fat. It was time he married and settled down.

It was well past noon by the time the train arrived, and Para got in quickly to find himself a window seat. But most of the carriages were empty and they had a compartment all to themselves.

'Where is everybody?'

'This is the estate train,' explained his brother. 'They will be getting in further up.'

'Estate train?'

'You'll see,' answered Saha, and shouted out to a boy selling buns and soda water. 'We had better eat something. It will be evening by the time we get to Mahadev's. One or two?'

Para shrugged his shoulders indifferently. He was impatient to set off. But it was another hour before the train left the station. Saha settled down to read his newspaper and soon fell asleep.

Para sat and gazed out of one window and then another, expecting to be greeted by some new sight. But it was paddy fields again and hills and coconut trees and, soothed by the steady rumble of the wheels, Para dozed off too.

He woke with a start to the sudden jolt of the train and, looking out, saw that an engine was being attached to the rear. For a moment, he thought that they were going back, but, stretching himself right out of the window, he was sure he could see, round the bend, an engine in front. And holding on to the window with one hand, he woke Saha with the other, shouting, 'Hey, *annai*, look. The train has got two engines.'

'Yes, I know,' replied Saha, stifling a yawn. 'One to pull and one to push. We are going into the mountains now,' and he went back to sleep.

The train drew itself slowly out of the station and for a while, all that interested Para was watching the two engines wind wearily round the mountainside, chanting 'push you bugger', 'pull you bugger', 'pull you bugger', 'push you bugger'. And then, slowly, he became aware that the landscape was changing. There were no paddy fields any more, or coconut trees, only hills, and tea bushes. Rows and rows of tea bushes.

Thousands and thousands of tea bushes climbing relentlessly up the mountainside, and women, shrouded in gunny sacks, bent double over their labour. Para peered at them to see what they were doing but, at this distance, he could not tell.

Saha looked up at Para from half-closed eyes. 'Two leaves and a bud,' he said.

'What?'

'Two leaves and a bud, that is what they have to pluck, two leaves and a bud. Hundreds and hundreds of them. All day long. From six in the morning to six at night.'

'How can you say it like that?'

'It's a fact.'

'I mean, without any feeling.'

'I haven't been through it myself, have I?'

'Oh?'

Two leaves and a bud, chugged the train. Two leaves and a bud, sang the refrain. Two leaves and a bud, two leaves and a bud . . . Para was entered into the sleep of the beat. But Saha, keened to his brother's disappointment in the scene around him, kept him awake with tales of the tea country that Mahadev had told him. Para lent him a dutiful ear, while keeping the other on the train's refrain.

'Look,' said Saha, shaking his brother by the leg. 'Up there, on the hilltop.' He pointed to a long, low, tin-roofed building in the distance. 'That's the tea factory.'

Para's interest was revived. So that was where the tea was processed. He would like to see that, how the tea was made. And how was it sold? How did it get sent to Colombo, and to all those far-off countries? Is that why they built the railways? What happened to all the money? How much did the tea-pluckers get out of it?

Saha burst out laughing. He could not quite make out this half-brother of his. He was full of contradictions. Just like his father, up one minute, down the next, practical sometimes and a dreamer at other times. He had been lost in wonderment like a child all through the journey, and suddenly here he was, delving into questions that had no answers, none that Saha could provide, anyway.

Perhaps Mahadev could answer them, suggested Saha, or he might know someone on the estate who could. Perhaps, piped up Para, he might even arrange for them to go and see a factory?

'Well, ask him,' replied Saha. 'We are almost there.'

'Are we?' Para leapt up to collect the bag from the rack above. Saha smiled again. He may not be able to keep up with his brother's moods, but he certainly enjoyed them.

Mahadev met them at the station with his son, Kanthan. 'These are your uncles,' he told the boy. 'Uncle Saha and Uncle Para.'

'Come here,' said Para and took the lad into his arms. 'How old is he?'

'Going two,' replied Maha, lighting a cigarette.

'Is *akka* here, too?' asked Saha.

'How can she be? You know she is expecting.' There was a note of grievance in Maha's voice. 'Kanthan is here only for a few days. I am taking him back as soon as the baby is born. Any time now.'

Saha did not say anything. He knew his brother was thinking back on their conversations about Uncle Nayagam's chummery and the family that never came. Mahadev had sworn, then, that he would never leave his family in Jaffna while he worked outstation.

The evening was settling into night by the time they reached Mahadev's house. An old pariah dog, accompanied by an even older man with a kitchen knife in his hand, came out to meet them.

'This is Banda,' said Mahadev, 'the greatest cook in the world, and Rex, the most useless dog in the world.'

Banda put his knife down and brought the palms of his hands together in dignified greeting, while Rex leapt half-heartedly at Para, as though he was trying to remember what it was like to be a dog, and then slunk off into the house.

The house itself looked like a long, narrow assembly of rooms stuck haphazardly together. Outside it, and along the walls and in open sheds, were piled the tools and rubble of the road overseer's trade. Tar barrels littered the garden. At the far end was a chicken coop with a few scraggy chickens pecking away at the dirt.

'I've got to get all this done up before I can bring the family,' muttered Mahadev. The building, he pointed out, was originally a series of sheds putting up coolies, brought in from India, in transit to the estates. And to convert it into a home. . . .

'Ah, *annai*,' Para interrupted him. 'Can you take us to see the estate, or even a tea factory?'

'I can't, but . . .' Mahadev stopped at the entrance to the house and turned round. 'Hey, that's a good idea. That way you can get to know the fellow.'

'What fellow? What are you on about?' Sahadevan was tired and impatient, and in no mood for Mahadev's cryptic utterances.

'Jeya, the fellow who's been proposed to Saraswathi. He works in the estate office, as a bookkeeper. He can show you around.'

A bookkeeper, thought Saha. Maha had not told him that in his letter. Not much of a job. Still, it was the man that counted.

After dinner, Maha filled in the details of the marriage proposal, stressing what a good family the boy was from. His father was a retired school teacher from Palali, and his mother's grandfather had been a village headman. Did Saha remember Pandit Pillai from Point Pedro – Maha was settling down to his tale – who used to come visiting Father?

'He was no Pandit,' interjected Saha.

'But that's what everyone called him. Anyway, these people, the Singhams, are connected to him. . . .'

Maha poured himself another cup of tea and, lifting the chimney of the hurricane lantern, lit his cigarette. Saha noticed how his brother's moustache had begun to droop even more.

The parents were here at the moment, Maha went on, visiting their son. It was they, in fact, who had brought Kanthan from Jaffna. Did Saha know that Kanthan . . . Saha fixed his brother with a stare across the table and Maha quickly went back to his story. Well, that was why he had asked Saha to come up: it was a good opportunity for him to meet and talk with the parents and 'the boy' at the same time.

Saha shifted in his chair impatiently. He wanted his brother to get down to the practical things. How much dowry did they want? Had the horoscopes been looked at? Why had the fellow chosen the less attractive of the twins? What was he like as a person?

'Well,' Maha dragged at his cigarette, 'Jeya is quite a bit older than Saraswathi, by about 15 years I think.'

'You think?'

'But that will make the dowry that much smaller.'

'How much?'

'We'll know that when we talk to them. I told them there's half the house . . . and some of mother's jewellery . . . and between us, I thought, we could raise about five hundred rupees in cash.

'You told them already?'

'Well, we had to start somewhere.'

'OK, OK. But why did he choose Saraswathi and not Lakshmi? He didn't know that Lakshmi might already be spoken for, did he?'

'He wanted the fairer of the two.'

Para guffawed from a corner of the room where he was playing with Kanthan, but quickly put his hand over his mouth as though to say that it was none of his business.

'Yes, he is a bit like that,' Maha agreed uncomfortably. 'Old-fashioned.' He knew that Saha wanted a modern husband for his sister. 'But he is a very steady chap. Thoroughly reliable.' He thought he saw approval in Saha's eyes. 'Oh yes, thoroughly. We won't have to worry about the girl once she is married.'

'And the horoscopes you said are all right?'

'Oh yes, the horoscopes match. Better with Lakshmi's than with Saraswathi's. . . .'

'But he still wants -'

'Yes.'

The following evening, Saha accompanied Maha to Jeya's house to meet him and his parents. Para stayed behind, at his own request, to look after Kanthan. Mahadev had his hair cut and his moustache neatly trimmed. He wore a white *verti* and *baniyan* and had thrown a cream woollen shawl over his shoulders. He looked the part of an up and coming overseer, a man of some future substance. Saha tagged along in his younger brother role, in city trousers and shirt. And, sticking to his role, he said nothing during the whole conversation with Jeya's parents. This was only the first meeting anyway, to see whether the families could get along with each other; the business would be done later, through a marriage-broker.

The Singhams were nice, ordinary people, as far as Saha could see, and Jeya himself looked a decent enough bloke. A bit staid, perhaps, but, as Maha had said, reliable. He served them tea and biscuits and dutifully kept out of the conversation of his elders, making small talk with Saha instead, ending with a promise to take Saha on a round of the estate at the weekend. Saha was well pleased with his prospective brother-in-law. His only doubt was the man's health: he was so thin and long and sallow, as though elongated by a chronic illness.

'He is not consumptive, or anything like that, is he?' asked Saha of his brother on the way home.

'Oh no. He's just had a bout of malaria. Otherwise?'

'He seems all right. And I like the old couple. They dote on Jeya, don't they? Is he the only son?'

'Only child.'

True to his promise, Jeya turned up on Sunday afternoon to take Saha and Para on a tour of the estate. He had already been to see them briefly a couple of times during the week, and Saha had begun to take a liking to him: he was pleasant and obliging, if a bit opinionated. But that put Para right off him. 'He is only a bookkeeper,' he growled, 'but he talks like he owns the bloody estate.'

As it turned out, though, the bookkeeper proved to be quite knowledgeable about every aspect of the tea business, from the growing of tea to its manufacture and sale. He took them on a guided tour from the nursery to the factory, showing them how important it was to time and meld each stage with the next. People only saw the plucking of the tea, he complained, as they climbed the mountain road that ran through the

estate, because that was what the pictures showed: women plucking tea. But behind it all was the hard work the men put in, weeding and draining and manuring and pruning. At the factory, Jeya showed them how the tea was withered and winnowed and graded and blended, and put into plywood chests for the journey to Colombo, where it was sold by auction to the various big tea-houses, and then shipped to England, where probably it was auctioned all over again.

Saha was impressed, and so was Para, despite himself.

'There must be a whole lot of money in all this,' he told the book-keeper, 'and a lot of it going through your hands, eh?' trying to placate him.

'Well, yes,' replied Jeya with reluctant modesty. 'But not just the money.' He laughed, rubbing his hands together.

'Just imagine,' Para put his hand into a bag of green leaves. 'So much wealth from just a leaf.'

'And prestige, and privilege,' Jeya said importantly. 'They say that Mr Lipton, who started as a grocer, is now a lord or a knight or something.'

'And what do those who grow the leaves and pluck the leaves get out of it?'

'Oh, they do all right.'

'Do they?'

'Well, they don't starve, and they've got a roof above their heads. What more can they ask for?'

Para did not reply: he was fast returning to his first impression of the man.

'I'll take you down to the coolie lines,' – it was Jeya's turn to placate Para – 'and you can see for yourself.'

It was getting dark by the time they finished the tour of the factory and began to work their way down through the tea bushes and towards the tenements. It was a more direct route, assured Jeya, but it was also steep and narrow and led up the mountainside before going down again. The light was fading fast, but there were women and children still working in the field, and Para could not help remarking on it.

'Their work never ends, does it?' he asked of no one in particular. They were walking in single file at the time, with Jeya in front and Para at the rear, but Jeya heard him.

'They are used to it,' he threw back over his shoulder.

'What, children?'

'No, men too. They are on the other side, cutting the drainage.'

Para was about to retort that that was not what he meant, when Saha looked back at him and shook his head.

'It's all downhill now,' announced Jeya, 'and we can take a shortcut here.'

The shortcut proved even more steep and slippery, like walking sideways on the side of a mountain with one foot above and one below, laughed Saha, falling over on a tea-bush. Except that there was nothing around you except tea-bushes, grumbled Para, beginning to wheeze.

'I didn't know you had asthma,' remarked Saha.

'I haven't. It's some stuff they've put on these tea-bushes.' His wheezing got worse and Saha suggested that he sit down for a while. But the moment he sat down, his breathing got sterterous and his eyes glazed over, and something akin to panic began to show on his face.

'What's the matter?' cried Saha in alarm.

Para shook his head. He did not know, he gasped, he felt hemmed in, he could not see the sky, his mouth was dry. . . .

'Let's get out of here, fast,' said Saha helping Para to his feet.

'It's not much further now,' Jeya called out, unaware of what was going on behind him.

The bushes were getting sparser and a footpath made their journey easier. Para was already beginning to feel better, when they emerged into a clearing. Just ahead of them were the coolie quarters, and Para, seeing a tap outside, went up to drink from it. But as he began to run the water into his cupped hands, Jeya shouted, 'Stop, stop. You can't drink from that.'

'Why not?' asked Para.

'It's their tap, it's polluted.'

'For God's sake, it's only a tap,' rejoined Para and proceeded to drink.

Jeya turned to Saha, his pale face bright with anger, and demanded that he keep his brother in order. This was no way for high-caste folk to behave. You can't go hob-nobbing with these people and not lose face. And he, he, he stuttered in his anger, he lived here, worked here, had a position to maintain. Saha nodded uneasily, smoothing his hair down with his hands. Yes, Para had been thoughtless, but he had not been feeling too well and was dying for a drink of water. He would speak to Para when they got home.

Para, meanwhile, had wandered off towards the tenements and was playing hide and seek with two little children, while their pregnant mother looked on, a smile lifting her weary face.

'That's it,' exploded Jeya. 'He's mad, quite, quite mad. These are un-touchables. He'll have to go home and bathe. At once.'

Saha called out to Para that they should be going, and started to walk towards the main road with Jeya. Para threw some coins at the kids

and followed the other two at a distance, either lost in his own thoughts, thought Saha, deciding not to wait for him, or not wanting to talk to Jeya.

'I am sorry I couldn't show you the line rooms,' said Jeya. 'Then you would have seen —'

'I have seen them before,' Saha cut in.

'Ah, so you know what they are like. Filthy, unclean. They live like pigs, these people. Have you seen the drains? Shit everywhere.'

'Oh, come on. What do you expect when a whole family is pushed into living in one room, with no kitchen, no lavatory, no place for children. . . . And twenty families strung out like that in an endless line of rooms?'

'But they are used to it.'

'You keep saying that,' Saha's voice rose in exasperation.

'Because it's true. It's we who feel bad for them, but they were born to it. It's their karma. They don't know any better.' He paused and hitched up his trousers which were threatening to escape his waist and, with a grave air of Hindu elderhood, he added: 'We must all know our place in society.'

The argument had a familiar ring to it, but in Saha's ears it seemed to ring more familiar still, and suddenly he remembered that it was something he used to keep on telling himself when he'd thought he'd fallen in love with Rani all those years ago, and he was suffused with the shame of it all.

Jeya went on jabbering, but Saha had shut himself out, and the voice of the man receded into the distance like a series of crackles on the old canteen wireless in the post office.

By the time they reached Maha's house, Para had caught up with them. He had got over his wheezing, but he was obviously distressed by what he had seen. 'Why doesn't somebody do something for these people, *annai*?'

'Tissa says that this man Iyer —' Saha answered weakly, but Jeya interjected, 'That damn fool. He is going to give us all a bad name.'

'I wasn't talking to you, you stupid man,' shouted Para and stormed into the house.

Jeya put his hand on Saha's shoulder. 'Never mind,' he said, 'after all, he is not your real brother, is he?'

Saha knocked the man's hand off his shoulder with uncharacteristic vehemence and replied in a cold blast of anger: 'He will always be my brother, but you will never be my brother-in-law.'

TISSA CAME BACK from the London conference in August, and would talk of nothing but England. For a whole evening, he sat Saha down with a presentation bottle of whisky and plied him with stories of the mother country.

Contrary to popular opinion, he declared, the English were a friendly people – not the ones who were sent to rule them, of course, but the ordinary people he met there in the streets and in the pubs. They might be very reserved with each other, but they were always prepared to talk to him. He had only to ask directions, and they went out of their way to be helpful. Or he would go into a tavern, ‘pub’ they called it, and the barman would start a chat with him, and soon everybody would be joining in. Their favourite game was to try and guess where he came from, but India was the closest they got. Few had heard of Ceylon, and even they knew little of the country, till he mentioned tea. And then they would slap him on the back and say ‘Ah, yes, Lipton’s tea-garden’. It had annoyed him at first, but he soon got used to it. His was a small country, after all, compared to England. And everywhere he went, there was history. Buckingham Palace and Westminster Abbey, and the Houses of Parliament and St Paul’s, and the Lady of Threadneedle Street, it all made sense now.

He took a sip from his glass of whisky and lit a cigarette. Did he look paler since his trip or did Saha imagine it?

‘Remember the song, Saha, “Goodbye Leicester Square”? Well, Leicester Square really exists – I saw it with my own eyes – and Piccadilly Circus.’ Tissa was boyish with enthusiasm and Saha did not have the heart to stop him, though he was dying to hear about the conference.

‘And Speakers’ Corner. That’s in Hyde Park. Our park has been named after that, you know. Anyone can get up and say anything they want there. And the speakers! Seventh-day Adventists, Temperance campaigners, Communist Party people, Salvation Army, Women for Birth Control. And there was this negro. He was laying into the empire and the king and all that, and the audience just laughed and cheered him on. Only one man got angry with him, and that was an Indian.’ Tissa shook his head in disbelief. ‘There’s real freedom of speech there, you know, Saha, unlike here.’

‘And why do you think that is?’ Saha could not help asking.

‘What do you mean? Oh yes, yes. But one day, we can be like that, too.’

‘You think?’ Saha sounded sceptical, and it caught Tissa off balance. He reached for the bottle of whisky on the table beside him and offered

it to Saha. Saha shook his head: he was still nursing his first drink. Tissa poured himself another, a large one this time.

'Well, they are going to give us the vote for a start,' he said. 'That much Mr Ramsay MacDonald has promised the Chief, if and when he becomes prime minister again.'

'At the conference?'

'No, of course not. Privately.'

'What happened at the conference? Did you meet any of the Commonwealth leaders? Who was there?'

'It was a Commonwealth Labour conference.' Tissa underlined Labour.

'OK, OK, labour leaders then. How about Nehru? Was he there?' Saha had been out of Colombo the whole of July and had missed out on most of the newspaper reports. 'Did you get to speak to him?'

'Oh yes, they were all there.' Tissa waved his hands about vaguely, and took a cigarette from a silver-plated case. 'French, these are,' he declared grandly.

'And . . . ? Come on, man, I have been dying to hear about your meetings with the Congress people.'

Tissa looked uncomfortable. 'You know they had some disagreement, don't you, with the Labour Party?'

'Ah, yes, Para read something somewhere about the Indian delegation walking out of the conference.'

'Yes, the silly buggers. And all because the Labour Party wouldn't support their demand for immediate independence.'

Saha was surprised at the way Tissa dismissed the whole affair. 'You mean the Chief didn't walk out with them?' he asked.

'How could he? Those guys were all mixed up with the Communists, like that MP fellow, Saklatvala, and Fenner Brockway or some chap. And you know that the Chief does not believe in communism.'

'I don't either, but that does not mean . . .'

He broke off. 'Did you say Saklatvala? But that's an Indian name.'

'Yes,' smirked Tissa.

'An Indian in the House of Commons?'

'There you are then.' Tissa's smile grew broader. 'That's what the vote can do.' He was enthusiastic again. 'And that is the Labour Party's point, you see: first, they give us adult suffrage and then, when we have learnt to use the vote, independence.'

'Suffrage before *swaraj*?' cracked Saha.

'Absolutely,' replied Tissa appreciatively. 'The vote is a means to an end. It is not important in itself, but for what it does.'

Tissa had ignored Saha's irony, and Saha felt hurt.

'The Chief says that it is the first step in the organization of the workers.' Tissa went on talking and Saha drifted into his own thoughts.

He had always trusted Tissa in political matters, even against S.W.'s judgement sometimes. Or perhaps it was not Tissa's judgement that he trusted, but his sincerity. S.W. might have taught him, but he followed Tissa, more out of friendship than anything else. And ever since Gandhi's visit to Ceylon, he and Tissa had both moved closer towards the Congress position. But now Tissa seemed to be following the Chief into the British Labour Party and compromise. Saha felt betrayed.

'We are going to have our own Labour Party soon,' Saha heard Tissa say. 'The Chief is working on it. And a Trades Union Congress too, like in England.'

'What on earth for?'

'It's all a part of the strategy,' Tissa replied importantly. 'Don't you see? First, we get the workers into unions, like our Labour Union; then we get the unions into a federation, like the TUC; then we get the vote, and then, and then' – Tissa leant forward in his chair counting out the stages on his fingers – 'they vote for their party, the Labour Party; and then the Party has the power to help them.' He looked triumphantly at Saha, as though he had brought some abstruse problem in logic to a successful conclusion.

Saha looked at Tissa's self-satisfied grin and the bile rose in him. Suddenly he wanted to wipe the smile off his friend's face. 'I thought we were organizing the workers to get our independence,' he said, 'not just getting independence for the workers.'

'But if we don't free them,' Tissa asked sweetly, 'how can they free us?'

Two weeks later the Ceylon Labour Party was launched, and Saha never raised the subject again. He did not much see the point of it. Tissa was firmly entrenched in his views and entirely committed to his Chief's strategy. Unmoored from Tissa, Saha drifted slowly away from politics. Tissa, in any case, was on the road most of the time, and when he came home at all, it was in the early hours of the morning.

One day, Saha came back from an acting assignment with a raging fever. The cook had gone home for Christmas and Para was in Jaffna. Saha's neighbour fetched him a doctor, but could not stay the night with him. When Tissa came in at two o'clock that morning he found Saha slumped in the kitchen over a glass of milk, gasping for breath. Alarmed, Tissa sent for the doctor again. But the doctor did not come till five hours later, and by then Saha's breathing had become less laboured and the fever had abated. 'It's pleurisy,' said the doctor. 'You had better keep him warm, and continue to give the medication. I'll call again tomorrow.'

For the first week Saha's fever kept leaping up and down, and Tissa never left his side. But by the second week, Saha was getting better and suggested to Tissa that he get back to work.

'It's all right,' replied Tissa. 'Things are quiet at the moment, but this tramcar business is giving the Chief a big headache.'

'Yes, Para told me they might be going on strike.'

'When is he coming back from Jaffna?'

'In a couple of days, I think.'

'I am OK till then. But in the meantime, master, you had better drink this.' He put a glass of hot milk in Saha's hands and took the chair by his bed.

Saha looked gratefully at his friend. 'You have had quite a hard time with me, haven't you?' he said. 'And I thought you never could stand sickness.'

Tissa, remembering how that story had originated, did not reply, and Saha continued on a more cheerful note. 'You won't have to do that much longer.' Before Tissa could respond, he added, 'I am getting married.'

'*What?*' Tissa leapt out of his chair. 'To whom? When? Why didn't you tell me?'

'Well, it's not confirmed yet,' Saha prevaricated 'and it's not till next year, anyway.' But Tissa still looked put out, and Saha observed testily that he had had a pretty tough time this past year, what with Lakshmi getting married, his father dying, and Saraswathi – but that was another story. . . . And where was Tissa all that time?

Tissa nodded and looked sadly at the ground before him; they had come such a long way from each other.

'Her name is Neela,' Saha mollified him. 'She lives here, in Kotahena, and I've seen her – at a distance.'

'A Colombo girl, eh? That's good,' replied Tissa, before his hurt got the better of him. 'But you never told me.' He got up and went to the door.

'Come back, Tissa, please.' Tissa hesitated. 'Please,' Saha pleaded. Tissa returned to his chair.

'Here, sit here,' urged Saha making room for Tissa on his bed. Tissa sat down woodenly beside Saha. 'I am sorry I didn't tell you, but how could I?' Saha paused and studied his friend more closely: there was a weariness about Tissa's eyes and a fleck of grey had touched his temples. 'We have not been getting on too well, have we, since you returned from England?' Saha said gently. 'And you thought it was because –' Tissa held up his hand as though to excuse them both. 'But I have changed too,' Saha continued. 'I meant to talk to you about it, but I never

got a chance. And, in any case, I didn't know any of it myself, till lying here, day after day, I began thinking – of you, me, the world, my father, life, Para, getting married. . . .' Saha trailed off, and Tissa sat quietly by, waiting for him to continue. 'Sometimes I want to chuck it all up and go into an ashram; there's too much pain in the world.' He was not looking at Tissa any more.

'I know you mock me about going to temple every Friday, Tissa, and about working in the government and working against the government, wanting to go back to my village and yet wanting to leave it as soon as I get there, liking their love and hating their narrow-mindedness. I feel so sneaky and secretive and two-faced, know what I mean?' Tissa still said nothing. 'But how could you? You are so different, so open and clean.'

'That's why I am afraid for you: you give yourself wholly to a thing, to a cause, a person; you don't doubt. And so you get taken in, cheated out of your goodness, know what I mean?' Tissa remained quite still. It was a long time since Saha had talked to him like this, soft and caressing. 'It is as if you are not your own person sometimes, but someone else's, like the Chief's, you are so loyal.'

He drained his glass of milk and put it down. And when he began to speak again, a melancholy had entered his voice.

'But then I have no loyalty at all – only duty, to you, to my father, my sisters – that's not loyalty, that's duty. Even the so-called political things I do, I do because of duty, not commitment, duty, duty to my country. Perhaps that's why I am my own person. But I don't like it very much. I don't like myself very much.' He paused, looking into the distance. 'That's why I want to go into an ashram, and come to terms with myself.'

'And yet, I can't bear being enclosed.' He returned to Tissa. 'I can't bear to see even animals like that, kept in cages, caught in traps. I can't bear to see things captive, know what I mean? I can't bear captivity. I want so much for our country to be free . . . it burns inside me. Sometimes, I tell myself that when the British have gone, I won't have to be two-faced any more. But that's not true, is it? We are what we make of ourselves, as the *Gita* says. Or perhaps it's my karma, who knows?'

His eyes opened and closed gently, with weariness and sleep. Tissa got up from the bed and blew out the lamp.

'Good night Saha,' he said tenderly.

'Good night Tissa.'

The day before the tramcar drivers went on strike, Saha had started out on his tour of the provinces on yet another spell of acting duty. And the

first he heard about it was when Tissa's letter finally caught up with him a week later. There had been rumours locally that there was some sort of trouble brewing in Colombo, but nobody knew exactly what. Tissa's letter began characteristically, in the middle. 'It does not look as though the tramcar drivers' strike is going to end in a hurry,' he wrote, pulling Saha up short. Tramcar drivers? So they had come out. Why hadn't Para told him? Why was he keeping quiet? Where was he in all this? 'Bousteads have refused to settle the strike, or even to talk to the union. They are so damn cocky, knowing that the government will back its own people. The Chief called for a boycott of the trams and the public answered his call. Cedric Boustead himself was seen driving a tramcar and was booed and hooted, the crowds threw stones at the trams. Two days ago some mercantile people had a procession supporting the tramwaymen and yesterday a whole lot of Law College students marched along the tram lines with red ribbons round their hats (like the Chief's) and waving red flags. And of course the railway workers are there as usual.' Saha began to feel some of the old excitement again.

'But the police are getting really violent. That fellow Downing, I.G.P., he of the 1915 massacres, remember Uncle telling us? - he is in command. And though Governor Stanley is not as bad as our old friend Manning, he is doing nothing about it. The police are now running the tramcars for Bousteads, can you imagine that? The people really hate them.

'I'll finish this letter tomorrow when I can find a minute.'

The letter continued on a hastily torn piece of paper from an exercise book. 'I didn't find time the last two days. But there is nothing much to tell. Except that the Chief has called a boycott of all Boustead's goods and the harbour workers have blacked Boustead's cargo, and they are now prepared to talk. But the trouble with the police is getting worse.' Saha went cold. Para must be in the thick of it.

'Anyway, you will be back in a day or two. Tell you everything then.'

Nowhere was there mention of Para, and Saha was beginning to feel sore about it when he sighted a PS on the back of the envelope. 'Para is fine,' it said, 'don't worry.'

When Saha arrived at the Maradana station on the morning of February 5th, there were crowds milling about in the streets. The trams had come to a stop, but people were gathered around in knots talking in agitated whispers while the police protected the huddle of tramcars as if it were Empire.

Saha stopped by a group, listening to their conversation.

'What is going on?' he asked the man next to him.

'Police beat him up.'

'Who?'

'Mr Goonesinha.'

'*What? When?*'

'About an hour ago.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, of course, ask anybody. Just when he was going to the Chamber of Commerce to settle the strike.'

'There's going to be big trouble now,' the man added, as though he had known it all along but nobody had bothered to ask him. '*Beeg* trouble,' he dragged out the 'big' to give it size. 'You wait and see.'

Saha, however, was more anxious to get to Tissa. If what the man said was true, Tissa would need all the help he could get. He jumped into a rickshaw and directed the man to the offices of the Labour Union.

Hundreds of people had gathered outside the office and their numbers were increasing by the minute. Saha pushed his way into the building.

'You heard?' asked Tissa, coming out of his room.

'It's true then? He was beaten up?'

'Yes, the bastards . . .' he checked himself, seeing Sultan seated in a corner, 'but nothing serious. He should be here any minute.' He took Saha aside. 'The boy is very upset,' he confided. 'The Chief is his great hero. You see the red shirt he is wearing? The Chief gave him that.' Tissa himself was very angry, Saha noticed, but was controlling it for Sultan's sake.

'He is sulking because I told him he can't go outside,' Tissa informed Saha, as though to explain why the boy had not greeted him with his customary ebullience. He took Saha to the window. 'See that lot?' he said proudly. 'They are the toughest bunch of workers in the land, harbour, railways, coal sheds, government factory, and they all downed tools and marched up here to see whether the Chief was OK.'

Saha looked out. The men who had gathered in the yard looked a rough lot all right, and their muttered silence was heavy with anger.

Tissa was talking to Sultan, and Saha noticed how tall and lanky the lad had grown since he had last seen him, with the good looks of his sister and the beginnings of a moustache shaped like Tissa's. Their conversation did not last long, however, and Tissa must have given in, for the boy suddenly bounded past Saha to the yard outside. Tissa shrugged his shoulders helplessly as Saha took the chair beside him. 'I don't know what's going to happen now,' he remarked, polishing his glasses. He put them back on and paced the room. Saha smoothed his hair down with his hands. He had a strange sense of detachment about the whole thing, as though he were watching it all from the outside. Tissa came back and

sat down, and then stood up again.

'How dare they, Saha,' he shouted suddenly. 'How dare they? And if they can do that to the Chief, what can't they do to us?' He stopped. There was a hush outside, followed by a rousing cheer. Sultan came rushing in.

'The Chief has come,' he announced needlessly. 'Come on, let's go,' he urged, dragging Saha by the sleeve. 'He is speaking.'

Goonesinha assured the gathering that he was unharmed and thanked them for their concern. But when he began to recount the story of his assault, the crowd broke out in angry cries of 'Kill the police, kill the police!' And it was in that mood that they dispersed when the meeting ended, and found themselves moving, almost without volition, in the direction of the Maradana police station.

There was no stopping Sultan now. 'I am going,' he declared, flushed with anger and tears. Tissa gave in. 'We'll all go,' he said. 'Wait till I close the office.' But Sultan had gone.

By the time Tissa and Saha caught up with Sultan and the marchers, they had already reached Maradana and their numbers had swelled beyond sight. Ahead of them they could hear the cries of 'Down with Bousteads!' and 'Power to the Unions!' mingled with 'Who beat the Chief?' and 'Kill the police!' And as they drew closer, they saw a man break through the police cordon and, clambering up the station flagpole, hoist the banner of the strikers' union high above the Union Jack. A cheer went up from the crowd as the man slid quickly down the pole and rejoined his mates.

'Look, look,' cried Sultan. 'There's Mr Para, there, there!' and, taking Saha by the hand, he began pushing his way through the crowd when Inspector General Downing appeared on the station steps.

'That's him,' someone shouted, 'that's the man who gave the order to beat the Chief.'

'Get the bastard!' shouted another and the crowd surged forward.

'Get the bastard!' echoed Sultan, breaking through to the front.

Suddenly there was a burst of gunfire and Sultan fell to the ground. Saha rushed to his side and, picking the boy up, cradled him in his arms. Tissa bent over the lad to stanch the wound in his chest. Sultan tried to say something, but blood gushed out of his mouth and drowned his words. A smile hovered around his lips.

'Sultan, oh Sultan,' moaned Tissa softly, holding the boy to his breast and rocking him back and forth.

A stunned silence fell over the crowd. They had had no time to run. Now they looked around them, gazed dazedly at the dead and wounded, and slowly their sorrow turned to anger. But before it could flare into

riot, a voice came over the loudspeaker. 'Friends', it began, and the crowd stood still. Tissa looked up and saw his Chief standing on the top step above him, beside a white man in a white suit, with braid and buttons, and a plumed white hat on his head.

'Friends', the velvet voice had put aside the loudspeaker. 'The strike is over. The Colonial Secretary and I have come to an agreement.' The crowd stirred uneasily. 'The Colonial Secretary, that is, has agreed to my terms.' The crowd relaxed, smiling at each other. 'They will be announced—'

'Oh no,' Saha heard Tissa groan. 'Oh, no, he can't do that, not after this, he can't . . . he can't, the bastard!' His voice rose angrily. 'The bastard, the bastard . . . Oh no.' His voice fell away with a moan. 'Oh Sultan, I am sorry. I am sorry. Oh Sultan, Sultan . . .' his voice faded and rose suddenly again in an anguished cry, high above the drone of Goonesinha's words, 'Sult-a-a-a-n!' And Saha, collapsed beside him, heard it echo and re-echo in the chambers of his soul like a muezzin's call to prayer.

BOOK TWO

My Roots No Rain

'Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.'

Gerard Manley Hopkins

I WAS BORN on a rainy monsoon night in December 1930.

I have no recollection of my early years except that we had moved to a house in another town, and that Sahadavan was not just a visitor but my father, someone who lived with us all the time, in a town called Kandy. I remember too, in a hazy sort of way, that the house was on a hill and that the garden at the back sloped down to a railway line sealed off by a wooden fence on which I would sit and watch the trains go by. Beyond that, and some vague notion that I had picked up a sister and a brother somewhere along the line, I have no real recollection of those early years. At one time I thought I remembered very clearly that when I was in kindergarten I got angry with my teacher and walked straight out of the class-room and all the way home. But I realize now that this was my mother's proud story of her rebel son of five, which, in the telling, had grown to the size of my own truth.

My first memory, really, is of that day in the rain when I was so sad for Sanji. I was seven or eight at the time and the house we lived in was above and to one side of the post office. In similar but smaller quarters on the other side lived the assistant postmaster. My father was the postmaster of Badulla!

Across the way from our brand new post office, but some small distance from it, was a patch of green, and huddled around it were the little old houses in which my friends Thambi and Ramu and Lucky and Simon lived. They were poorer than us, the sons of labourers and postmen and tradesmen, and my mother was anxious that I should not associate with them lest I learn their rough ways. But after making me promise obedience to my mother at all times, my father let me go and play with my friends.

At first, though, they were not willing to accept me. For days I would sit at the edge of the field by the bole of the jacaranda tree and watch them play *thaatchi* and *gudu* and, occasionally, when they could lay their hands on a ball, rounders. Then one day my Uncle Navam, my mother's youngest brother, who had 'come for a rest' after sitting his London Matric, brought me a big new rubber ball from Colombo. And off I went to our playground to show off to the boys, but there was no one there. I kicked the ball into the drain by Ramu's house, but no one . . . I went home disconsolate.

Next evening, I kept watch at my window, waiting for the boys to

come out to play before I ventured out with my ball again. I started kicking it around my tree. And, little by little, they began to approach me, saying nothing, but picking up the ball as it strayed towards them and bringing it back to me, and then kicking it around themselves – and soon I was playing my first football match. Of course Ramu and I were the babies and we had to keep goal. Thambi was the eldest, all of fifteen, and he paired off the teams. Lucky, though small, was the best dribbler, and he played ‘jack’ – for each side, that is, in each half. I remember I made a brave save from one of Thambi’s savage kicks at goal, and from then on I was accepted.

School was enjoyable too, though at first a little frightening. The headmaster was a strict disciplinarian and insisted on neatness and punctuality and good manners. And the teachers were careful to see that they carried out his wishes. But by and large they must have been lenient (except for that matter of Sanji’s shoes) and easy to get on with because I can hardly remember any of the teachers from that time. Except Marmoon, of course, the sportsmaster, a strikingly handsome man, wooed by all three of the headmaster’s daughters, and a wizard at football. He played for Uva Barefoot’s – only the captain, a Burgher inspector of police, had boots. I went to see them play every Sunday, and I can still see in my mind’s eye the fluidity of Marmoon’s movements, his brilliant ball control and passing, and the awesome power of his shots into goal. But most of all I remember his dribbling – dodging, we used to call it – as he went past the ranks of booted Englishmen opposing him as though he had brains in his bare feet.

My best friends at school were Lucky, the only boy from my neighbourhood to go to the same school, and Sanji. Lucky’s father was a *vedarala* whom my father would go to see every time he fell out with Western medicine. Sanji was the son of an estate shopkeeper who, with the help of the little schooling his father was able to find for him, had broken from the coolie lines to set himself up in business. The shop itself was a mud-built, tin-roofed, miserable little affair set on top of a hill on the outskirts of the Horton Tea Estate, far enough from town to invite the custom of the coolies and close enough to the plantation to be embroiled in its affairs. It was all that Raman could do to keep himself and his shop from being sucked back into the plantation and overtaken by tea bushes. Already four of his five sons, after trying to make a go of the shop, had succumbed to coolie life, and though the eldest was a factory hand, it was still in the estate’s tea factory that he worked. Raman’s five surviving daughters were tea-pluckers, and his wife an invalid.

Sanji was the late flowering of the old man’s dauntless will. Born after his brothers and sisters were already married and had children of their

own, Sanji was the baby of everybody's family, the last repository of their hopes, all of them anxious to see him through school, all of them willing him, with whatever will they had left, to break out of the endless cycle of work and debt to which they had been condemned.

They dressed him up as one dresses up hope, in white shorts and white shirt, white socks and white canvas shoes, furnished him with exercise books and a pencil and a clean little brown paper bag to carry them in, and sent him to 'the English school' – only to have him turned away and asked to return in the regulation khaki shorts.

His real name was Sanjeevan. That was what his father called him. Sanji, I had thought, was a shortened form of his name, like Thambi was for Thambiraja or Lucky for Lakshman. We often shortened our names to make them manageable. It was much later that I learnt that Sanji was the name on his birth certificate, the elderly chief clerk at the registry office, a Hindu converted to Christianity, insisting that Sanjeevan was too grand a name for a low-caste labourer's son: did Raman not know that it meant 'Redeemer'?

I admired Lucky. He was so good at everything and always so happy and gay, and I was proud to be his friend, but I liked Sanji more. Perhaps he was more like me, not too bad at most things and both happy and sad in the same moment. Besides, we both liked stories, particularly the ones the English teacher told us, and by the time we were able to read we had run through all the A.L. Bright Story Readers in our grade. But most of all, we liked the true-life stories that Raman, Sanji's father, told us; and often I would steal away from home (somehow I felt my mother wouldn't approve) to the little shop on the hill to listen to the old man's tales.

And then, when we were in Standard II, Raman died. Sanji did not come to school for a while and, when he finally returned, he was not as clean and as neat as before. Over the next few months, he was constantly being pulled up by the form-master for being slack in his work, untidy and generally indifferent. All I could see were the mounting patches on his trousers and the growing sadness in his eyes, but I didn't know then that his folk could no longer afford to send him to school. And then one day, he turned up in class with no shoes at all, and was sent up to the headmaster, who sent him home for good.

I saw Sanji a few times after that, at his shop mostly, and once when he came to play football with Lucky and me and the others on the green opposite our house. But he was now attending 'the Tamil school', the estate school for coolie children, and felt resentful towards us all, though why I couldn't understand, because there was Thambi who had to give up school altogether and Ramu who only went to school from time to

time when his parents could find the school fees. Or perhaps it was the work he had to do in the shop that made him so withdrawn. But the only work he had in the shop, as Lucky commented cruelly, was to keep it from falling.

Whatever the reason, I never found out. For soon afterwards my father was transferred to another town further inland – demoted, in fact, to a ‘malarial station’ – because he had incurred the wrath of Mr Watson, the Postmaster General, for writing petitions on behalf of underpaid postmen. I never saw Sanji again, though he was to come back into my life many, many years later. But that is another story.

I have little recollection of the next two years. They seem lost to me somehow, a void out of which I can conjure up only the feel of a void, the feel of emptiness. How often have I gone back over those years, forcing my memory to yield up a friend, a house, a school, an event – something substantial, something concrete! But all that comes to mind with any sort of clarity is a sense of being moved around, shifted, from place to place, school to school, evacuated of all memory but that of moving and of the fever that kept moving with us. And a sense, too, that it was all connected with a war that was being waged over my head somewhere between my father and his superiors . . . if only he would stop fighting! Other memories intrude. Like the time when I got lost on the tea estate behind our house and could find no way out because one tea bush only led to another. Or the time when I tipped a kettle of boiling water on to my sister’s knee and anxiously proceeded to rub it down with a cloth, peeling her skin. But finally, it is the memory of the fever that is the most abiding. I can feel it now, even as I write: the first tremors of my shaking body, the rising fever, the arctic cold in my bones, cold and hot, both at once, wishing for a thousand blankets and wanting to throw them all off, and the exhaustion that followed the recovery, only to go down again with another bout.

And then suddenly my father was transferred to Nuwara Eliya and to health: the vindictive Mr Watson had retired and the new Postmaster General was said to belong to ‘the new school’. Or as my mother put it, ‘*Saathan* has gone back to England and taken his malaria with him.’ The fever would recur though, from time to time, and remind me and her of those hollowed-out days.

By this time I had passed my Standard III exam, and my father decided to send me to his old school, St Benedict’s, in Colombo. Not that he could afford it, especially as by this time he had five children to support. Nor did he particularly want me educated in a Catholic school. But they were the only ones that offered a decent English education, and as for ex-

pense, there would only be the school fees to pay, as I would be living with my mother's parents in Kotahena, in the heart of Colombo.

I didn't want to go. I hated the idea of leaving home, of leaving my parents and my brothers and sisters, Leela in particular, who was a year younger than me and my best friend, more especially now that we had this beautiful big house over the post office with a huge rambling garden at the back, cut into a hill as high as our house, with pear trees and plums, carrots, cabbages, rhubarb and runner beans and all sorts of up-country vegetables and fruit. There was, too, the flower garden in front, with roses and pansies and lilies and carnations, flowers I had read of in books. Just across the road was the public park with its swings and roundabouts, its trout stream and maze. How the memory floods back with the richness of it all, as though the previous two years had never existed. Perhaps children make light of misery and too much of happiness.

It was in the school holidays that we moved to Nuwara Eliya, and Leela and I spent all day travelling on our sticks through the world of our garden. The trench here between the vegetable plots was a roaring river that we bravely rowed across only to face the crocodiles on the further bank. The jungle of runner beans was choked with man-eating plants that only Leela's scientific knowledge could see us through (she was better in arithmetic than I). The pear-tree mountains, though, were the most daunting of all, but the higher we climbed the faster we came down bruised and bleeding, our clothes all dirty or torn. The bleeding did not matter, for we knew of magic leaves that would stop it, but there was nothing we could do to stem my mother's wrath when she saw the state of our clothes. We could pretend that we had never gone up to the garden but had slipped and fallen in the drain while looking after the two younger ones, Ganesh and Ram – an accident, sort of, in the course of duty – but somehow it never worked. And, invariably, I got the worst of it.

Soon the holidays were over. I was to leave with Uncle Navam, who had been visiting with us. My father packed my bag, while my mother and Bisso, the cook, made up food parcels for the journey. Ganesh offered me his treasured wooden top and Ram a last clammy piece of toffee from his pocket. Leela pretended to be busy looking after the baby. My friend Robert was polishing my shoes, sprucing me up for travel. Even Uncle Navam was busying himself with something or other. Everyone was caught up in my departure. It seemed a momentous occasion. I began to feel a sense of importance, in between bouts of sadness.

'Ratnam *annai* has come,' announced Uncle Navam.

'Hurry up with the food parcels,' my father called out to my mother. 'It is seven o'clock already. We must leave in ten minutes.'

I ran out to the window to look at Uncle Ratnam's little car, a tiny Fiat as small as he. He was not my uncle really, but a distant relative of my father, and worked as an apothecary in the general hospital close by. He was the first person to have a car in our family, on my father's side, that is, but was very generous with it. He was altogether a gentle and generous man, always well dressed, 'a real stylo' my mother said – 'extravagant' said my father.

'Rajan,' my father summoned me, 'go and call your mother and come to the prayer room, all of you. You can keep your shoes on.'

As we gathered in the shrine room to pray for my safe journey, my father lit the oil lamp and served up burning camphor to the framed picture of Lord Siva. We sang two short *thevarams* and my father called me to him and placed holy ash on my forehead.

'You must not be sad, my son,' he said. 'Your grandparents and your uncles and aunts will look after you, and you can always come home for the holidays. You must study hard, though, and set an example for your brothers and sisters. But, above all, you must be a good boy, obedient to your elders and kind to those who are less fortunate than you. Pray to the Good Lord to keep you from bad thoughts and habits, and go to temple every Friday with your uncles.'

My mother embraced me and covered me with kisses – she was usually not so sentimental.

'Be a good boy, son. Don't do anything to make your grandparents angry. And write to us every week.'

We trooped out to the car with Ganesh and Ram demanding that I bring back nice Colombo sweets when I came back for the holidays, and Leela covertly pointing to the sticks she had hidden away under the bed till my return. Uncle Navam and the baggage were crowded into the luggage space in the back of the car and I sat on my father's lap in front. Bisso came tearfully up to the car and kissed me, and Robert pressed five cents into my hand. And as Uncle Ratnam drove off, I began to cry.

At the station, though, I was intrigued once again by the little train on which I had come up before.

I asked, 'What did you say these trains were, *appa*? Why are they smaller than the others?'

'They are narrow gauge trains,' said my father. 'Come, I'll show you.' And holding me by the hand, he took me to the edge of the platform. 'See? The two lines are closer to each other, the track is narrower. Ah! don't lean out so far. Come back here, the train is coming.'

'Yes, but why is it narrow here?' I insisted.

'Because the climb from Nanu Oya up these mountains is very very

steep. The railroad has been cut into the mountains, you will see as you go down, and if you have big, heavy trains running through them, they could shift the earth and start earth-slips and landslides, even wash away the railway lines, especially in the rainy season. That's why it is better to have narrow railroads, that way you don't disturb the mountains too much.'

A fair-skinned man in station-master's uniform came up to my father. He was not very steady on his feet and his nose was red. 'How are you Saha?' he said. 'Is this your boy?' He turned to me. 'So you are going to Colombo to study and become a big man?' I nodded shyly. 'Shall I ask the guards to look after him?' he asked my father.

'No, no, it's all right. He is going with my brother-in-law. You don't know him? Navam, this is Mr Heppenstall. You know my cousin, Ratnam, of course.'

'Yes, yes, we have met,' said the station-master, laughingly, sharing some private joke between them, 'in the hospital. Better get into the train, young man,' he said to me, 'we leave in two minutes.'

Uncle Ratnam hugged me and slipped a silver rupee into my pocket. My father picked me up and kissed me. Uncle Navam helped me into the compartment and shut the door. The train moved off. I felt empty.

But soon Uncle Navam was pointing out the scenery we were passing, and for a while I forgot my sadness at leaving home. The mountains had still not come out of their early morning mist and there was a lovely smell in the air – 'Wild mint and eucalyptus,' sniffed Uncle Navam – but the trees were alive with birds and the tea-pluckers were already busy among the bushes. The train chugged slowly and reluctantly down the hills, and came to a halt at the big railway junction at Nanu Oya. There we changed into a normal train, bigger, faster, and Uncle Navam, ignoring the sandwiches my mother had made for us, treated me to a lordly breakfast of tea and cakes in the restaurant car.

I was still intrigued by the railroad, though.

'Why do we keep going round and round and why are there so many tunnels?' I asked Uncle Navam.

'We are not going round and round, Rajan – that is the way it looks – but zig-zag, like a snake. Isn't it easier to climb up a mountain or go down it not straight up or down, but from side to side?'

'Yes, that is true. And the tunnels?'

'The tunnels are holes cut into huge rocks in the mountain through which the trains go.'

I fell silent again, looking out of the window. The scenery was slowly changing, the air smelt more of tea and it was getting warmer. I took off my pullover.

By noon we reached Hatton and a little later we ate the rice and curry my mother had packed for us. The mountains were getting smaller now and their tops were more visible. As we approached Kandy, Uncle Navam pointed out to a rock shaped like a book.

'That is Bible Rock,' he said, 'and above that, there is Utuman-kandé where Sardiel the thief used to hide out, in a cave.'

'Ah yes, Utuman-kandé Sardiel Appu. But Bisso said that he used to steal from the rich to help the poor and that the English could never catch him, and they had to shoot him down with a golden bullet.'

'Well, that is the story the villagers tell. But the English books say that he was a robber and a thief.'

'Still, he was very brave to live up there in all that jungle,' I gave in reluctantly.

At Polgahawela we changed trains again. Suddenly the scenery changed and the air got warmer still. The train straightened itself out and began to go faster. Tea bushes and rubber trees gave way to coconut, mango and jak. But presently it started to grow dark. Night was falling. I could no longer look out of the window. I fell asleep.

'Wake up, wake up,' I heard Uncle Navam say, and he shook me by the shoulders. 'Give me your pullover. I'll put it in the bag.'

'Where are we?' I asked.

'In Colombo,' he said.

My grandfather met us on the platform. He was as I remembered him from two years before: a big man dressed in trousers and a long closed coat with a white turban on his head and carrying a silver-knobbed walking-stick. I was glad to see him.

'Poor fellow,' he said, as he picked me up in his arms. I rubbed the sleep off my eyes. 'You must be tired and hungry. It's a long journey for a little chap. But it's not far to go now. We will be home in no time. And you can sit in front, with me, in our big new Austin car.'

My grandparents' house was situated in the highest part of Kotahena; all the other streets seemed to start from there, going up and down and everywhere. The house itself was very large with a high verandah in front covered by trellis-work and a long garage at the side running all along the house leading to the garden at the back. At the rear of the garden was a cow shed housing two milch-cows, and beyond that a tall wall covered with broken glass to keep out thieves. But what interested me most were the gas lamps with their white mantles that seemed to light up at the touch of a chain. I had never seen them before; and not till later did I learn that the street lamps were lit by gas too; and then for evenings on end I would stand at the gate and watch the gas man come riding

by on his bicycle to touch the street lamps to life with the metal end of his long stick.

My grandfather was the chief cashier in the Treasury, respected and liked by everyone who knew him, except his wife. He was a gruff man, Billy-goat Gruff we children called him, but warm and loving with it. Tall and majestic, he always kept himself in trim, walking the five miles to work every morning and eating only oatmeal bread and green vegetables for dinner. It is from him that I got the taste for *gottukola* and boiled *bandakkas* sprinkled with black pepper and salt (the poor man's asparagus, he called it). But most of all he liked raw carrots and curried beetroot, and waited eagerly for the basket of up-country vegetables my father sent him on the first Friday of every month. He lived very modestly but, in anticipation of his impending retirement, had treated himself and his family to their first car.

My grandmother, by contrast, was a small witch of a woman, cold and clever and all-seeing. We hardly saw her about the house; it was my grandfather who filled it with his raucous laughter and bellows of futile rage. But it was she, we all knew, who ran the household and ruled it, and ordered our lives from the deep recesses of her solitary bedroom. And we – husband, children, grandchildren, servants, cows and all – submitted to it, one way or another; except my Uncle Gnanam, that is, who rebelled meaninglessly and endlessly against his mother's unobtrusive tyranny.

Gnanam was the family failure. His two older brothers were lawyers, one an advocate and the other a Proctor S.C. & Notary Public (as his signboard proudly proclaimed). They had both married well and lived near the law courts in Hulftsdorp. Gnanam's younger brother, Navam, was studying to be an engineer, and even his youngest sister, Saras, had passed the Cambridge Junior Exam with distinction and was about to sit the London Matriculation. The eldest in the family was of course my mother, Neela, and she, it was generally agreed, had been given away carelessly (by my grandfather, who else?) to an impoverished postmaster from an even more impoverished farming family (all because Grandfather had been born in Sandilipay too and knew my father as a boy). That, perhaps, explained the affinity between my father and him, and between Uncle Gnanam and my father: they all seemed ambitionless in a family that was aspiring to riches and position. Gnanam, of course, was the worst of the lot because he had failed his London Matric three times and was now working as a clerk in the town hall – 'a real disgrace to the family' my grandmother said, 'and not quite right in the head'. I liked him, though. Not that I did not like Uncle Navam. He was unfailingly kind and considerate to me. But he shut himself away in his room

most of the time, studying, and keeping out of his mother's way. Uncle Gnanam, though, would play cricket with me or take me on tram rides or teach me songs or read me stories. He told me about the big war that had just started between Germany and England, and on one occasion started to teach me Hindustani and told me about his dreams of going to India and fighting for Indian freedom alongside his heroes Gandhi and Nehru, whom I had heard my father speak of, and some man called Subas Chandra Bose, whom I had never heard of. I never thought Uncle Gnanam would make a good soldier, though: he was a tall, thin, disjointed sort of man with a weak chest. Besides, he was gentle.

I went to school in a hired rickshaw with my aunt Saras: she attended the convent next to St Benedict's. I did not like St Benedict's very much and, in the few months I was there, made no friends. The teachers were mostly priests, Brother this and Brother that, and all they seemed to be interested in was saying prayers, teaching Scripture, or dashing off to mass or matins or benediction in St Lucia's Cathedral down the road. And although I tried to please them, devoting long hours to learning the catechism by heart, I always ended up being called a pagan and a heathen and was made to kneel outside the classroom as a punishment. The only sympathy I got was from two other boys in the class who were non-Catholics, but somehow did better than myself at Scripture, and from Uncle Gnanam, to whom I would confide my distress. But he had a funny way of helping me. He would start off very seriously by putting me through the questions and answers in the catechism and then fold up with laughter at some of the things it said. And I would end up laughing with him and joining him in his silly song:

An-thony, meen-thony
Ondu curry, ondu porri

'Thony is a fishing boat, right? and "meen" is fish. St An-thony, the fisherman's saint, must have been a Tamil.' He chuckled at his invention.

'But why *ondu curry* and *ondu porri*?' I played along with him.

'Yes. Curry one and fry one. What else do you do with fish? And that's what St Anthony did with the fisher-folk down here: fed them to the Church.' His usually kindly face was twisted in anger. 'That is their big church down by Sea Road. Remember I showed you? This place is full of churches and convents; they made our people into Catholics.'

I never quite understood what he was going on about, but it made me feel that being a pagan was no bad thing.

Perhaps I would have liked school better if I had been happy at home. But, however hard I tried, I could not get on with my grandmother,

or with my aunt Saras, as a matter of fact. I never felt at ease with the old lady, never safe, not that I saw much of her. In the evenings she was locked up in her room, playing invalid and drawing her daughter's attention to her. (Her husband's she had long ago lost and now no longer wanted.) During the day, she would sit in an easy chair in the corridor between her room and the kitchen, chewing on her gums and watching the servants. I was at school. Only at afternoon tea, tiffin she called it, would I come regularly face to face with her, and then I would be so conscious of her presence that I never ate as much as I wanted to. And tea was my favourite meal, too, and probably my grandmother's, for there were always good things to eat then: buns and biscuits and little sponge cakes that she had bought from the baker's man that morning or, better still, *muscat* and *aluwa* that the servants had got from the sweetmeat seller. The food was specially grand when grandmother's rich relatives came to tea. Then she herself would turn out the mutton patties and fish cutlets for which she was renowned. And it was then, too, that I felt closest to her. For she would show me off to them as her eldest grandchild, a bright boy and a great help to her in her old age. I would warm to her praise and be ambitious to satisfy her every whim. But no sooner were they gone than she would fall on me for having been too greedy, and deprive me, for weeks after, of all the things I liked to eat. 'What do you think you were doing in front of all those people, gobbling away like that?' she would demand to know. 'Do you want them to think I starve you? And when have you eaten so well? In your father's house?'

'That damn pauper,' she would go on. 'He doesn't pay for you, does he? He sends a basket of vegetables to that old fool and he is satisfied. Doesn't want money, he says. And who runs the house?'

I would try to creep away, hoping the tirade was over, but she would call me back, and I knew I was in for it.

'Your aunt tells me that you have been stealing her sweets.' (It was one sweet. I didn't think she had noticed, the mean sneak!) 'And she saw you buying toffees the other day. Where did you get the money from? Did you steal it?'

'No, no, Grandmother, Uncle Gnanam gave me five cents.'

'Oh, so he has money to throw away has he, that miserable clerk?'

'I polished his shoes.'

'Why? What was the servant boy doing?'

'Uncle didn't ask me to. I did it to be nice to him, like a surprise, and he gave me five cents.'

'And you wasted it on toffee? Go and live on toffee then. No more biscuits and *aluwa* for you, only bread. Do you hear me, only bread.'

Of course, it was not always like that. There were times when the

old lady would let me throw dice for her at *sokkottan* and then reward me with part of her winnings. Or she would show me how to work the ice-cream machine or make wood-apple pickle, giving me the lion's share in the process. But these were rare occasions, and I probably remember them as a relief from the tension of the unspoken wars she waged with her husband or the domestic intrigues she got up to with her daughter, Saras. I don't know what it was, but she seemed unable to be happy for long, always dissatisfied with one thing or another, as though the world owed her something. She had married 'beneath herself', and she never forgave her husband for that. Her father had been a rich landlord who had gambled his wealth away. One of her uncles was a race-horse owner and a cousin was the deputy manager of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, the first Ceylonese to occupy such a high post. She had expected that her husband, whose job was no mean one, would restore her to her former position, but he had squandered his money on his poor relations. They had not been able to afford even a car until recently, let alone buy their own house. And from her children she had ceased to expect anything. She had fed them and clothed them and brought them up, she moaned constantly, but when they were married they had gone their own sweet way.

It was a relief when the Easter holidays came round, for my grandmother too, I supposed, because she pushed me off to Nuwara Eliya with Uncle Gnanam even before my father could arrange for somebody to accompany me.

Nuwara Eliya was crowded. There were people everywhere, mostly Europeans, but also rich Ceylonese, all come for 'the season', 'the holiday season', Uncle Gnanam explained. 'They can't stand the heat of Colombo at this time, the *vellayans*. So they come to cool off, that's why they call it "Little England", and to play golf or go to the races or promenade in the park.' He put his hands on his hips and wiggled a seemly walk. 'Or "do Pedro",' he added, mimicking an English accent.

'But they are not just *vellayans*,' I said.

'No, our people too, but they think that by coming up for the season and playing golf and going to the races they become *vellayans* too, and then they feel they can't stand the hot climate either, and so they also come here to Little England to cool off.'

'Is Mr Heppenstall a *vellayan*?' I asked.

'Who? The station-master? No, he is both. He is a Burgher, a Dutch Burgher. His great-grandfather was from Holland.'

'Who is Pedro?' broke in Leela. She had grown in the few months I had been away and was now taller than me.

'Pedro is not a man,' I laughed.

'Pidu-ru-tala-gala,' my uncle broke up the word for Leela, 'is the highest mountain in Ceylon. It is 7,000 feet high. Didn't they teach you that at school?'

'No, they said Mount Everest is the tallest. Then there is the Alps and -'

'But *appa* told us,' I said, interrupting Leela, who was only showing off her knowledge.

'He never.'

'Yes, that time we were going in Ratnam Uncle's car. He showed us Piduru. He said there were cheetahs there.'

'Ah yes, I remember now, but he didn't tell the name.'

'Of course he did, but you were half asleep. He said he'll take us up there one day when we are bigger. Will you take us, Uncle? I am bigger now.'

'No, Rajan, that is too much of a climb for you,' and when I looked disappointed, he went on. 'I'll tell you what, I'll take you to Single-tree Mountain, that is smaller. But you must get *appa's* permission first.'

Uncle Gnanam was as good as his word. A week or two later we packed a picnic basket and climbed up Single-tree. In fact we all went, my father too. Of course, Ganesh and Ram were too young to go with us, and my mother and Bisso had to stay behind with the baby.

It was not a big mountain, and it was bare at the top except for one solitary tree. But Leela and I were thoroughly excited: we had climbed a real mountain at last and we could look down on the racecourse in the distance and the golf-links and, even the town bazaar, like in a picture book. And we could look up and see the sky all blue and for ever. All around us were rolling waves of hills, with Piduru far away standing high and proud and alone like my grandfather. It was all so beautiful that it hurt to look, like a pain in the chest. My father must have felt like me, for he stood there leaning on his walking-stick staring into the distance sadly. I put my hand in his.

'Is *patta* going to be all right, *appa*?' I asked. We had heard that morning that my grandfather had had a heart attack while on his morning walk.

'I don't know, son. This time it's more serious. He was told the last time to give up all this keep-fit nonsense, but he doesn't listen, does he?'

'Are you and *amma* going to Colombo?'

My father shook his head.

'Is Uncle Gnanam?'

'No, *patta* needs rest and quiet, and when he is better we will bring him up here for a holiday.'

'Come on, we must go now,' he added. 'It's getting late. Go and get your sister and help Uncle Gnanam collect the cups and plates and put them in the basket.'

All the way down I was thinking of my grandfather. I had hated the idea of going back there (it was a pity that it was not my grandmother who had had a stroke, I thought wickedly, and then punished myself by stubbing my toe for thinking such wicked thoughts), and I had got Uncle Gnanam to speak to my father on my behalf. In fact it was he who thought of 'the plan'. Just to say that I could not live with my grandmother, or that I did not like the school, or even that my grandmother did not want me there, would not have persuaded my father. He would certainly have refused me another change of school and, although my grandmother had given him an ultimatum about me, he agreed with my mother that it was I who was at fault, and that I must learn to get on with my grandmother and my aunt. Uncle Gnanam's plan, though, was to emphasize my education. It did not matter where I stayed, he told my father, but I should go to a better school, a less religious school, like St Joseph's College in Maradana. That is where my cousin-brother Kantha went, and I could live with my father's younger brother, Uncle Para, with whom my cousin lived too, in Forbes Road, just opposite the school, and he, my cousin, could supervise my studies. Besides, Uncle Para was a strict disciplinarian and would bring me pretty smartly into line. As for school fees, Father Legrange, the rector of the College, who was known for his kindness, would not charge more than half if my father went and spoke to him and told him of his difficulties.

My father must have been thinking on the same lines, because he was not too difficult to persuade. My mother was against it, though. One moment she felt that I had done my grandmother wrong, and I should go back and learn to 'live nicely' with her, the next that I would not be comfortable enough or have enough to eat at Uncle Para's. It was this concern for me that was uppermost in her mind in the first few days of the holiday.

But as the holidays wore on and I started getting on her nerves again, she began to turn against me. I tried desperately to win her over, by not playing cricket in the house and waking the baby, looking after Ganesh and Ram, not leading Leela 'astray' or needling Bisso, and I was beginning to succeed, I thought. And then one day she caught me stealing. It was not much, just a few cents, but it made her angry enough to take a stick to me, and when she learnt that it was not just that once either and that I had been going at it steadily, she flew into a rage and beat me senseless. Even Leela's pleading or the bawling of Ganesh and Ram could not stop her. Bisso had to rush out of the kitchen and physi-

cally hold her down. And that was not too difficult, for my mother was a small woman, half the size of her rage.

She beat me, I think, more in sorrow than in anger that time. I heard her crying to Bisso in Sinhalese, 'My first-born is a thief, Bisso, a thief, can you believe that, a thief. And for what? To buy chocolates! Don't I give him to eat, couldn't he ask me?'

Later, I tried to make her understand that it was not the chocolate bars I wanted – in fact I gave them away to my brothers – but the picture cards in them: I needed only Ely Cathedral to fill the last page of my Nestlé's album before my classmates did, and I would have stopped stealing when I'd got it, but I kept on getting Westminster Abbey. She did not believe me, though.

'Your grandmother is the best person for you,' she said. 'She will put you right, and the sooner you go back the better.'

But I did not mind that any longer. I wanted to go back and look after my grandfather, who was friendless in that house. Even Uncle Gnamam had been driven from him by his inability to stand up to his wife's ceaseless hectoring of 'the no-good clerk'.

A few days later my grandfather died, and I moved to Uncle Para's house to begin my first term at St Joseph's College.

2

ST JOSEPH'S COLLEGE was a grand school, perhaps it still is. Set back from the road by a playing field twice the size of a football pitch, with a wall running the length of it and wrought iron gates at either end, the school stood consciously apart from the surrounding slums of Maradana. It seemed removed from the real world, like a monastery, a cloister, and the set of its buildings – classrooms that started on either side of a brown stone chapel and ran in a rectangle surrounding a courtyard – heightened that impression. Behind the quadrangle was the cadets' armoury and the tennis courts and the junior playing field; and beyond that, the waters of the Beira.

Hardly any of us who lived in Maradana went to St Joseph's. We were mostly too poor for that. Except for the boarders, and there were not many of them, most of the boys came from further afield by train or tram or bus or rickshaw, some even by car. They were generally the sons of well-to-do businessmen and traders and of bureaucrats in the lower echelons of government. The big bureaucrats, the ministers and judges and senior civil servants and the landed gentry sent their sons to Royal

College and St Thomas's. They were posher and grander than St Joseph's: real public schools and Church of England. We played football and cricket and a little tennis, they played rugger and cricket and lots of tennis. We had housemasters, they had housemasters and prefects. We turned out clerks and priests, they turned out the ruling class.

But our head, the rector, Father Legrange, was more famous than theirs, having written numerous books on botany and won the Légion d'honneur (which sounded grand, whatever it meant). He was a big rumpled mattress of a man, covered in a white cassock bound at the waist by a black sash, into which was thrust a huge cross that hung from a cord around his neck. He never walked, he shambled, peering at the ground through thick glasses as though in imminent discovery of a new plant, nodding affably to the boys as he went along. But nothing ever really escaped him. He knew exactly what was going on in his school, but let the vice-rector think he ran the place, with an iron hand of course, while he, the rector, potted around in his botanical garden behind the laboratory. Only when it came to the sacking of a boy or the dismissal of a teacher did it become quite clear who was really in charge; or when a boy was sent home by the bursar because he could not pay his fees. The old man would send for the boy's parents, then learn about their difficulties and put the boy on 'half-fee', or no fees at all. The vice-rector might protest that the boy was not a Catholic or the bursar plead that the school could not afford it, but all that old Legs was interested in was that the boy was genuinely poor and that he genuinely wanted to learn. Some of us would never have been at St Joseph's but for him, and many of us would have had little appreciation of the plants and the trees and the natural beauty of our country but for him. Ceylon, for our rector, was a heavenly garden, he its celestial gardener.

Perhaps it was that peculiar quality of his, of innocence compounded with learning, that brought so many broadminded priests and enthusiastic teachers to St Joseph's College and made it less bigotedly Catholic than St Benedict's. Not that the regimen for the Catholic boys was any less strict: they still had to learn the Scriptures, attend mass and benediction, and go to confession. The boarders in particular, and you had to be a Catholic to be a boarder, seemed to spend all the time in chapel, but then they were mostly converts or seminarians. Things were much easier for us non-Catholic boys. We did not have to attend Scripture classes or recite the catechism. And we were not punished if we absented ourselves from school on the days of our own religious festivals and observances. Nor did the priests or the teachers, the Catholic ones, deride us as pagans and heathens, though we could not help feeling somewhat apart. Of course they were not all like that. There was always the odd priest who

was a raving bigot, like Fr D from Belgium, the Religious Knowledge teacher. He resented the fact that non-Catholics were exempt from RK and allowed to get on quietly with their own reading during the RK period, and would force them to pay attention to the Scripture lesson and even learn the catechism. Should anyone dare to protest, he would fly into a rage and slap and kick and knock the boy down with the fervour of a crusader. But Fr D did not last very long: his bigotry landed him in the lap of the Buddha, quite literally, on a school outing to the holy city of Anuradhapura, and Legs packed him back summarily to Belgium.

The vice-rector too was a bit of a bigot. Himself from a poor Sinhalese family in Chilaw, who had been converted to the Catholic faith a generation earlier, he was particularly hard on the non-Catholic boys, especially if they were poor. Perhaps he identified or confused (who knows?) poverty with wickedness, and felt that neither condition was tenable when there was a church that provided escape from both. Or perhaps he felt that, as the administrator of the school, it fell to him to be the defender of the faith, the last bastion against the encroaching pagan hordes. And intrepid warrior that he was, he would not wait for them to come to him, but would himself set forth down the corridors of the school every morning after prayers, with his cane thrust before him like an avenging sword, and look into every classroom to see whether there were any heathens up for punishment that day. Some teachers made it easier for him by putting the erring boys out in the corridor, as though in propitiation.

For some time it was thought that Fr C also was particularly harsh towards non-Catholics, because he seemed to pick on them for his favourite punishment. He taught arithmetic, in the lower forms, and whenever a boy got his sums wrong, Fr C would make him come up to the blackboard and do them all over again, pinching him high up on his thighs every time he hesitated. The Catholic boys, we noticed, did not get pinched so hard and even when they were, they were stroked out of their pain. But as we grew older and became prey to our own desires, we realized that Fr C was not prejudiced at all: it simply happened that the Catholic boys were prettier.

There were some lay teachers, too, who were inclined to favour the Catholic boys – like Mr W, the sports master, who preferred to have Catholics in the cricket team. But he also wanted his team to win, and so some of us managed to find our way into the school side. Besides, most of us could not afford to play cricket and preferred football instead, which the school did not consider so important, although the Old Joes were one of the best football teams in Colombo at the time, and some of our players even wore boots.

Generally, however, it was the teachers, both lay and clerical, in the lower grades, who were keen about religious teaching or meted out special treatment to the Catholic boys. By the time you reached Junior School Certificate things became easier, in terms of relationships, that is. The work, of course, got harder. Sitting for public exams was a serious matter, and involved the reputation of the school. But the teaching got better too, and more interesting. And the teachers themselves were interesting characters. They were known to the whole school by reputation, and you could not wait to get to the senior forms and meet them in person.

There was A.R., for instance, a wizard at mathematics, did all sorts of tricks with numbers and taught you ten shortcuts to problems in geometry. He was of medium build and size, and was known as Flash Gordon because he dashed around town in an old sports car with the hood down and a lovely Burgher girl at his side. He was always nattily dressed and sported a handkerchief in the sleeve of his jacket, and though he scribbled on the blackboard all day long, there was never a trace of chalk on his cuffs. He was, it was whispered, a lapsed Catholic.

'Skull', who taught higher maths, lived altogether on a higher plane. He was over six feet tall, all of it skin and bone, with a balding pin-head perched on top. He was a strict Hindu and a vegetarian and led, it was said, a most ascetic life. You could rarely keep up with his thinking, but if you got there, you were bound to be a brilliant mathematician.

J.P., by contrast was a huge, fat, ugly, roly-poly man with a lugubrious face wreathed in smiles. He wore grey double-breasted suits and taught English. In his youth he had been personal secretary to the great G.K.C. – Chesterton, that is – and had taken on not only his master's talent at writing, but his size and girth as well. He was a lousy teacher, as far as exams went, but he gave us such a feel for the language and a taste for its literature that we successfully betrayed our own. Chesterton and Belloc were of course his favourite writers, the ones that he enjoyed anyway, but he also read to us from Aquinas and Augustine.

From time to time he would read his own little essays to us, or recite the poems he had written, mostly in honour of Catholic martyrs and conquistadors. One particular recital, a paean to Dom Constantino de Sa e Meneseo de Noronha, the Portuguese captain-general who had put Ceylon to the sword, still lingers in my mind, not just for its ringing tones but as a remembered moment of splendid unease.

And then of course there was Fr H, a brilliant Latin scholar – grey and dirty and unkempt in his bedraggled cassock – totally unable to control his class, but winning us over to Latin grammar with little Latin jingles that he composed as he went along. A lovely man, quite

unworldly and quite unappreciated, except by the poor fisher folk in Negombo, who had sent him to school in the first place.

There were other dedicated teachers too, like Cowboy, the bow-legged physics man, Wigga, bald as a coot, and Legga, the cripple, the history and geography teachers. But they were more teachers than characters, and made less of an impression on the boys. You would remember them for having pulled you through your exams and not for what you would become. They were destined not to be a part of you, of your history, your persona; just a party to your success.

The most memorable days of the year were sports day, and the day of the big match, the cricket match, between us and St Peter's, the two 'premier' Catholic schools. It was not that our fixtures with the other schools were not bitterly contested, but this was in the nature of a family feud, nurtured carefully over the years on the lines of the Royal-St Thomas encounter. That of course was *the* big match, the battle of the élites, graced by the illustrious and the powerful, and elevated to the status of a national event. Ours was a poor replica, a replica for the poor, and although we tried to make it an exact one, from ceremony to celebration, from friendships to feuds, their day ended with a dinner-dance at the Galle Face Hotel, ours in tavern brawls between Bambalapitiya and Maradana.

I enjoyed it though, more even than sports day. (I was not so good at athletics but almost made the under-16 cricket team.) I enjoyed the cheering and the shouting, the ice-cream and the *achcharu*, and I enjoyed it most the year my cousin Kantha played in the team, and on the big day took 6 for 53 with his deceptive googlies. I decided then to model my bowling on his. I never managed to play for the school, though, and had to be content with playing football for the juniors (there was no senior side) in the Rockmount Cup.

Prize day was also an eventful occasion, not that I ever won any prizes (I did get an 'honourable mention' in English once), but I got to act in the play that the Tamil Society put on for the occasion. I was their star singer, a natural boy soprano they said, and was pampered no end, especially by Mr C, our Tamil teacher, who was also producer, director, scriptwriter and lyricist, and pretty good at them all too. Looking back now, I can begin to glimpse the enormous talent the man had, and know that in another place, another time, he might have been playwright, poet or film-maker. As it was, he was only the 'Tamil master' in the junior school, unseen and unsung, marked out from the rest by his bedraggled tussore suit, his trouser legs held permanently together by bicycle clips, so that one never knew whether he had just come or was just leaving, his threadbare black tie and his brown pork-pie hat stained at the brim from

the *gingili* oil that ran off his hair. But once a year, a week or two before prize day, he came into his own. Students would make way for his bicycle as he passed, teachers would wave their greetings, and even the vice-rector would stop him and ask how 'it' was going, what surprise had he in store for them that year, should 'we' be selling tickets to the public? And on the day, the rector himself would rush through the prize-giving with uncharacteristic haste, so as to clear the decks for the schools's great show of the year. Bonjean Hall would be full to bursting with parents, pupils, teachers, well-wishers and gatecrashers, and full of chatter. But a great silence would fall as the curtain rose, on a bare stage, and the audience waited for Mr C to introduce the play; for all his plays had introductions, prefaces he called them. And then, as Mr C walked to the centre of the stage, there would be gasps from the audience, followed by loud spontaneous cheers. For the Mr C who stood before them then was another man, neat and spruce and handsome in his national dress, all of silk – *verti*, shawl and *banian* – a man so transformed, so self-possessed that his audience began to sense in him the transformation of their own lives. The play had begun, and for the next two hours they would be carried away by song and story that went beyond the confines of language.

In later years I would remember with a pain of regret how I had bullied that great and good man.

Some of the school's activities were of course dampened by the war. Blackouts cut out the evenings. Some of our senior cadets, K.R., our cricket captain among them, left school to join the army. Our sportsmaster and one or two of the other teachers had already been called up; they were in the reserves. Mr C gave up his concerts to go and work with the troops, doing what I do not know. And Legs turned his beloved botanical garden into a vegetable plot.

But the war did not affect us directly, except for a single incident when a Japanese air raid over Colombo destroyed our harbour and killed a few of our people. Schools were closed down for a while. It could have been much worse, the papers said, but for Sir Geoffrey Layton, our commander-in-chief. It was then that we began to realize that we had no 'proper' government. The question kept cropping up in the civics class. We were ruled by 'no-nonsense' Geoffrey, who had already put some of our leaders in gaol. But we also learnt that somewhere in Kandy was the secret headquarters of the commander for the whole of South-East Asia, Lord Mountbatten, the King's cousin, no less. And that made us feel important and helped us to put up with rationing and blackouts and periodic evacuations.

Apart from that, life in school went on much as before. By the time

I got to the London Matric class, the war was over and there was talk of Ceylon being granted independence.

Those were happy days, my days at St Joseph's, and I liked living with my Uncle Para and his wife and their little daughter, Devi, and my brother Kantha, my cousin really, the son of my father's eldest brother, Mahadev. His parents had died in an accident when he was barely five and my father had adopted him. They were poor, my uncle and aunt, unlike my grandparents, and lived in a poor quarter of a poor area, but they were kinder, more generous, more loving, and even when they were harsh, you saw the justice in their harshness. They rarely visited my grandparents' house, especially after my grandfather died; my uncle was too proud a man to visit the rich, and my aunt derided them as 'Colombo Tamils' and 'Town Tamils', given to Christian ways. I was not sure where that put me, though, because when I was at school I felt like a Christian and a 'Town Tamil', and when I was at home I felt like a real Jaffna Tamil, and when I went out to play with the boys on our street, I did not feel like a Tamil at all, but a Maradana street urchin. I smoked, I stole, I even had a go at drinking arrack, and we beat the hell out of the Dematagoda gang when they intruded onto our territory, and under cover of the blackout, shamelessly raided the Home for the Poor and Aged, for mangoes and guavas and umbrella fruit. But every time that happened I went home and prayed for forgiveness, even on those occasions when I was caught by Kiri, the watchman, and brought home to a half-hearted 'thrashing' from my uncle.

'How could you?' he would yell, taking a reluctant belt to me. 'How could you steal from the poor? And the old? Is that what you are going to do to your parents? Eh? Eh?' And feebly the belt would fall with every question. 'Is that what you are going to do to us when we are old, eh?' He would stop for a little while and just when I thought it was all over, he would start on me again, the anger slowly descending into grief.

'And to think that man Kiri brought you here. What if he had taken you to the police station? And what about his job? You think it's great fun, but who gets the blame? The watchman. And who is going to look after his family when he loses his job? You? Do you know that his wife is in hospital? Do you . . .' And then, remembering perhaps that I had taken Kiri's wife the food my aunt had prepared, his anger would give way to sadness and he would sit down wearily in his easy chair, throwing the belt away from him as though it stung his hand.

'My poor brother. He does so much for everybody . . . and his son . . . his eldest son . . .'

And all the time he spoke my aunt would be intoning from the corner of her room:

'It is my fault he steals. I don't give him enough to eat.

'It is all because of his Christian friends.

'It is Kantha's fault. He smokes and plays cards and sets a bad example.

'If only he would go to temple more.'

And then, for a while, chastened and subdued, I would go to temple with my aunt every Friday, come home straight from school and play with my little cousin and, as soon as the lamps were lit, get down to my books. But curiously, it was during my 'good' periods that Kantha would take it into his head to 'cut' school (except when there was cricket practice) and go to Arasu's with the intention – or on the pretext, I never knew which – of doing 'combined study' with his three other friends who were also sitting their London Matric for the second time, and end up gambling at cards. Invariably he would come home late, smelling of cigarettes and arrack, sometimes without his books (having sold them to pay his gambling debts) and Uncle Para would lay into him with a hopeless passion of love and despair. Soon, though, Kantha was to fail his exam again and leave school, and go to live with my parents, hoping to sit the London Matric privately, with the aid of the Marlborough Correspondence Course. My uncle was loath to see him go, blaming himself for 'the boy's failure'. But Kantha, my father argued, needed closer supervision and Uncle Para, whose job as a railway guard brought him home only at the weekends, could not give him that.

With Kantha gone, I had to take on the role of the eldest in my uncle's family, responsible for my cousin and aunt. I did not mind it, I enjoyed it even, after a fashion. And there was always Uncle Gnanam's visits to look forward to. He was the only one of my mother's relatives that Uncle Para got on with, the only one with whom he would talk politics and religion, because, he said, people fell out over things like that, not that they did not almost come to blows at times, especially when Uncle Gnanam went on about independence and that. He could not sleep, he said, till the British were driven out – like Dutu Gemunu, till he had defeated Elara. But Dutu Gemunu was a Sinhalese, Uncle Para would reply with a smile on his face like when he teased me, and Elara was a Tamil, like us, and if the British left, the Japanese would come in. At least they are Asians, Uncle Gnanam would retort. And they would go on endlessly like that and I would give up trying to understand it all. Except that sometimes Uncle Gnanam would take me to the big Siva Temple at Gintupitiya and, after a quick round of prayers twice around the temple – we were always late for *pooja* ('no point in putting money into that

bloody Brahmin's pockets' he would say) – he would sit me down with sweets and soda and try to explain that he and Uncle Para were not really quarrelling, but that he was a nationalist while Uncle Para was a socialist. That did not make me any the wiser, but I was not sure any more that I wanted to fight for the mother country when I was all big and grown up.

At other times Uncle Gnanam would take me and my cousins to the bioscope, to see Tamil pictures mostly, but sometimes cowboys too, and Rin-Tin-Tin the wonder dog.

And yet I could not help looking forward to my holidays, not the ones I spent with my parents in Nuwara Eliya (and later, when my father was promoted, in Kandy) – those too – but more the two, three weeks we all spent in Jaffna once a year, when my father got his leave. Those were the happiest days of all.

The journey itself was fascinating. In less than two days we seemed to cover the whole of the country. The train ran through landscapes and seasons like a spendthrift. It began, slowly at first, in the morning, from Nuwara Eliya, inching its way down the mountains of the high country, through tea plantations and forests of pine and eucalyptus, and dropped suddenly at dusk into the paddy fields and coconut groves of the valleys below. But when we woke the following morning and looked out of the window the green was all gone. There was only a parched land before us, stretching towards the ruins of tanks and temples in the distance. By noon we would sight the first palmyrah trees, still and solitary, sometimes a cluster but scarcely a grove, and know we were nearing our journey's end. Soon the tobacco farms would come into view, and little plots of vegetables, the women bent over them, and against the horizon we could see the men walking the *thulas* of their wells to eke out the water for their fields. We were in Jaffna at last, soon to be released from the confines of our carriage.

Not that we wanted to be released from our carriage particularly. For me and Leela, and even the younger ones, it had been home and school and playground all at once, and not stuck in one place either but moving, and without any rules to spoil things except the rules that seemed to make themselves as we went along. Or perhaps it was my father who made them as he moved around in that tiny compartment, turning it into an everywhere.

At meal times he would make a table out of the suitcases and treat us to the *string-hoppers* and chicken curry that my mother had cooked and packed in plantain leaves, making her sit down with us and be served; and when the 'table' had been cleared he would give us books to read or tell us stories, or provide us with board games like ludo and draughts, interrupting us from time to time to point out the landscape or mark a

monument, signify a ruin. And at nightfall he would spread mats and rugs and pillows on the floor for Leela and me to sleep on; my mother and the younger ones would share the long seats between them, while my father sat on the tin trunk in the corridor as though in eternal vigil. I loved to watch him make the arrangements for the night. I looked forward to it as in a transport of safety. Everything he did in that small rectangle of a compartment was so assured, deft and certain. He moved in the confines of that cubicle as though it were a house: he gave it space and breadth and dimension. It wouldn't have surprised me one bit if a tree had suddenly sprung up in our midst, or a stream or a mountain, so much space there was. Perhaps space was a relationship: we had so much room because we had room for each other, and a way of belonging, perhaps, to ourselves and to others.

It was a feeling that was to stay with me right through our stay in Sandilipay, and perhaps that was why I liked it so much there. It had the feel of a real homecoming, not like going home to my parents but like bringing my home home.

The promise of it had already been there in the train journey, and had grown, as we drew closer to Jaffna. Now, at Chunnakam station where we changed to a large bullock-cart for the last lap of our journey, the sense of homecoming grew even stronger.

'It's a long journey, isn't it *thambi*?' asked the old carter of my father. 'The children must be tired.'

'Yes, two days,' my father replied, 'but not so bad as the last time. It was three days then because of the landslide.'

'What's that, *thambi*?' the carter enquired, not quite hearing what my father had said. 'Ah yes, the landslide. I remember, when the rains had pulled the mountain down over the railway lines.' He laughed. 'Funny that, isn't it? Here we have no rain to water our crops and there you have too much.'

'How is the onion crop this season?' asked my father. 'Is Deva still working that plot?'

'Who is Deva?' I whispered to my mother.

'Ssh, shh,' she silenced me. 'He is his son,' she whispered back.

'Oh yes,' said the carter. 'He is a determined young man. But the market isn't very good at the moment. Plenty of Bombay onions coming in.' He spat out his betel chew and looked back into the cart.

'Five children is it? You had four the last time. Is it a girl then, the last one?'

'Yes.'

'Where's Mahadev's boy, then, Kantha? I thought he was living with you.'

'Yes, but he has gone to Colombo to sit his London Matric. He will be coming next week.'

'Failed it, did he, before?'

'Yes, twice.'

'His youngest brother, Myl, seems to be a bright boy? They say he is doing well at school. Not Somu though, eh? But he is very good with the cows and the goats. Without him there won't be any animals left in your family. Orator thinks he should leave school, I am told, and take up farming. He is a good boy, helps out Deva a lot you know, on the farm. What are your plans for him?'

'We'll see,' said my father. 'I must talk to the boy.'

'Who is Orator?' I whispered to my father, not wishing to interrupt grown-up talk, but unable to keep down my curiosity. 'Is that a name?'

'Orator Mani is the principal of my old school. Orator means speaker. He was a great speaker, and a great fighter for independence, with a fine command of English and Tamil, and when he spoke it was like music. So they called -'

'But three boys, eh?' interrupted the carter. 'Two girls and three boys, that's not bad.'

He fell silent for a while, then continued. 'But then you don't have to work the land any more, you are a government servant, now, and that's what your father wanted. So what does it matter if they are boys or girls?'

My father agreed, muttering that he had been a government servant for a long time. But for the old man, he was still farmer Pandyan's son.

'Juk, juk,' shouted the carter suddenly to his bulls, twisting their tails with his toes. 'Go on, you sons of Satan, are you going to keep us here all day?'

My father chuckled. I looked at him inquiringly.

'Nothing changes here,' he said to me in English. 'The same talk, the same sort of people, even the same bulls. Only, when I used to come as a young man to Jaffna, we had single bullock carts, now you have double bullock carts. That's the only difference. Even the way the carter shouts at the bulls is the same, only the carter has changed. In those days it used to be my friend Velan. But he used to ask me the same questions! About the family and so on. He is dead now. You see, son, here in the village everybody knows everybody, everybody belongs to somebody.'

We were leaving the tarred road now and entering the rough and ready lanes of Sandilipay. The cart slowed down to a walking pace as it made its way through stone and sand and mud and rock, and suddenly

stopped altogether. My father got down from the cart and, ordering all of us out to relieve it of our weight, tried to heave the wheel out of the rut it had fallen into. Just then two men came along.

'Ah, *thambi* Sahadevan,' said the older one, swaying a little. He was carrying a cackling chicken under one arm and a bottle of arrack under the other. 'When did you come?' And then steadying himself and focusing on the rest of us, 'Oh, you are just coming, are you? Hmm, the little fellows are all grown up now. Can't remember their *patta*, eh?'

I remembered him all right, my mother's uncle, first cousin to my grandfather. Churchill, everyone called him, because he had not given an order to anyone in his life.

His son, by contrast, was a quiet, serious man, and strong, a 'physical culturist', known to everyone as Sandow. He did not say a word to us, just nodded to my parents and proceeded to lift the cart out of the rut.

'I'll come that way tomorrow, then?' said Churchill *patta*, taking his leave. 'Ah,' he added remembering his religious duties, 'there's a big service at the temple on Friday, the priest from Nallur is coming to do the *pooja*.'

We met others as we went along, and my father, walking beside the cart in its slow progress down the winding lanes, stopped to talk to them briefly. But I was more interested in the large catapult that my cousin Myl was brandishing as he came to meet us.

Soon Somu and Gowri and Valli and their friends were swarming all over us. And by the time we reached Aunt Lakshmi's house there were a whole lot of people waiting to meet us and pass us on from hand to hand, like jewellery.

July was the best time of year in Sandilipay. The trees were in bloom then, not that there was a great variety of them – the soil was too unyielding for that and water scarce – but what trees there were put forth in July. The morning air smelt of jasmine and the evenings were pungent with the scent of the queen-of-the-night. Even the fruit trees were full to boasting, if only with mangoes and plantains and jak, and the brown of the gardens had broken into green vegetables. It was also the time of year when, as though by common consent, the government servants returned to Sandilipay on holiday from their various postings outstation. And the village resounded with the noise of children and the sounds of reunion: the emigrants and the exiles had returned, to be united again with the parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins and in-laws for whom they had set out to find work in the cities. Benefactors and beneficiaries, near relatives and far, old and young, the ne'er-do-well and the well-to-do, the postmaster and the peasant, they all came together in

Sandilipay in July and the village was alive once more, like a page from its past.

It would die again, or sleep, when we had all left. But for now it was alive, with *thaatchi* and rounders and cricket, singing contests and *kool* parties, temple festivals and coming-of-age ceremonies – and hush-hush goings on over marriage proposals for this one's sister or that one's cousin. I liked the *kool* parties most of all, and the cricket matches with the neighbouring villages, especially if I got to play. I don't know why Leela and I called them *kool* parties, because they were not parties as such; they just happened, people just came, when there was *kool* in the offing. But how they knew I couldn't say. I liked to think they got the smell of *kool* in the air, but Leela pointed out more prosaically that everyone knew who had been to market that morning to buy the 'kool things' – the palmyrah flour out of which the 'soup' was made and the hundred and one other things that went into it like sprats and prawns and shrimps and fish-heads, *billing*, jak seed and coconut, long beans, and butter beans, *bandakka* and *brinjal*, tapioca, rice and tamarind.

My aunts would start cooking the *kool* in the late afternoon, in a huge earthenware pot on an open fire in the middle of the kitchen compound. And by dark, various relatives and friends would begin to sit themselves down on their haunches around the pot, and the serving would begin. We ate from dried jak leaves shaped into cups, chewing and spitting the bones on the ground for the dogs to clear up.

'Where's Jimmy?' someone would ask. 'He is not dead, is he?'

'No, no, he must be asleep somewhere, by the well, probably,' my aunts would answer. 'Somu, go and fetch him, and bring a plantain leaf for his food.'

'Why by the well?' asked a cousin.

'Likes his reflection I expect,' laughed an uncle.

'Perhaps he doesn't want to eat,' suggested a niece.

'Yes, his teeth are gone,' agreed a grandparent.

'Well, we all got to go sometime,' said a friend.

Jimmy was the oldest dog in the neighbourhood. He had been around a long time and everybody knew him like they knew a monument. Nobody would pass him by without saying hello to him, or just 'ah, Jimmy', with a shake of the head as though to say 'Weren't those the days'. And they were, for Jimmy was a great fighter in his time, not just strong and fearless, but shrewd. ('There is nothing so wise as a mongrel,' my grandfather used to say.) He would fight anybody or anything, from thieves to snakes, that threatened the family he was living with, for he was a communal dog and moved from house to house as took his fancy. But he stayed away from those houses that gave him leftovers to eat;

he had to be served properly, like anyone else, from the pot, on a plantain leaf. Nor would he answer to calls of '*unju*', the form of address used for dogs in general, meaning something like 'here, you'; he had to be addressed by his proper name, Jimmy. It was that sense of himself, perhaps more than anything else, that marked him out from all the other dogs in the village. Now, in his old age, he had withdrawn into a great silence, not wishing to trouble anyone, just waiting for death.

There were other Jimmys, of course. In fact all the dogs in the village were either Jimmy or Rover, whatever their sex – there was no word for bitch in Tamil, my father explained – but so long as old Jimmy was alive, he remained the first Jimmy. And Jimmys, as everyone knew, were higher than Rovers – of mixed blood, mongrel, like the English, and more 'Englishy' in their name. Of course there was the occasional Rex, come from Colombo with all sorts of claims to pedigree, but he was soon put in his place. Jimmy was king.

When Jimmy had been found and fed, the conversation would turn to more serious matters: a problem about the village school or temple, a dispute over a well or a dowry, a family feud, or just a personal quarrel between friends. And invariably it was to my father that everyone would turn for advice. For although he was not the oldest among them, or the wisest, they respected his common sense and liked him for his generosity: there was hardly a person in the village whom he had not helped at some time, often at some cost to himself. Besides, he cared about the village – not like some of those other 'outstation' people, they said, for whom the village was just a dumping ground for their wives and children. It was he, after all, who had persuaded the government agent of Jaffna to run the main road from Manipay to Chunnakam through Sandilipay, helped to raise money to build the local primary school, and urged the villagers to petition the government for a sub-post office, though as yet to no avail.

And the village had begun to breathe again. It had survived for a while on the little produce it could take to market miles away and on the postal orders its government-servant sons sent home, but it had gradually been cut off from the rest of the world and forgotten. Now there were shops rising by the roadside and markets on a Sunday, transport to nearby towns and access to hospitals, and a feeling among the people that there could be a life for them even in the new scheme of things.

Of course I could not have been aware of all this at the time of which I am writing. Neither is it something which I am giving shape to now with hindsight. The memory is there as though I had known it then, known all those deeper things about the village. Perhaps my intermittent visits to Sandilipay contrasted so vividly with my life in Colombo that

I was shaken into an awareness of the village very early on. Or perhaps I had found that understanding during that last long stay in Sandilipay, waiting for my Matric results. It is difficult to say, and I don't quite know why. Other memories of my schooldays seem so distinct, clear, separate: there are spaces between them which I cannot quite fill. But my memories of Sandilipay run on to each other, unreckoning of the time that separated my visits there, as though they had been edited for continuity. And it is not as if I had lived there all my life.

Or perhaps I had, in a manner of speaking, for the village and its affairs were never out of my father's mind, wherever he was, and I was close to his thinking. No, not to his thinking, really. Or, if I was, it was only because I tried to make sense of the irrational, contrary things he got me to do, like making me take private tuition in Tamil while insisting that I do well in English so as to pass my exams and get a decent job, or forcing me to go to temple every Friday evening while sending me to a school that made me kneel at assembly every weekday morning.

Or perhaps it was his pain I was close to, even when I was away from him and could only hear it in his letters. And it invariably had something to do with the village. I remember the time that his niece, Kantha's sister, that is, was taken ill with meningitis. Mahadev, their father, and his wife had died tragically a couple of years earlier, and now Pushpam was dying too. There seemed no end to the family's tragedies. My father was distraught. He could not get leave to go to Jaffna, but he would not go to work either. He just lay there in his easy chair all week long, bereft. And the other time, years later, when Kanni, Aunt Lakshmi's daughter, had got married. We were all in Sandilipay for the wedding. There had been some last minute hitch about the dowry, but my father had managed to raise the extra thousand rupees that the bridegroom's people had insisted they have in cash, and Kanni was to be married. After the ceremony the bride had left for the bridegroom's house, as was customary. And early the following morning, anxious to be the first to visit Kanni in her new home, I cycled down to the bridegroom's village some few miles away. The house seemed deserted, but I managed to find my way to the bridal room, only to find the door wide open and Kanni seated in her wedding clothes, her hair still bedecked with flowers, at the foot of an untenanted bed: the bridegroom had disappeared on the wedding night. I rushed back to Sandilipay breaking with the news, but unable yet to sense its sadness – till, that is, I told my father. He froze, and a great anguish came over his face, and then he gathered himself and broke the news to his sister, and together they sat on the stoop of the verandah for a while and then set off to the bridegroom's house without

a word. Only then, and I was sixteen at the time, did the pain and the hopelessness of it all bear down on me.

And I hated the village and all its rules and customs then and, wanting to tell somebody of the evils of arranged marriages, sent off a letter to the Junior Page of the *Ceylon Daily News*.

But these were not the only things that kept the village so vividly in my consciousness. It was with us in everyday, material things too: in the clothes we could not afford and the food we had to husband and in the one quarrel between my parents that recurred endlessly through their lives. It usually preceded payday.

'I want more money this month,' my mother would begin, having first settled my father in his easy chair with a cup of tea and the newspaper. 'Ram's shoes are too small for him, his toes are all swollen. And Leela needs a new uniform. I can't patch up the old one any more and the new one she wants to keep for prize day and things.'

My father would nod his head and carry on reading his newspaper.

'And with Rajan home for the holidays, I've got an extra mouth to feed, and he is hungry the whole time, must be hookworm.'

'It is not hookworm, woman, it's his age,' my father would retort impatiently. 'Para took him to the doctor in Colombo. The boy is growing up.'

'But how am I to feed him? Para looks after him all right, but when he comes home he feels he should have the lion's share of everything – two pieces of fried fish, all the onions in the *achcham*. Kantha gives part of his share to him, and even then it is not enough. And how can I say no to that boy? He is only here for a few weeks.'

'Hmm.'

'What, hmm? What is hmm?'

'Yes, yes, you can have more money for food. That you cannot stint on. Is he having enough milk?'

Having won the first round – on the matter of food, she knew, she always would – my mother would step up her attack.

'What about Ram's shoes then, and Leela's uniform? Ganesh needs a shirt and I need a sari. But that can wait. I have to get Bisso a cloth and jacket first, for the Sinhalese New Year. She is going home to the village and wants to buy something for her parents. She has spent all her wages.'

'I'll give her some money,' my father would say shortly.

That was round two to my mother, but back she would come again.

'What about the other things, then?'

'What other things, woman, what other things are you talking about?'

'The shoes, the uniform, those other things. What's the matter, are you deaf?'

Silence.

'Do you want me to borrow money from Bisso again? I had to take Rs 25/- from her passbook last month.'

'Ganeshan's old shoes should fit Ram,' my father would say, and go back to his paper.

'What old shoes? You gave them to your brother's son.'

'Hmm. We'll see,' my father would concede.

But the concession would only make my mother bolder and she would launch into a full-scale attack.

'We'll see, we'll see, all the time we'll see. What is there to see? You care more about all your no-good relatives in Sandilipay than about your own children. What have they ever done for you? Look at all your sisters' husbands, wastrels and drunkards. And their children? They don't want to study, they don't want to work. Look at Gunam. All he does is smoke and loaf and pretend he is some sort of *sadhu*, above work. Who is going to find the dowry for his sister? You?

'And as if that is not enough you have to go and lend money to the toddy tapper. How is that cripple going to pay you back? By tapping toddy with his broken arm? And you are not going to ask him for it, are you?'

'Chi' my father would say in an expression of disgust. 'What is all this ugly talk? And the children can hear everything. Is this what we teach them?'

'I don't care. I want —'

'I do,' my father would roar in one of his rare outbursts. 'I have listened to you long enough, and I don't want to hear one word more. Do you understand, not one —'

'But —'

'Just shut up, will you?' he would yell, getting up from his chair and throwing down the paper, and my mother would know that he could endure no more, and tactfully leave the room.

Later in the kitchen, he would put his hand on my mother's shoulder.

'Gunam and Myl and them, who is to look after them if we don't?' he would say. 'They don't have the same chances —'

'And my children?'

'Yes, I know, but they are also our children, aren't they?'

And my mother would nod in complete agreement, and sob silently into the aubergines.

I WAS PREPARING FOR my London Matriculation when Ceylon got its independence in 1948. There had been intimations of independence for some time, even before the war was over. The newspapers were full of it, my father and Uncle Gnamam discussed it endlessly, and at school, we were set essays on dominion status and parliamentary government. But the struggle for freedom was associated with Gandhi and Nehru and the Indian National Congress. Our leaders stood on the sidelines awaiting the outcome, offering up prayers and petitions to Her Majesty's Government the while. The Ceylon National Congress had sold out, my father said; all they were interested in was to hold on to their lands and privileges. They did not care about ordinary people, and the people in turn did not have a say in their country's independence: it was all being done somewhere above their heads. Of course they would bring out the flags and the buntings on the day, but only because it was another occasion for festivity. As for Goonesinha and the Labour Party, they had abandoned the cause of the workers long ago. Goonesinha himself was content to sit in the State Council or to drive around in his chauffeur-driven 'limousine' (my father dwelt on the word luxuriously), doffing his pith hat, with the ever-thinning red band around it, to imaginary crowds. There was no mistaking my father's bitterness about the man. It was almost personal.

'I thought you were in his party at one time,' I said provocatively.

'No, I was not,' my father replied with unusual vehemence. 'I was what you might call a fellow traveller. I was involved with your Uncle Tissa a lot, and he, as you know, was a Goonesinha man.'

I nodded. I had met Uncle Tissa a few times and on a couple of occasions I had gone to stay with him and his family – he had a son a little younger than me – when they were in Kalutara. And it was from the stories Uncle Tissa told me that I had begun to get a picture of my father's youth. But of his Chief, Uncle Tissa would never speak, and when the subject came up as to why he had left the Labour Party, he would look at Auntie Beatrice and sigh, as though to say that she was the only good thing to come out of it all.

'We were such good friends, Tissa and I,' my father said, parting his hair with his hands, and I knew the sign well enough not to interrupt him. 'But I was transferred out of Colombo and I lost touch with him.' Something in the way he said it made me feel that that was not the real reason. 'And then I got married,' (nor that either, I thought), 'and you were born, and I began to drift away from all that sort of thing.'

For a while, though, he added, glowing with pride, he had been with

the Youth League people: Handy, Caldera, Valentine, that lot.

At this, I looked blank. The names meant nothing to me. Was the Youth League a football team? But then, it was not often that I had been able to talk to my father about these matters, least of all about his own involvement in them. I had not lived at home most of my school life, and he was not given to talking about himself. But just before the 1947 election, the election that was going to set up the new parliament that would bring in the new constitution, my father was transferred to Colombo, as chief postmaster. The family was reunited at last, and I was coming to know my father and Leela and Ram and my mother and Ganes and Premi all over again. Or, rather, it was another way of knowing them, my father in particular. I was coming to know him like a friend. He still preached his homilies to me, but not so much about obedience and honesty now as about the perils of puberty: the dangers of 'self-abuse' and of being too friendly with older boys and men. But since I had already got over puberty with some little help from other boys and was beginning to look at girls more avidly, his advice was somewhat belated. He still got me to recite my *thevarams*, though, and go to temple on a Friday, in the hope at least that it would set a good example to my brothers and sisters. But, these things apart, he left me to myself and treated me as an adult. And I, in turn, curious to know the young man he once was, would provoke him into conversation whenever I could. He, for his part, was less averse to talking, especially about politics. The impending election, the independence to come, the political ferment that the whole country was in had thrown him back on his past and shaken his tongue loose.

'Who were they?' I asked. 'These people: Handy and Caldera and the rest?'

'Who were they? What do you mean "who were they"? Don't you know anything, boy? They were the people who started the *Swadeshi* movement, like Gandhi's, getting people to boycott British goods and buy local products, and the *Suriya Mal* movement, and the *Swabasha* movement.' His voice had risen noticeably.

'Ah, the Socialists you mean,' I answered, trying to get all the bits and pieces into a framework I understood. At least I had some knowledge of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party.

'Not the Socialists, you silly boy!' My father was exasperated. 'Before that! In the early thirties, in fact! The Socialists did not come on the scene till 1935! What do they teach you in that school of yours?'

'Not about those things,' I replied aggrievedly. 'Mostly British history. Magna Carta, Waterloo, that kind of thing.'

'But you do Ceylon history?'

'Only the early period, *appa*, not about now,' I protested. 'And not for the Matric, it is not in the syllabus, only British history. 'Even about the Socialists I know a little only because Mr Corea, our government teacher, used to tell us about it. But he got sacked for not teaching the syllabus.' I added that the new rector had offered this explanation, but we all knew that it was because Mr Corea wore a red shirt and no tie. My father was puzzled. Hadn't he seen me wearing a *suriya mal* on Poppy Day? So what was that all about?

'Oh, that? Uncle Gnanam made me buy it. He said that if I bought a poppy, I was putting money into our enemy's pockets, whereas the *suriya mal* collection went to help our people. Didn't you use to sell the *suriya mal* too, at one time?'

'No, son,' my father replied, more gently or in regret, I knew not which. 'I had been transferred to Badulla by then and there was not so much activity in those parts.' He cleared his throat which had gone husky. 'But your Uncle Gnanam,' he said, perking up, 'he was in the thick of it.' He started laughing. 'Yes, in the thick of it,' he repeated and broke into peals of laughter. He never laughed very much, but when he did, it tinkled all over the place.

'Why, what happened, what happened?' I kept breaking in.

'He got sacked, that's what happened,' he replied, trying to control himself. 'He got kicked out of home, that's what happened.' Another peal of laughter. 'And all because of one *suriya mal*.' He wiped mock tears from his eyes. 'I'll never forget the day.'

'What happened?' I demanded impatiently.

'Well. He put on his national dress and his Gandhi cap and stood in front of his office. It was his first job, as a clerk in the Treasury, and he tried to sell a *suriya mal* to his boss, Mr Jones.'

'And?' I prompted.

'He got the sack of course. And there was hell to pay at home as well. First your grandmother threw him out of the house. Then she brought him back, thinking he was mad and must get treatment before he became a bigger disgrace to the family. So she took him to a Buddhist priest to do a *thoil* and drive away the devils. That was when he decided to become a Buddhist priest himself. And your grandmother quickly tried to get him married and settled. But he did a bolt to India.

'That Gnanam, the things he used to get up to, I could go on all day . . .' And he started laughing again. Quite clearly, he approved of our 'mad Indian uncle', for that's what we called him secretly.

'How long was he in India?' I asked.

'I don't know exactly, but it couldn't have been more than a few days.

Because his purse got stolen at the crossing and he came back and went to stay with some friends in Jaffna.'

'Was that when he joined the Youth League?'

'I don't think he joined it; worked with them probably. But joined it? I don't know. He never joined anything in his life. He is a free soul, that one. But you ask him, see what he says.'

Uncle Gnanam was a frequent visitor to our house. He lived in a chumery in Borella and came home every Sunday to 'sample' my mother's cooking (as he put it) and to talk politics with my father. I was not interested in politics, except as it concerned my father or Uncle Gnanam, or their friends. Other things occupied my mind. I was longing to go to university and I was anxiously awaiting my Matric results. I was living between preparing for the Matric again, if I failed, and getting ready for my university entrance exams, if I passed. Besides, I was in love.

We lived in the poorer part of Kotahena, by the police station. It was a far cry but a short distance from Hill Street, where my grandparents had lived. (My aunts and uncles had married and moved away, all except Uncle Gnanam, and my grandmother had gone to live with my Aunt Saras.) Even Hill Street was not the same any more. It was still the richer part of Kotahena, but it had little of the charm and manners of the rickshaw-owning Tamils who had once lived there. They had moved on to the 'residential district' of Cinnamon Gardens.

Our part of Kotahena was a jumble of slum dwellings and tenements and derelict old houses, though the house we rented was tucked away from the main road and not altogether unfit for living in. I had been to these parts before when, as a little boy, I had accompanied my grandfather on his secret visits to a needy relative in a tenement close by. I had been frightened then, the streets were so menacing and the houses dark and forbidding. But it all looked so different now, alive and fascinating, with its mess of peoples – Hindus, Catholics, Buddhists and Muslims; Tamils and Sinhalese and Malays and Burghers; the well-off, the have-enoughs and the poverty stricken – and its maze of streets and alleyways. It was at first sight no different from Maradana, where I had lived with Uncle Para all my schooldays. But Maradana was flat and uninteresting, shabby without being picturesque. Its streets led only to other streets, its buildings had nothing to say. It did not demand to be explored, as Kotahena did, or summon you to its history. Just to walk through Kotahena was like going on an expedition. And often at weekends, when rain had washed out all likelihood of cricket or football, I would go exploring the streets and the lanes and the churchyards, sometimes with Uncle Gnanam, but mostly on my own, conjuring up visions of what the place looked like all those years ago.

Or perhaps they were visions that were forced on me by the lie of the land and the look of the buildings. The streets took off like mountain paths, rising and falling all over the place, almost vertically sometimes, and the lanes got lost in bog or wasteland. They spoke of a place that had once been all hill and valley and marshland, unlike any other place in Colombo, with the sea not far away and enough fruit and fish and vegetables for the people to live on. There were still signs here of where the wild fruit grew: the wood-apple, the *massang* and the *pinni-jumboo*. And in St Matthew's churchyard there still stood a mighty red-blossomed coral tree, from the top of which you could see far away to the ships in the harbour on the one side and to Mutuwal and the fishermen on the other. Perhaps the marshes had once been paddyfields.

But when had the villages grown into a town, the huts into houses, the paths into streets? I did not know, no one could tell me, and I had no way of finding out. There were no outward signs here of our early settlements, only those left behind by the Portuguese: churches and schools and big rambling houses on the high ground. St Benedict's College, the Good Shepherd Convent, the nunneries and seminaries, all spoke of their presence. And none so evocatively as St Lucia's Cathedral, which seemed to span half the valley of the town, and its dome to vault the heavens.

I remember how, as a little boy attending St Benedict's College, next door to St Lucia's, I had asked Uncle Gnanam for help with my catechism, and how he had made fun of it and of the Catholics and their saints. But still I could not help going up to the cathedral sometimes, just to look at it, so grand it was and awesome, and so unlike the dark little *Kali Kovil* that stood some few hundred yards away like a crevice in the wall, or the plain Buddhist temple down the road, its *stupa* a shrunken dome. And sometimes I would peer into the cathedral to look at the stained-glass windows or to watch the rituals and the ceremonies. Their gods seemed so different — resplendent, immortal, mighty — while ours were all too human, mere men and women, with human faults and foibles. You could not take ours too seriously. Just imagine God the Father having the elephant-faced Ganesha for a son, let alone a blue-skinned seducer like Krishna for a relative, magic though he was with a flute. (Did Jesus play the violin? I wondered.) And yet I could not get really close to them, to their gods, I mean. Maybe because they did not want to get close to me, because I was not a Catholic. Of course I could always become one, but that looked like a condition for affection; gods should love everybody. Maybe it was because they didn't that Catholics thought themselves so special, so superior to everybody else. I could never forget how they treated us non-Catholics at St Joseph's, teachers, priests and boys, all except Legs and perhaps Corea, as though there were

something wrong with us, some sort of handicap or disease.

Perhaps that was why I never quite went inside St Lucia's. Something always held me back, a sort of feeling of betrayal, not mine but theirs, but mine, too, if I went in. And so, caught between its grandeur and its aloofness, I would often stand before the cathedral, gazing at it, or just sit on its long wide steps, my back to its magnitude, munching gram and watching the faithful go to benediction.

And it was seated like this before the cathedral one day that I first set eyes on Lorna Moonesinghe. The service was over, and the congregation was moving leisurely away, with people talking to each other. My friend Shelton, whom I sometimes accompanied home from church, had apparently not been to benediction that day. And I was rising to go when I saw her coming through the door, talking to a priest, lifting her veil from her face as she did so. I thought I had seen her before, seen those long skimpy legs and flat figure, but only at a distance. There was something about her now that attracted my attention and, instinctively, I went up to the door pretending to look for Shelton. She did not notice me, but I could see her face quite clearly now. It was astonishingly beautiful, the eyes especially, large and languid, closing and opening ever so gently as she talked, wishing me and the priest and the world to enter them. She had an open purse of a mouth, loud with laughter, and a complexion as dark as mahogany and as luminous as satin. She had put her veil away in an absurd little handbag and was shaking the long black tresses of her hair into place when the priest looked inquiringly at me. I left.

I learnt her name from Shelton, and for days afterwards I could think of nothing but that face, longing to look at it again, bathe in the pools of its eyes, run the tips of my fingers over that mouth. Perhaps I could sneak up behind her in a crowd and touch her hair.

My longing was made worse by the book I was reading. There were not many books on my father's shelves that I had not read, but mostly they were boring: *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, *Plutarch's Lives*, Samuel Smiles and Avebury, Seneca and Plato, and even something called *Ontology* by Santayana. A self-taught man was my father. There were some novels, too, mostly by Charles Dickens and Walter Scott, but I had been through them all. The book I really liked, though, was *Hereward the Wake*. I had read it three times already. And then, only a week earlier, I had come across a torn, coverless, moth-eaten book under a pile of old newspapers and magazines, *Lorna Doone*. It was a compelling story, and I was already half-way into it and beginning to see myself as John Ridd, when I set eyes on Miss Moonesinghe, and she became my Lorna Moone.

Oh, Lorna Moone, Lorna Moone, how I waited at the church every evening – and you never came! Two Sundays and still no sign of you; neither mass nor benediction offered you up. I traced you, through Shelton, to the Good Shepherd Convent, but discreet inquiry of my sisters, who went there too, yielded nothing. I accompanied my sisters assiduously to school, but caught no sight of you. Oh, Lorna Moone! Lorna Moone!

And then that rainy evening, some six hellish weeks later. There you were, right before my eyes, on the cathedral steps, in a sea-green dress and silver sandals, looking for the gram-seller who had packed up and gone. And I saw you every Friday and Sunday after that. I even got my sister to find out in which class you were at school, but she wouldn't tell me where you lived. I asked her to take you a note from me; she refused. I bribed my little sister with sweets; she took the sweets and never gave you the note. Shelton wouldn't help me; it was wrong, he said, I wasn't a Catholic. What a spendthrift waste of days they were! Oh, Lorna Moone!

But then you began to notice me. I had moved a step closer to your appointed gram-seller. I began to chat him up, ask him, casually, how often he saw you, at what times, before service or after, with whom and, this ever so casually, was that young man you were with, sometimes, a brother, a relative, or a friend?

You began to notice me, as you talked to the gram-seller, but only because you saw me staring, trying to break into a smile. Soon, though, you were beginning to look in my direction, even when you didn't stop for gram, you threw glances at me, exchanged looks even. And once, you spoke to me, with your eyes. You did, you did, I swear you did. Oh, Lorna Moone!

But suddenly you stopped, looked away. And when you spoke to the gram-seller again, you turned your back on me. He tried to embrace us in his conversation. But you shook your hair into place and walked away, in disdain, I thought. And you didn't buy gram for days thereafter, or cast the shadow of a glance at me. Oh, Lorna Moone!

I gave up. I died. And then I came back, and sat on the same step. The gram-seller said you had been looking for me. He was being kind; you had missed a familiar sight, that was all. But wait, he said, she will come today. And even as he spoke, there you were, in midnight blue – how I noticed your dresses when I noticed no one else's – and nothing mattered any more. But I did not dare to stare. I dropped my eyes.

'I have no change,' the gram-seller was mumbling. 'Why don't you ask the young master over there?'

'Can you change me a rupee?' you were saying. You were saying, to me. To me. I sprang up.

'Yes, yes, a rupee, yes.' I rummaged through my pockets, turned them inside out – no change, just ten cents. 'No, I am sorry, I thought . . . I am sorry. I must have . . . sorry . . .'

'But how much do you want?' I recovered. 'Ten cents? Here's ten cents. No, no, you can pay me next time. Please take it, please, it's no trouble. I don't need it.'

'Thank you,' you said softly, and slowly closed and opened your eyes on me. I felt faint. 'Have some gram at least.' And you held out a handful. I took it as a communicant receives a wafer.

'I'll pay you back next week,' you said, and left. My Lorna Moone!

It was a week before I saw her again. The service was over and people were going home. I was about to leave, myself, when I saw her come through the church door talking to the priest. It was like that first time, but this time she walked up to me and held out a ten-cent piece.

'Here's your money,' she said shyly. 'Thank you.'

'That's not my money,' I replied, suave, in control. I had rehearsed the scene a hundred times and I wasn't going to falter now.

'What do you mean it's not –' she began.

'That is not the ten cents I gave you.'

'You are being silly,' she laughed. 'Here, take it.'

'No, I won't! It is not . . . ' but I was weakening, and I had forgotten what I had planned to say next.

'Go on, please,' and she dragged out the please imploringly. I was lost.

'Yes, all right,' I gave in. But as she put the money into my hand, I grasped hers, involuntarily, desperately. 'Don't go, just, not yet, please.'

'It is getting dark and my mother will be anxious,' she said, drawing her hand gently out of mine. 'I must go.'

'Have some gram, then,' I suggested, trying madly to seal her escape. 'After all, this money is not really mine. It belongs to both of us. We should spend it together.'

She smiled, but wouldn't be taken in.

'Please,' I said. 'Can't we be friends?'

'All right then, let's buy some gram. But after that I am going.'

The gram-seller looked at us standing side by side before him, his flickering oil lamp between us, and held out a packet of gram with both hands, gesturing to us to accept it, together. We were being married.

'Can I walk home with you?' I asked her.

'No, no, you can't. I really must go. If my father saw me with a boy, he would kill me.'

'To the bottom of the road, then? Please?'

'Oh, all right,' she conceded, and we began to walk down Cathedral Street. 'Where do you live?'

'Near the police station. And you?'

'I'll tell you the next time, but only if you promise never to come there.'

'I promise, but tell me now. If you don't and I find out where you live, the promise doesn't hold.'

'You can't. You couldn't all these days,' she teased me. 'You don't even know my name.'

'I do. It is Lorna Moone.'

'Lorna Moone?'

'Lorna Moonesinghe, I mean.'

'Who told you? Shelton?'

'N-o-o-o!' I lied half-heartedly.

'Yes, it must be Shelton. But he wouldn't tell you where I live,' she challenged.

'I don't want to ask him.' I had asked him in the past though. 'You tell me.' I could afford to be honourable now.

'What is your name?' she said, changing the subject.

'Rajanathan. Rajan for short.'

'You are a Tamil,' she said matter-of-factly. 'And not a Catholic?'

'No.'

'What are you studying, what class?'

'I am preparing for my University Entrance,' I replied half-truthfully, hoping to impress.

'Really?' She was impressed. 'That's very clever of you. What are you, seventeen?'

'Yes, thereabouts,' I replied cautiously, not knowing what age she fancied. 'And you are sitting your Senior Cambridge, aren't you?'

'So you know everything, Mr Clever,' she mocked me. 'But you don't know where I live.'

We had walked to the end of the road by now, and she stopped to go in the opposite direction from me.

'Won't you tell me, Lorna?' I pleaded.

'I live near Shelton's house,' she blurted out, laughing, 'and you never even guessed. I have seen you come there to play cricket on the building site just above our house.'

'Oh God, no! Not the house with the trellis-worked verandah? I have seen it a hundred times. Every time I've gone to fetch the ball. It always gets lost in your drain. But it is always shut, your house. I thought an old couple lived there.'

'Yes, they do. They are my parents.'

'No one else? That boy who comes to church?'

'He is my cousin. I have a brother, but he works in Kandy and comes from time to time. He used to be a good cricketer, you know, played for St Joseph's.'

'St Joseph's? I go to St Joseph's; when did he . . . ? Oh, Moonesinghe. Yes, of course. Hector Moonesinghe . . . thin tall guy, fine bowler.'

'That's my brother.'

'But he played years ago. He must be much older than you.'

'He is. Twelve years.'

'That's why your parents—' I began.

'Yes, my mother must have been over forty when I was born. That's why they are so strict with me, old-fashioned. They don't like me to speak to boys. And they are not keen about my studying. They want to get me married off,' she ended teasingly. 'I am off. Cheerio.'

'When can I see you?' I ran after her.

'When you come to play cricket with Shelton and them, next Saturday?' She called back flirtatiously. 'I'll put a handkerchief in the trellis.'

I observed Lorna's house more closely the next time I went to play cricket on the vacant lot down her lane. I even volunteered to take up the fielding position at long leg, which nobody wanted because the ground fell away steeply there into a pit of rubble and sandstone. But it was also the closest spot to Lorna's window. I rarely saw her, though, alone. Her mother was always with her or another old lady, probably an aunt. Besides, I could not get away from the boys long enough without being noticed, and once they knew about me and Lorna, it would all become public. Shelton was already beginning to suspect my frequent visits to his house; though he wouldn't help, he would not tell anyone either.

I tried to speak to her on her way to school, but there were too many people about. Besides, my sisters were becoming decidedly uncooperative. Leela not only refused to carry messages for me, but derided the whole thing from the vantage point of her assumed adulthood. And little Premi took her cue from her sister.

'I will tell *appa* that you are wasting time on that girl when you should be studying,' Leela threatened me one day.

'I don't give a damn,' I said angrily. 'I don't care who knows. I love her.'

'Love? Don't be silly! What love? You can't marry her.'

'Why not? I jolly well can.'

'You remember what happened to cousin Thillai, don't you? He was in love with a Christian girl and she ran away with some other fellow. See how happy he is with Kamala.'

'You talk just like *amma*. Christian girl indeed! What rubbish! They are not all like that. Besides I'll never agree to an arranged marriage.'

'Oh, so you are going to disobey *appa* and *amma*, are you? After all they have done for you?' Leela was putting me on my honour. 'And you the eldest,' she added contemptuously, expecting perhaps to kindle a sense of duty in me. But I only became more defiant.

'I am finished with all that old-fashioned nonsense,' I declared. 'I am going to marry for love.'

I had finished *Lorna Doone* by now, and the tragedy of our families keeping me and my Lorna apart began to bear down on me heavily. And then one day, on her way to school, Lorna thrust a note in my hand. Her parents were going away to see their son that weekend and she would be alone with her aunt. I should come at dusk to the back door.

The next few days were the longest I had known. Even waiting for the Matriculation results, due any time now, was less painful by comparison. I could not study, I could not eat, I could not even rejoice with my father that he had finally got my cousin Kantha a job. I remember feeling vaguely pleased that my father had one dependant less now, and soon perhaps Kantha would be able to take his two younger brothers off my father's hands too.

'Now if only Rajan would pass his Matric . . . ' my mother had said.

'Only a few days now, eh, Rajan?' my father remarked. 'And then we can celebrate, what?'

I nodded, but I could give it no thought.

'Why don't you say something?' said Leela provocatively.

'Leave him alone,' said my father. 'He is all wound up about the results.'

Leela guffawed and left the room.

Saturday came at last. It was a fine day and we played cricket that afternoon in Lorna's lane. And at dusk, when everybody was going home, I too pretended to leave, but made my way back surreptitiously to the rear of Lorna's house and waited for her to give me the signal that her aunt had been safely deposited in the verandah with a newspaper and the servant girl, Lorna's fellow-conspirator. I had not long to wait before she gave the all-clear.

In the gathering darkness her eyes looked all bright and lit up. Her shyness was gone and she took me boldly by the hand and led me into the kitchen. My senses ached to know the smell, the feel, the touch of her, but I couldn't find the will to make a move. We just sat there on two stools, tentatively reaching out to each other's hands, saying little but swearing our undying love. But there was still tomorrow when we would meet again, after benediction.

Sunday was even longer than all the preceding days, but when I met her at the back door that evening, I knew it had been long for her too. Without a word she took me into the kitchen and kissed me, on the cheek, deliberately but reproachfully as though to blame me for not taking the initiative. I did. I took her in my arms and kissed her, long and tenderly, on her lips. I dwelt on her mouth, so soft, so wide, so utterly sensual that all my being was gathered into it and lost. I was her, till I felt a hardening in my pants. And at that she moved away, smiling.

Her parents were delayed, they were not coming back until the following week. I could see her again next Saturday, and perhaps Sunday, too. But I could not wait, and though she had made me promise not to come down her lane, let alone try to see her, every evening at dusk I would steal up to the mango tree behind her house to catch a glimpse of her. And then one night, just when I was about to leave my post, I saw her coming out of the kitchen, all bubbly and bright, only to turn back at the door and put out her hands to someone within. Instinctively I ran up to the house and stumbled into the kitchen. Lorna was leaning against a man, her back to him and her hand behind her back; his hand was on her breast. It was the fellow I had seen with her at church, her cousin.

'Lorna,' I yelled involuntarily. 'Oh, Lorna!'

She turned on me, surprised and savage.

'Get out,' she snarled in a hoarse whisper. 'Get out, you hear! Get out. How dare you come here!'

'Who is this fellow?' her cousin asked her, and then, accosting me with the authority of family, 'Who are you? What are you doing here?'

'I don't know who he is,' volunteered Lorna. 'All I know is that he is a bloody nuisance, keeps following me everywhere I go, to school, to church, everywhere. He is mad, deserves a damned good thrashing.'

'Ah, this is the guy you told me about,' the cousin remarked, and started laughing. 'It's not worth thrashing him. Go on, get out,' he said, more amused than angry. 'Don't show your face here again!' He slammed the door on me.

I ran from them, from myself. I ran aimlessly into the night, seeking out its darkest recesses to hide my shame and humiliation. I ran till my lungs would burst, driving with physical pain the other pain out. And suddenly I found myself on the steps of the cathedral, its dome looming huge and relentless over me. I sat down and wept.

My Matriculation results came the next day. I had passed.

Success meant little to me. I was in mourning – for me, for Lorna, for the world. What use was my Matriculation? I bore it like a penance.

But there was activity all around me, for the feast my parents were preparing in my honour, and soon I fell in with the mood of celebration. Lorna, after all, was not the only girl in the world. I began to see that now, though Leela had said it all along. At university, she said, there would be many more girls, and more intelligent ones at that, prettier too, perhaps, and above all, sincere. The important thing now was to get to university, to put aside everything and study hard for the entrance exams. Leela was comforting and not at all censorious. We were friends again. But the pain remained, somewhere deep within me, like a grief, to come back again and again, like a lesson unlearnt, unlearnable.

4

WHEN I GOT INTO UNIVERSITY a year later it had become the University of Ceylon. Till then it had been University College, and its degrees were given in London; but now it was a university in its own right, with its own vice-chancellor, Sir Henry Wiggins. It was an honour, apparently, to have Sir Henry for our first vice-chancellor because he was a famous constitutional lawyer and had helped to draft the Ceylon constitution. His own constitution, though, seemed weak and frail, buffeted by the vehemence of his coughing. He smoked incessantly and always carried a tin of Ceylon Peacock in his hand, whether to identify himself with the country or because they were the cheapest cigarettes on the market, one could not say. But though we saw little of him, and that only when he was coughing his way from the car park to his office or back, he was obviously a learned man. His books were required reading in our politics class, and we were proud to have a man, who had written so many books, for our head. It was rumoured, though, that he did not believe in all that stuff he wrote about democracy – not for us, anyway.

University life went straight to my head. I felt free and adult. I was not forced to go to classes or do homework. I could attend lectures or not as I pleased, within limits, of course, and the occasional essay I had to write could always be postponed. Above all, I could sit in the tuck-shop, drink tea and talk all day long, and I could play football or tennis (my cricket was not up to scratch) in the evenings and attend the Union Soc. debates or Music Circle sessions at nightfall. Besides, I could now wear long trousers, and Kantha had even given me an old pair of black flannels, the creases of which I kept pressed to a knife-edge under the weight of my mattress. I had a bicycle too, which Uncle Para had bought me

second-hand, to travel from home to university. And to cap it all, my father decided unexpectedly to make me an allowance of Rs 2/- per week. He had all along anticipated having to pay for my university education and had stinted and saved to make provision for it, but suddenly the fees had been lifted.

'Great man, that Kannangara,' my father remarked as he gave me my first allowance. 'But for him you wouldn't be getting any money at all from me.'

'What Kannangara?' I inquired. I knew nobody of that name, and it was unlikely that we had a secret benefactor somewhere.

'C.W.W., Minister of Education, not now but in the old State Council,' replied my father, as though that was sufficient explanation. I still did not know what he was talking about. I looked to Uncle Gnanam, who happened to be there at the time, for help, but he would say nothing. I thought I had better bluff it out, rather than betray my ignorance.

'Oh, him,' I said. But my father was not taken in.

'So you know about him, do you?' he challenged.

'Well...'

'Well what?'

'Wasn't he the man who made Tamil and Sinhalese compulsory, and made our life a misery?'

My father and Uncle Gnanam both burst out laughing.

'So that's all you remember him for?' my father asked. 'What has that got to do with my giving you pocket money?'

'I don't know,' I said sheepishly.

'Well, son, he is the man who made education free for everybody, from kindergarten to university. And that is why I can afford to give you some spending money.'

'I am sorry, I didn't know that,' I faltered.

'It was only recently, about two, three years ago,' said my father, as though to vindicate my ignorance. 'But he did other things before that, started Central Schools for instance.'

'Central Schools?'

'Look at this boy, Gnanam,' said my father, turning to my uncle. 'He is like a foreigner, does not know anything.'

'I know they are village schools,' I protested. 'But why central?'

'Because they served as the centre for secondary education for a whole area, one secondary school for a whole lot of primary schools. Before that, there was no schooling for village children beyond primary school, they stopped learning at ten or eleven and went to work. Unless they were lucky, like me, and found someone to pay for them to go to a town school.'

Nor was that all Kannangara did, my father went on, relighting his cigar. He opened up night schools, for children who had to work during the day and for the children of plantation workers, and made education compulsory up to the age of fourteen. 'He even introduced free school meals, eh Gnanam?'

My uncle nodded. 'In the rural areas, and that encouraged them to grow more food during the war. Those Central Schools had more practical education, not like your St Joseph's and St Benedict's.'

'People have already forgotten Kannangara,' my father went on, 'but that was a great thing he did: free education. A revolution.'

"Education for the mass, not for the class", that's what he said,' quoted Uncle Gnanam. 'And remember the opposition he had?'

'From the English ministers you mean?' my father asked. 'Not that some of our people were much help. D.S., after all, was leader of the State Council and he didn't do much.'

'No, not just them. The Catholics, I mean. They really went for him.'

'Why the Catholics?' I asked.

'Because Kannangara wanted all the schools to be run by the government,' replied Uncle Gnanam agitatedly. 'State schools, so that everybody could have the same education, rich or poor, Christian or non-Christian. So that everybody could have the chance of a good job, not just the English-educated.'

'But why were the Catholics so mad?'

'Because they could no longer make use of education and their schools to convert our people,' replied Uncle Gnanam impatiently. 'It was up to the parents, not the school, to decide what sort of religious instruction their children should have, even in the Catholic schools.'

'That is why you did not have RK classes at St Joseph's,' my father explained. 'Remember you had to do catechism at St Benedict's? That was before the law was passed.'

'But the denominational schools are still run by the churches, and they still get grants and they still charge fees,' observed Uncle Gnanam dejectedly. 'We still don't have full free education.'

'It will come,' my father replied. 'One day it will come. He couldn't do everything.'

During the whole of that first year at university my sense of freedom was unabated. I didn't have a care in the world, and I fell in and out of love a hundred times. And, in pursuit of my hundred loves, I found myself led into the Dance Club and the foxtrot and waltz, or into the Music Circle and Beethoven and Mozart. Of course, I was a member of the

Socialist Society, but so was every other right-thinking person. Occasionally my fancy would take me into the Oriental Society in Cruden Hall, but by and large, we avoided the Cruden lot: they were too native for our liking. I made friends by the score, invented new tortures for freshmen on rag day, and even managed to get into the university soccer team. In between I managed to get in some work and to scrape through my first exam. There was little in the subjects I took that fascinated me and our lecturers were by no means grabbing of our attention. The Economics professor went on and on about apples and oranges and marginal utility; the man who taught government and politics served up endless notes and reading lists (mostly of Wiggins's work); the Latin lecturer was half the time away on a camping trip with a rucksack on his back, and on the occasions when he turned up (with the rucksack on his back), he kept returning to Cicero's orations. 'Quo usque tandem abutere, Catalina, patientia nostra?' he would declaim, and proudly render a free translation: how dare you abuse our patience, O Cataline? Or he would pick up our exercises and with hand to head bemoan: 'O tempora, O mores.' Whether he knew anything but Cicero we never found out, but he was good enough to give us all a pass mark in the exam. Only the lecturer in English Literature caught my attention, or perhaps it was the subject itself that interested me. The syllabus seemed to span the whole expanse of Eng Lit., from Chaucer to Eliot, from poetry through drama to the novel. The man who taught us Chaucer and early English literature was as boring as Chaucer, but in trying to teach us to appreciate Chaucer's characters helped us to see him as a character far more interesting than any of Chaucer's, so mock-English was he in his dress and manners and accent (got off the radio every morning, it was said, fresh from the BBC). The lecturer in Shakespeare and drama was, perhaps not accidentally, given to teaching politics and not the play. (It was rumoured that he was a member of 'the LSSP politbureau', whatever that meant.) But it was the professor of poetry who grabbed me most. Himself an acutely sensitive man, he became, as he taught, a sort of sensitized conduit through which the raw feel of Donne and Keats and Hopkins and Eliot was passed to us. Or perhaps I was able to sense him, and them in him, because they answered to my waking sensibilities about religion and sex and fantasy and despair. They had a reality for me that the novels of Dickens and Butler and Austen and all those other people in our syllabus never had: they were forgotten as soon as they were read. They were another place, another time. But the poets were here and now and spoke to me directly. How often after the death of another love, I would want to wear 'my trousers rolled' and walk upon the beach, realizing that the mind had 'mountains, cliffs of sheer fall . . . no-man-fathomed'.

How much I longed to bring religious fervour to the aching fever in my loins and justify them both. And in Keats's feel of things I found hope for my own touchiness.

Strangely enough I made no lasting friendships at university, none that mattered anyway, except perhaps with Lal, and that in my last year. He was not at the university, though, he was at Medical College, and I happened to meet him at a Lanka Sama Samaja Party rally in Victoria Park. He was selling the party paper at the gate, and I fell into conversation with him, trying to recall where we had seen each other before.

'It wasn't with Kanniah, was it,' he asked, 'at that Union Society debate?'

'Between the LSSP and CP, you mean? No, I didn't go to that one. But Kanniah and I are classmates. So you might have -'

'I remember,' Lal interrupted. 'It was at my cousin Roy's place, Roy de Silva. You used to go to his Marxist study group, didn't you?'

'Ah yes, the day the prime minister died last year. Roy and his parents were going to Temple Trees to pay their respects. I remember now. I was coming to return a book and you were just leaving on your bike.' 'Hey,' I added as an afterthought, 'why didn't you go to the funeral, if you are Roy's cousin?'

'Oh no, I am a poor relation, a distant cousin, very distant,' he laughed. 'As far as Dematagoda is from Cinnamon Gardens.'

I could see from his broad Sinhalese accent that Lal had not been to a proper Colombo school, and though his English wasn't too bad, it seemed a little studied, like the English they taught in Central Schools: he was not at ease with it.

'You live in Dematagoda, then?'

'Yes, near the reservoir.' He pronounced it 'resservoyeur'. 'Where all you people get your water from. Water, water everywhere and not a drop in Dematagoda,' and he began to laugh again. I could not help feeling that he was poking fun at me, and I resented it. It was I who should be feeling superior, but had concealed it for his sake.

'You don't think that's funny?' he asked.

'I don't see the point,' I replied loftily.

'Oh come on, man, don't take it so seriously.'

'No,' I yielded - he was so completely without malice, 'but I still don't see the point.'

'Point, point. It isn't a big point. It's just a fact. People in Dematagoda have to get water from the public taps on the street, at certain times of the day. Roy and rich people like him get it in their lavatories and kitchens and bedrooms. And where's the reservoir? In Dematagoda.'

'So?'

'So, that's what socialism is about: water, food, housing, not all that stuff that you and Roy and people read in books.' He was angry now. 'You and your study circle. Why don't you come and clean the drains in our slums and fight for the rights of ordinary working people? I don't know about you, but Roy – have you seen his place? Inside? All those carpets and furniture and his father's hunting trophies on the wall, and the golf clubs. And the cars?'

'But Roy rides a bike,' I said weakly, as his arguments began to sink in.

Lal guffawed. Roy was rich enough to ride a bike, he said cryptically. In fact, Roy could not afford not to ride a bike if he was to be seen to be a socialist. And the labourer's shorts he wore and the khaki shirt sort of went with the bike. Lal broke off as someone stopped to buy a paper. These were the things that Roy thought made him a common man, Lal continued, a man of the people. How could he talk about the people, the people, all the time if he didn't show he was one of them?

I began to get his meaning, but could not understand his vehemence.

'You are not jealous, are you?' I asked, and could have bitten off my tongue even as I said it. It was such an absurd thing to say, and hurtful. But there was a hurt in me too, somewhere.

'No, Rajan, I am not jealous,' Lal replied quietly. 'But he takes people in, like your friend Kanniah. Kanniah used to do some good work with the estate union. You know he is an estate worker's son, don't you, got a scholarship to university. But now look at him. He is afraid of being called a coolie and tries to hide his *pottu*. He would take it off if it wasn't tattooed permanently on his forehead.'

'But what has that got to do with Roy?' I persisted, but with a growing feeling of unease. I was not much different from Kanniah . . . I hid myself from my village too . . . and that time that Roy came home my father had put on a shirt over his *verti* to come out and meet him.

'No, not just Roy. It is the whole university set-up. It makes you ashamed of yourself. And people like Roy, so-called Marxists, give that shame an excuse – no, not excuse, what is the word I want – a substitute? No . . .'

'An alibi?'

'Yes, an alibi. And you know that he is a member now, of the LSSP I mean, and soon he will be an official and then an MP and then . . . It's just another career.'

'I must go,' I said abruptly. 'The meeting has started. No wonder there's no one around.' Lal was too disturbing. I wanted to get away. 'That's D.M. talking, isn't it?' I asked, giving ear to a loudspeaker. 'Aren't you coming, Lal?'

'No, you carry on. I have heard it all before.' He looked sad, dejected. 'They are like Roy, our lefty leaders, all rich and comfortable. Even their red shirts are made of the best cotton, if not silk.'

For days afterwards, my conversation with Lal kept echoing in my mind. And I kept looking at myself and around me with different eyes, reassessing everyone. I found myself being considerate and resentful in turn towards my mother and my brothers and sisters. I felt it my responsibility to lift them from our meagre existence, but had a suspicion that I'd lose myself in the lifting. I began to understand why my father dressed so carefully in suit and tie when he went to work and wore just a *verti* wrapped around his loins when he was at home, but I was still a little ashamed for him when my mother's relations came to visit us.

I tried to talk to Uncle Gnanam, but he was no use, perhaps because I could not quite express what I was feeling, and even when I thought I did, he rode away on one or another of his hobby horses. My father was the only person I could talk to, but I was afraid I would hurt him with my questions, about him, anyway. But if that was so, then my questions themselves were wrong and I shouldn't feel them . . . so, my feelings were wrong? . . . but feelings were feelings, how could they be wrong?

And there were my exams, just six months away. Perhaps I'd fail them anyway, and become a storekeeper or a clerk and not lose touch with my folk . . . But I was expected to be bright, as befitted Sahadevan's eldest son, and there were no BAs in Sandilipay, and my parents needed help with schooling for my brothers, dowries for my sister. I had to pass, become somebody . . . and then?

I turned to Kanniah for the answers; he was, after all, in a similar predicament. But Kanniah would only hint at his confusions; he preferred to talk about Lal instead. I was bored at first and impatient; it was not what I had come to talk to Kanniah about. But as he continued talking, I began to get the feeling that Lal's life was tied up, somehow, with Kanniah's, as though Lal was his last hold on himself, a sort of lifeline, keeping him in his own memory. Not that Kanniah spoke of it as such, but it was the impression I got as he unfolded Lal's story to me.

Lal's father had died in the great malaria epidemic of the 1930s, when Lal was barely five and his sister Lalitha going on seven. He had been an apothecary in Kegalle and had worked all the hours of the night and day treating the sick, and had himself died of the fever. For a while Lal's mother had managed to cope on the small pension she received and the few vegetables she grew on the tiny plot of land behind their rented house. But as the children grew older and she became more concerned about their education, she had moved to Colombo and got herself a job

as a seamstress in a convent. The work was long and hard, in dark and dreary rooms, and her status no more than a servant's. But her earnings helped to get her children to 'proper English schools' and to keep them in food and clothing. After a while, though, her health began to fail her, and by the time she was forty she had lost the use of her eyes – and her job. Lalitha was seventeen at the time and, though she was bright and had hopes of becoming a teacher, she had to give up school and take on a job as an attendant in the general hospital. Both mother and daughter were committed to seeing Lal become a doctor, however, and were relieved when he won a scholarship to medical college. Lal himself brought in some money through giving tuition in physics and maths, but squandered a lot of it, Kanniah felt, in unnecessary party work.

'His mother does not mind, though,' he said, half in reproach and half in admiration, 'nor his sister. It is their investment in the future, they say, and besides, they have been poor – they are poor – so how can they forget the poor? Now, what can you say to that? I'll take you there one day,' he added. 'You'll like them, and the old lady makes some superb *aluwa*.'

I did not see Kanniah for a while after that; we were both busy studying for our finals. But I saw Lal a few times, on my way to and from the library; there was some girl there whom he came to see. I did not get to talk to him, though, not at length anyway. And yet I could not help but feel a growing bond between us. Perhaps it was his warm and open manner that claimed me, always so inviting, hospitable, as though he had all the time in the world for me, for everyone, without taking it away from any of us. Or perhaps it was his unassuming intelligence and his gaiety tinged with melancholy that attracted me, and the vitality that seemed to pour out of his frail body. I wanted to know him better, visit his house.

And then one day I saw him outside the library, taking his farewell of the girl he came to see. I pretended not to notice, but he called after me.

'One minute, Rajan. I was hoping to see you.' He fetched his bike from the cycle shed and joined me. 'Hema is a good friend of mine,' he explained unnecessarily.

'So, what are you doing about the *hartal*?' he asked.

'*Hartal*? What *hartal*?'

'The *hartal*, the stoppage of work, on the 12th, 12th of August, you know, against this damned government. Oh, come on Rajan, we are not going to allow Dudley and his government to get away with it, surely.'

'You mean cutting the rice subsidy?'

'And the school meals, and putting up the price of sugar, bread, everything. They can't be allowed to get away with it. The party, all the parties, are organising a *hartal*. You must help. I'll talk to you later.' And as he was leaving he turned back and shouted: 'Why don't you come home, on Sunday evening, we can talk then. Kanniah is coming – come with him.'

But if I thought I was going to have a quiet discussion with Lal and Kanniah that Sunday, I was disappointed. There were people going in and out of Lal's house the whole time, and Lal himself was busy talking to one person or another, leaving no one out.

'It's not always like this,' Kanniah explained and added laughingly, 'only most of the time.'

'What's going on?' I asked.

'It's this *hartal* business, they are organizing for the big day. See these leaflets and the banners and –'

'Hey Rajan,' Lal called out. 'Sit down somewhere. I'll see you in a minute. Glad you came. Kanniah get him a tea, ask *amma* or Lali in the kitchen.'

The house was small enough, a tenement in a row of tenements, and the room was smaller. I found no chair to sit on, somebody gave up a stool. I felt distinctly uncomfortable; the people around me wore sarongs and spoke in Sinhalese, labourers obviously. And I was discomfited by my discomfiture. Kanniah came back with a glass of plain tea.

'Aren't you having any?' I asked.

'I don't drink tea, man, I grow it.' He apparently felt at home, returned to himself.

'Are all these LSSP people?' I inquired.

'Yes, from the party unions.'

'What exactly is a *hartal*?'

'It's when everybody stops work – clerks, labourers, teachers, hawkers – everybody. They are calling it for August 12th, for one day, to protest against the government cuts.'

'And all the left parties are in it?'

'Not all of them, not –'

Kanniah broke off to talk to someone else. But before I lost him again, I burst out into the question that was uppermost in my mind.

'Why is Lal doing all this for the party if he thinks the Socialist leaders are no better than the PM's bunch?'

'He didn't say that, did he?'

'No, not like that, but –'

'Besides, he is not doing it for the party or D.M. or Selwyn or any of the leaders. He is doing it for these people here, in Dematagoda and

Maradana and other poor areas close by. And most of them are workers and belong to the unions, and the unions belong to one party or another. Lal, I think, would prefer not to be a member of any one party, because when the unions are divided the workers are divided – Hey, Sena,’ he broke off, suddenly calling out to someone who was just leaving, a dark well-built and striking young man dressed in a gaudy sarong and wearing a gold chain. They spoke for a while in low tones and were soon joined by Lal, and then the man left.

‘That is Sena,’ explained Kanniah, rejoining me. ‘He is a dock-worker, very militant, but also headstrong. Where were we, Rajan?’

‘You were saying that because the unions are divided . . .’

‘Ah, yes. And not only that. The unions belong to the parties, not the parties to the unions. And what are the parties divided on? On Trotsky and Stalin, Lenin and Luxemburg, and I don’t know who else. They are more concerned about the party line than about organizing the workers, all the workers. So the bosses use one union against another, one lot of workers against another lot. You see what I mean?’

‘You mean it’s all the fault of the leaders? And that is why Lal doesn’t care for them? And you don’t either?’ I ventured.

‘Yes, but Lal goes further than me. He says that it is because they are intellectuals and not from the working class. So theory is more important for them than bread. And it is true; they are all rich people.’

I said nothing, but I was not quite sure that there was not some disloyalty involved here, on Lal’s part.

‘One day,’ continued Kanniah, ‘the workers will have their own leaders. But till such time we have to work with the ones we’ve got.’

‘But is that honest?’ I asked. Before Kanniah could reply, a woman dressed in cloth and jacket, who looked just like Lal but more robust, joined us.

‘Ah, Lali, this is Rajan,’ Kanniah introduced us. I stood up to offer her my stool.

‘No, no, you sit,’ she said. ‘I’ll get a chair.’ Most of the people were gone by now and there were a few vacant chairs about.

Lali took my breath away. I could see now why the features of Lal’s face looked so wrong on him; they had been made for his sister: a full sensual mouth, kindly eyes, a long thin nose and nostrils keened, it seemed, to the faintest smell of falsehood. Her long black hair was gathered in a loose knot on the nape of an unending neck which seemed to have been fashioned merely to hold that wondrous face aloft. I was in love again. But I was also aroused: she had such beautiful round breasts jiggling about in her low-cut blouse and a pair of buttocks that jiggled along with them as she walked across the room to fetch a chair.

'Sit, Rajan.' Her voice was low and soft and strong. 'Lal has told me about you, Kanniah also.' Her English was halting, but I gave it no mind. 'Very busy today, no? Always like this.'

'Always?' Lal asked, joining us at last. Everybody else had gone. 'No akka, sometimes.'

'You don't have to speak in English,' he added. 'Rajan speaks Sinhalese, as good as Kanniah's.'

'No,' his sister remonstrated. 'Can't be. Kanniah is a Kandy man,' and she laughed a merry tinkle.

'Putha,' Lal's mother called in Sinhalese. 'Do you want more tea?'

'No, *amma*,' Lal shouted back, 'come and sit with us. Everybody's gone.'

Mrs Perera looked an older version of her children: it was difficult to see what their father had contributed. We talked for a while, inconsequentially and long. But I was loath to leave; the evening brought back memories of my boyhood, in Maradana and Sandilipay both at once. I felt I belonged here and I could not bear the thought of leaving Lal's without being vouchsafed some encouragement to return. A formal invitation would have been enough. I could have built a whole world of hope on it, and effort – work for a first in my exams, perhaps (though time was running out), get into the administrative service even and take her away from the hardships of her life. But although Lali was warm and friendly, she said nothing that my fancy could go to work on.

'Rajan, you'll come with us, no?' Lali said suddenly. Kanniah had risen to leave and I with him. 'With me and Kanniah? Lal and the others are going before.'

'To the demonstration,' Kanniah explained as I looked blank.

'Oh, yes, of course.'

'We'll meet here and then go, all right?'

'Yes, yes, that's fine. I'll come with Kanniah.'

Talk of the *hartal* was on everybody's lips – on the streets, in the market, on the buses – a murmur at first, far off, like the distant rumble of the sea, and then growing louder, coming closer, beating even on the doors of our house. The university alone seemed free of it all, shut out from all sound except its own. It felt strange, travelling all that way from home to university and hearing nothing but that distant thunder, and then suddenly to enter that cloistered calm – even the images got mixed up. It was like clapping a shell to one's ear and then removing it, suddenly.

As the day approached, the sounds became clearer, more defined. People were jubilant and angry in turn. They were going to bring the whole

of Colombo to a standstill: the railways, the port, the buses, schools, shops, offices, everything. They were going to throw out the government and have their own. Even the 'boy' in the tea-boutique I frequented had thrown off his servile manner; he addressed me with familiarity and flung my glass of tea on the table challengingly. And for a moment I saw how it would be if these people took control, and I wasn't sure I wanted it that way.

The government was scared. There was talk that they were going to bring out the army and that even the police were being armed. It only made the people more angry and defiant.

I was ill at ease. I could not talk to any of my friends at the university; they were too busy studying for their exams. Kanniah was missing, and all that Roy and his cronies would say was that though they agreed with 'the principle of the thing', the *hartal* tactic was all wrong: it was not as though we were still under the British. And at home I found it difficult to broach the subject. My father seemed tense and there was a row brewing between him and Uncle Gnanam. The first broadside had already been fired and, on the evening before the day of the *hartal*, it broke into open warfare. I was just returning home from college when I ran into the tail-end of the battle, and tactfully decided to hear it out from the verandah steps.

'What's the matter with you, *aththan*?' Uncle Gnanam bit out the *aththan* as though to address my father as brother-in-law was itself a matter of shame. 'What's happened to all your principles?'

'Principles, principles. What do you know about principles?' my father shouted back.

'You have sold out, that's what it is. You have sold out.' There was anger and pain on Uncle Gnanam's face as he rose from his chair and began to stride up and down the verandah. I craned my neck to see what was going on, not daring to go in. I saw my father trying to control his own anger. He reached out for a box of matches on the windowsill and relit his cigar. Uncle Gnanam sat down again.

'You're a fraud, *aththan*,' he yelled, banging his fist on the arm of the chair.

'That's enough,' my father roared back. I had seldom seen him so angry. 'I don't want one more word from you. Do you hear me? Not one. Sold out, fraud — how dare you?'

'It is easy for you to talk, you have no job, no responsibilities, no one to support, no family, no relatives, no one . . .' He stopped, checking his anger, and then burst out, even more angrily. 'And now you want to live off other people's bravery!'

Uncle Gnanam was stunned. His mouth fell open in disbelief: my

father was seldom less than measured in his speech, seldom less than fair in his criticisms. But he must have realized it even as he spoke, for he quickly rose to his feet and put his hand on my uncle's shoulder.

'I am sorry, *thambi*, I did not mean that. Forgive me,' he said.

'No, it was my fault,' replied Uncle Gnanam, more astonished than hurt. 'I had no right to talk to you like that.'

I had leapt to my feet at my father's outburst; now I sat down again on the step, relieved.

'It is not even those things really, my job and so on, that I am worried about,' my father began calmly, resuming his seat.

'No,' Uncle Gnanam interrupted, 'I know that. You have put your job on the line enough times for the peons and the postmen.'

'It is a question of duty,' my father went on.

'Duty?'

'My duty to the government, to myself.'

'To the government? Where was your duty in the old days, in the strikes you took part in?' The conversation was getting heated again.

'I was a clerk then, an employee. I had a duty to strike,' my father explained, half to himself. 'I am an executive now, an employer if you like. I am a party to this government's policies. And if I am going to go against them, I must first resign.'

'Resign?' Uncle Gnanam was speechless. He could not follow my father's logic, nor could I. 'Resign?' Uncle Gnanam laughed uncomfortably. 'You must be joking. It is not as though you were an MP or something, and they never resign anyway.'

'I am paid to do a job,' my father mumbled.

'I'll never understand you, *aththan*,' Uncle Gnanam threw up his hands in the air, and got up to leave. 'I give up.'

My father sank deeper into his chair.

'I owe it to myself,' I heard him say hardly above a whisper. 'Or who am I?'

The day of the *hartal* dawned bright and early, or so it seemed, because I found myself with all the time in the world to make up my mind about going to the rally. A part of me was excited by the idea, of moving with the masses (the phrase had a ring to it, making me feel valiant, radical), and by the prospect of seeing Lali again, of being with her, alone and private, in that vast gathering. But at the same time I did not want to get too involved in 'all this *hartal* nonsense', as my mother termed it. I was just asking for trouble, she said, and she had enough problems on her hands, with both my brothers down with mumps, without my having to go and get beaten up or arrested or something. I should be studying

for my exams, that was what I should be doing. And my father left it all up to me: I must do what I thought was right. I was my own person now.

Caught between two minds, I frittered the morning away. By the time I set out, the streets were deserted, the shops were shut, there were no vehicles on the road except for police vans. It was too late to meet up with Kanniah and Lali. I turned back to go home, listless, unhappy, despairing of myself, unable to escape the feeling that I had deliberately dragged my feet. What would Lali think of me?

The *hartal*, I learnt the next day, had begun well. Workers had downed tools everywhere. Buses and trains had ceased to run, shops and schools and offices had closed down. All the left parties had come together to issue a united call for the stoppage. There were rallies and demonstrations everywhere and, in Colombo Town Hall, the monks had gathered in their hundreds to go on a fast, refusing to take the food that the government had kept from the mouths of the people. The government itself was reported to have retreated to the safety of a ship in the Colombo harbour from which to direct its affairs.

By noon that day the *hartal* had gathered momentum. The crowds had inflamed the speakers and the speakers in turn had inflamed the crowds. The workers demanded direct action. The leaders were taken aback; they had not planned for such a contingency. Things were getting beyond their control, they called off the *hartal*. The government rallied, brought out the troops with orders to kill. Twelve people were shot dead.

On the following day, the prime minister, unable to bear the sight of blood on his Buddhist hands, resigned and handed over the reins of government to his more bloody-minded cousin.

It was not till two days later that I finally managed to overcome my shame and visit Lal. The house was quiet. Only Kanniah was there, beside the family, and they were all gathered in the front room making small talk. They looked crestfallen – at the outcome of the *hartal*, no doubt – and I thought I'd cheer them up.

'It was not all a failure,' I declared. No one said anything.

'We . . . You brought down a prime minister,' I went on breezily. The silence continued. 'That at least is something.'

Lal stood up and walked to the door and leant against it with his back to us. Kanniah I noticed was getting annoyed with my line of talk, I didn't quite know why. And before I could start again, he broke in impatiently.

'That is not the point, is it?' he said, drawing his chair closer to me and talking in a sort of hushed anger, as though to keep the conversation

from carrying to the others. 'Twelve of our people were killed, by our government.' He emphasized the 'our'. 'We expected it from the British, but this . . .'

'What about that time during the clerical workers' strike, when Kandasamy was killed?' I asked, vaguely recalling the fragment of a conversation I had had with my father at the time.

'That was under the British, you fool,' Kanniah bit out. 'Our so-called ministers connived with them of course. But that was in 1947, before independence. This is our own—'

'Anybody we know?' I broke in.

'What do you mean? Don't you know? Sena was shot.'

'Oh God, why didn't you tell me? I didn't know.'

'Not so loud, you idiot.'

'Dead?' I couldn't keep my voice down. Kanniah nodded. I went up to Lal and put my hand on his shoulder.

'I am sorry Lal, I did not know.'

Lal just nodded, still looking out on to the road.

I returned to my seat beside Kanniah.

'He must have been in the front line,' I remarked. 'But then he was always very brash, you said.'

Lali suddenly burst out sobbing. Lal and his mother conducted her to the bedroom. Kanniah was furious.

'Come on, let's go,' he said taking me forcibly by the arm. And once on the street, he turned on me with clenched fists.

'You bloody, bloody fool,' he shouted. 'I could kill you.'

'Why, what did I say? I only said what you—'

'Shut up, will you?' Kanniah yelled at me, beside himself with anger. 'Just shut up!'

I didn't like him yelling at me, but I couldn't help noticing the pain in his anger. I let it lie. We walked along for a while without speaking. I resolved to see Lali again the next day and apologize to her, it did not matter for what, comfort her, win her friendship, affection even.

'They were to be married next week,' Kanniah said, more to himself than to me.

'Who?'

'Lali and Sena, you fool. Who else?'

I DID NOT GET A CLASS in the finals. I barely managed to pass. The higher reaches of the Ceylon Civil Service were closed to me. My parents were disappointed, of course, but I affected a worldly indifference: there were more important things in life than getting into the CCS; besides, I didn't hold with such 'bourgeois values'. (I had picked up the phrase in my sojourn with the Left and liked the sound of it; it rang with contempt even as it sang of renunciation.) The trouble was that I had begun to believe in it myself, in renunciation, I mean, and gave up for a while all attempts to secure a job, apart from sending off applications, that is. But applications by themselves were valueless, you had to use influence, go and see people who would see people who gave jobs to people. And I of course could not do that, could not allow my father to do it for me, either. I was going to stand on my own two feet, get a job on my own merit. And that merit I felt was not altogether inconsequential: a third-class degree, perhaps, but in economics (not so common), a certain fluency in both Sinhalese and Tamil, physically sound (I was above average height, strong and had played for the university at soccer and tennis) with a pleasant, outgoing personality (I had been social secretary of the students' union) – the sort of things that they looked for in a DRO (Divisional Revenue Officer) or AFC (Assistant Food Controller) or an ASP (Assistant Superintendent of Police) even, one of those more robust, outdoor types of job lower down in the administrative service. And failing that, there was the mercantile sector: banks and firms and insurance companies. It would be not too difficult to find an executive job there, but you needed connections, to show that you were from a good family, and trustworthy, socially. The only job that seemed open to me as me, however, was teaching. But teaching, everybody knew, was the graduates' graveyard: once you got in there you never got to do anything better. Besides, it was very badly paid. Even my father, who was careful to let me sort myself out in my own time, balked at the idea of my becoming a teacher – not, at least, till I had exhausted every possible avenue to get a 'proper job'.

Uncle Gnanam alone seemed happy to see me become a teacher. It was a grand profession, he said, a noble one, the noblest in the world. To grow things like a farmer, that was noble; but to 'grow people', what could be nobler than that? He had himself wanted to be a teacher, but somehow he had never got round to sitting all those foreign exams, Cambridge Senior and London Matric: there were more important things to think about. India was aflame with the spirit of freedom, and Ceylon too had been touched by it. Even as a boy of ten he had been

inconsolably saddened by the tales he heard his elders tell of the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh; and his Tamil teacher in senior school had been an Indian nationalist. Cambridge and London had already begun to recede. And then, in the tramcar strike of '29, as he was preparing to sit his first exam, Gnanam was caught throwing stones at the police and was promptly sacked from school. That was the end of his 'teaching career', he observed wryly and laughed. But mine, he said, was just about to begin: I was a good learner and had a way with children; I would make a good teacher. And had I not played football for the university? Well then, the boys would love that. And as for the girls, they could not help but fall for a well-built, handsome fellow like me, and with such a fetching smile, too.

I could not take Uncle Gnanam seriously, though. He exaggerated things, got them out of focus, appeared even at times to lose touch with reality. Perhaps he had always been like that, only I hadn't noticed it; or perhaps he had begun to go that way after his last sacking, from Hunter & Co. The story was that he had walked one day into the managing director's office and sat on his desk. 'What are you doing in my office?' Mr Hunter had asked him. 'What are you doing in my country?' Uncle Gnanam had replied. Unable to bear this final disgrace, his mother had wanted him put away from public view, and private memory, in the mental hospital at Angoda. My father had intervened and brought him home to live with us. But that final betrayal by his family lay like a tumour on his brain and, gradually, he began to let go of his mind. All he had asked of life, he said, was to walk his way, wear his clothes, speak his language, fend for his people, but all around him was a whole white world of injustice and humiliation and treachery and, from his own folk, nothing but betrayal – and why shouldn't he go mad?

And yet, despite such mad talk, I could not help feeling that he made a sort of sense, somewhere, somewhere beyond my reaching as yet, and beyond his, sometimes, I thought. He disturbed me, enough at least to make me give a thought or two to teaching.

Nor did I get much change out of Lal and Lali, who were my only companions at the time. They too thought I should teach, but for a different reason: I would learn a lot about our country, particularly if I got posted to a provincial school, as was likely.

But I could not be enamoured of teaching. To me it was just a job like any other – not a calling – only worse paid, with no status and no future. It was literally the last thing I wanted to do. Kanniah had opted for it and departed to a school somewhere in the deep south, but several of my other friends had found jobs at the top. And I wanted to be up there with them.

But as the weeks grew into months and all that I received in response to my applications were acknowledgments and rejections, my principles began to take a beating and my resolve to weaken. And gradually, reluctantly, I found myself coming round to my father's point of view: that he should 'put out a few feelers' here and there, 'approach a few people', see how it all went. He might even pay a calculated visit (he added cunningly) to some of his wife's rich relations and see whether they could put him in touch with some MPs.

Uncle Gnanam was aghast. Visit his wife's relatives? The people who had looked down on him as a 'thuppai postmaster' all these years? The people who tried to railroad him, Gnanam, into an asylum and got him thrown out of his mother's house? What was the matter with his *aththan*? Had he taken leave of his senses? Visit MPs? Surely he wouldn't want to go bum-sucking that lot? That was not at all like the *aththan* he knew.

'Oh, come on, Gnanam,' my father had replied, 'you are exaggerating again. I have done it before, you know, bum-sucking, as you call it, for my worthless nephews. Of course, they were lowly jobs and the sucking was of a lower order', he added, deriding himself. Uncle Gnanam, who was apt of late to take everything personally, felt that my father was laughing at him and retorted angrily that nepotism and corruption were not laughing matters. My father apologized, quickly realizing that he had been tactless and sensing that Uncle Gnanam was about to lift off. But Gnanam hardly heard him and continued to work himself into a rage, accusing my father of being irresponsible, an accomplice in corruption and nepotism, no different from all those men who ruled the country. Corruption everywhere, dirt and dung. My father tried to quieten him down, taking Gnanam into his confidence. He explained that getting me a good job would help to improve Leela's prospects of marriage, help even to provide for the younger girl's dowry. Besides, the boy was losing confidence in himself and should be found a job quickly.

My father spoke softly and earnestly, sharing his burden with his friend, hoping he would understand. Uncle Gnanam, though soothed by my father's voice and mollified by his tone, seemed to hear nothing. He was gone into himself.

'Everywhere corruption,' he mourned. 'Corruption, corruption everywhere and nothing ever grows. Look, *aththan*, look at my hands, they are clean now, clean. But when I was working in that customs office, remember, before the Hunter & Co job? They were all taking bribes, that's why they sacked me, you know, because I wouldn't.

'And I thought that when the *vellayans* were gone, we'd be free of all that.' He kept rubbing his hands on his shirt. 'They are worse than the

vellayans, *aththan*, our rulers, worse. They are the *vellayans*, now. They even kill our people like the *vellayans*.'

My father remained silent, resting his own burden, weighing up the other man's sorrow.

'Remember you used to tell me about the tramcar strike and Sultan, how they killed him? You know how many Sultans they killed this time, in the *hartal*? How could they, *aththan*? How could they order their own people to be killed? And what did our great LSSP *vellayans* do? Nothing. Nothing, led them up the garden path, and nothing. Oh, *aththan*,' he burst into tears.

My father clasped him to his breast and held him tight against his sorrow. A tear trickled down my father's face.

And suddenly I began to see him again, this man, my father. The face had grown more gaunt, the body slack (the strong firm chest had wrinkled into breasts) and grey had touched his hair. I had not noticed him before, not for some years. I had taken him for granted; he was there like the sun every morning. I had taken them all for granted: my mother, brothers, sisters, as though their only purpose had been to smooth my path through university, absorb my troubles, keep theirs from me, so that I would emerge a more accomplished man at the end of it, an educated man, with a certificate or two perhaps to show for it.

Now it was my turn to carry the others, and I hadn't seen it, not till I had seen it reflected in the tear that ran down my father's face.

In the following week, and for some weeks after, my father and I made the calculated visits he had spoken of to those of my mother's relatives who were in rich and influential positions. My mother refused to join us on our expeditions, saying that she would not help her son at the expense of her husband; if he wanted to lower himself in the eyes of her 'high and mighty' relations, that was his business, she wasn't going to be a party to his shame. (At such times she sounded like her brother, Gnanam, all fiery and determined, and I would catch a glimpse of her as a person in her own right before she vanished once more into mother and wife.)

The houses we visited were invariably large and grand, populated more by servants than by children, with well-kept gardens and shiny cars in the driveway. I was impressed at first, and then envious and disdainful in turn, till, that is, I met the people who lived in them. They were always kind and smiling, but in that patronizing sort of way that never allowed me to relax. They would inquire about my mother and be solicitous about the ill-health that prevented her from coming with us, but their intention, I couldn't help feeling, was to remind my father that he had failed to observe protocol: his wife, after all, was the connection

between them, it was she who gave him any standing in their eyes. But never mind, they would concede, as though in restitution, her mother (my grandmother, that is) had visited them just the previous week (implying that she was the only connection that really mattered – because she was matriarch or money-bags I couldn't quite fathom), and she had mentioned in passing that they should do what they could to save 'the boy' (from what, I was not sure, unless it was from becoming a postmaster like his father). Which went to show that she was concerned about me, about my future. But did I reciprocate, was I grateful? Not a bit: I did not so much as visit her, did I? After all she had done for our family, for me, bringing me up and . . . (I had stopped listening). I had more time for my father's people perhaps? (That old feud again – the old lady must have kept it alive even after her husband's death, and now that I had a degree I could be reckoned a recruit to her side). Well, they would see what they could do for me.

My father somehow managed to absent himself from these conversations, for no sooner were the initial pleasantries over than he would move out of his chair to study the pictures on the walls or to scrutinize the trellis-work, putting himself beyond earshot. He was there and not there. It was, I suppose, his way of doing his duty as a father while retaining his dignity as a man.

On one occasion we even got to see an MP, a junior minister in the government. But although he made sympathetic noises, it was clear that he had nothing to gain from helping my father, who was not one of his constituents, and had no pull. Besides, he was a Tamil, not that he, the minister, had anything against the Tamils, but the Tamils, it had to be said (and Banda was saying it, he laughed), had had it too good for too long. Now it was the turn of the Sinhalese, and unless his party, the United National Party, did something about it, Banda's Sri Lanka Freedom Party was going to get into power. He suggested that I become a teacher.

Our last visit, as it turned out, was to my mother's uncle, who was on the board of several firms and banks, and a good Hindu, given to good works. He was, I gathered, quite keen to help his less fortunate relatives. But as we walked through the gate of his house and up the sea-pebbled driveway, flanked on either side with orchids and petunias and exotic roses, my stomach flipped over and I fled, leaving my father stranded between gate and door. Waiting for him on the road below I tried to sort out the reasons I would give my father for my precipitate flight. But I could find none; nothing sensible, that is. We knew what we were doing, we had reckoned the cost, it was just another visit. Perhaps it was a visit too many? But why just then, in the garden? And I

remembered that it was the orchids that had set me off, the orchids and the petunias and the imported roses, those flowers, and some memory of my learning that called to me that even their flowers did not have the look of flowers that are looked at. They needed them to remind them of their wealth, like they needed poor relations, like they needed us.

My father joined me down the road and said not a word. I looked at him covertly and thought I saw a look of relief, of peace even, on his face. On the way home we fell into step as we were wont to do when he walked me as a boy around the Kandy lake.

‘It’s teaching for us now, then, is it?’ was all he said, and I nodded.

But I still couldn’t reconcile myself to the fact and was reluctant to act on it. I felt cheated, somehow. I even toyed with the idea of going to Law College and becoming a barrister, but my father, I realized, could not afford that. Besides, I was not sure that I could wait three years to get married. Not that I had asked Lali or she given any indication that she would consent, but we had been thrown together a lot since Sena’s death and Lal’s departure to Ragama Hospital to do his internship. I did the heavier chores for Lali and her mother, now, and was generally man about the house, commuting between my home and theirs on my rickety old bicycle. Mrs Perera treated me like her own son and took my side against Lali in a quarrel – not that we quarrelled much, except over this teaching business. Lali had never liked my middle-class ambitions (as she put it), and liked even less the way I went about achieving them, and she took every opportunity to scold me for it, but somehow ended up being more on my side than I was.

‘You know your trouble, mister?’ she would sum up angrily after these discussions. It was always ‘mister’ when she was angry, it put me out there somewhere far from her. ‘You don’t know your own, how do you say it in English, value? No, worth. You don’t know your own worth. That’s your trouble. And so you don’t know other people’s worth, or who is worthy and who is not. Your rich bloody relatives –’

‘Hey, Lali, don’t use bad words,’ her mother would interrupt in Sinhalese.

‘They are not worthy of licking your shoes,’ she would go on (and I would feel returned to her favour), ‘let alone your father’s. What do you want their jobs for? What’s wrong with teaching? And you know you’d make a good teacher.’

‘He has sisters to give in marriage,’ Mrs Perera would intervene before I could reply – not that I had anything to say. ‘Brothers to see through school. Who is going to do all that?’

‘How did you give Lal and me –’

‘Ah, that is different,’ and the old lady would pause, lapsing into rev-

eric. 'No one would help . . . and so I . . . I had to . . . What? Make you a hospital attendant? And you so bright . . .'

And Lali, seeing that she had upset her mother, would lash out angrily.

'Oh, do what you like, Rajan, do what you like! It is your life after all!'

That used to hurt me at first, the way she so abruptly returned my life to me, and for days I would hesitate to resume our former intimacy. But Lali gave it no second thought, she was so sure of her own feelings and affections and knew that no malice could enter them. It was not that she never doubted her emotions: I had seen her agonize over little things. But once her feelings were made up, she acted on them. She felt, rather than thought, a problem through. Her judgements were instinct with feeling and, for that reason perhaps, carried greater conviction. And yet she was never dogmatic or overbearing; she did not try to impose her judgements on others, they were for her. It was a sort of authority she had over herself, unobtrusive but stubborn, learnt perhaps in those long years of poverty and hardship and the indifference of relatives when she had no one to trust but herself, and little to guide her but her feelings.

It was a quality that Lal had, too, and made his politics a felt thing, not something learnt out of books. He would soon be a fully fledged doctor but he would not forget where he had risen from, and his life-style, I suspected, would continue much as before. Which was why perhaps I respected his political views and judgements: he lived his convictions; and they carried to me, even against my will.

On the day after that last aborted visit to my great-uncle, I told Lali that I had decided to become a teacher. But she suspected at once that it was not so much a conviction as an offering and, patting me on the back with the same affection as she would a dog that had brought back a bone, she said:

'Oh, good, if that's what you want.' And then, relenting a bit, she remarked for the hundredth time that I would make a good teacher.

'I'll make a better barrister,' I retorted angrily.

'Oh I see, it's Law College next, is it? Yes I suppose you'd make a good lawyer. You've got the gift of the gab, Lal says. Why don't you ask him about it? He is coming this evening.' She frowned. 'What about money? How are you going to support yourself, or do you expect your father—'

'That's all you think of,' I interrupted, raising my voice, and then fell into a sullen silence. What about those three long years? I thought. Why doesn't she mention that? Surely she knew I was in love with her, couldn't wait to marry her. Why couldn't she give me some idea of what

she felt? I knew she was fond of me, maybe loved me even, but she would not show it, let alone say it. And I, for my part, did not feel I could broach the subject, not openly anyway, not till I had found a job. I had hinted at it, though, often enough but jokingly, and she had responded at that level, but held back even then from committing herself. There was always something in reserve.

One day she was arranging the white and gold flowers of the temple tree before a bronze figurine of the Buddha when I entered the house. She broke off to greet me, then returned abruptly to her task. I was left to stew in my silence. It was Poya day, I remembered, and she would be taking her mother to temple, which of course was why she was dressed in white. White suited her, I thought, letting my eyes roam over her beautiful back: it made her both sensual and saintly at the same time. Or was it the chiffon of her sari that made her look virginal even as it floated softly round her voluptuous figure? Approaching her from behind, I laid my hands upon her shoulders gently, noticing irreverently how of late she was going a bit to fat.

'I am going to teach,' I said.

For a moment she didn't move. Then she turned round slowly, removing my hands gently from her shoulders and placing them down my sides.

'Yes, I know, Rajan,' she replied softly.

I should have asked her to marry me then, I realized later, but the moment passed, and when I picked it up again it had grown cold.

'But go into the provinces somewhere, to a Central School,' she urged. She finished arranging the flowers and sat down beside me on the settee.

'Why provinces?' I asked. The thought of leaving her filled me with anguish.

'Because it is the children there who need teachers like you, sensitive teachers who can bring out the best in them. And it is good for you, too. It is there that you will learn about our people, not here in Colombo, and one day you will fight for them, in your own way.' She spoke with quiet conviction and lifted, for a moment, my expectations of myself.

'But I want to be here with you,' I said plaintively, reaching out for her hand.

She took my hand in hers and replied in little more than a whisper, 'It can't be, my dear, it can't be.'

'You won't marry me, then?' I took my hand away and rose from the settee, aggrieved.

'I can't, Rajan, I can't.'

'Why not?' I reacted angrily. 'Why on earth not? Don't you care for me, love me a little? What is it? Is it because I am a Tamil?' I wanted to hurt her.

'No, it's not that, but there's that too, not for me but for you. Not my mother, but your parents. Have you thought what they would say, their eldest son marrying like that, and what it will do to your sisters' marriage prospects?'

'So that's it, is it? And I thought that—'

'No, no Rajan. That is not it at all. I merely brought it up because you mentioned it . . . because it is something that you must think about before—'

'What is it then?' I interrupted, beside myself with disappointment and anger. 'What is it? Tell me!'

'I can't, I can't,' she cried out and burst into tears.

I had not seen her cry before, not even at Sena's funeral.

'It is Sena, isn't it?' I drove on despite her tears. 'Isn't it?'

'Yes,' she shouted, 'But not the way you mean it.' And she fled into the house.

I left angry, hurt and bewildered, and walked briskly down the lane. I was determined never to see her again, or Lal for that matter.

I had almost got to the end of the lane before I noticed the hustle and bustle of women and children rushing out of their houses to the main road below and heard as in a dream the beat of tom-toms and the sound of dancing. There was a *perahera* passing by. I was in no mood to enjoy the sight but I could not get through the crowd either. I stood there staring blankly at the procession. An old lady beside me was trying to work her way to the front to give her grandchild a better view. I made way for her, and then, seeing that she could not get any further forward, I took the little girl from her arms and hoisted her on to my shoulder. The old lady smiled her gratitude, and suddenly I realized that I would never see Lali's mother again. And the thought saddened me. Who would take her to the *vedarala* and fetch her medicines?

'You are a sucker for pageants, aren't you?' a voice behind me remarked. I turned around slowly, hiding my surprise.

'Oh hello, Lal,' I said matter-of-factly.

'You don't sound very jolly. Come on! Let's go! The *perahera's* almost over!'

The old lady took the child from me and thanked me.

'I have just come from your house.'

'So?'

'I don't want to go back there.'

'Ah, it's like that, is it?'

'I have got to get home,' I lied.

'Oh, come on, man! Come and have a cup of tea at Ananda Lodge. I could do with a *vaddai* or two. I'm hungry.' He put his arm round me and urged me along.

The café was crowded and noisy, but Lal managed to find a place in the corner by the kitchen. The table was dirty and littered with mugs, and there were flies everywhere. I turned up my Hindu nose at the uncleanliness, but Lal smiled at my discomfiture and signalled to a boy, a sort of underling to the waiter, to remove the tea mugs and clean the table. The little fellow could have been barely nine years old, but he swept half a dozen mugs off the table with one hand and wiped clean the stone table-top with the other, using a dirty wet rag. I must have made a face because Lal laughed outright.

'You should eat more often in places like this,' he said.

'It is not the place that I mind,' I retorted warding off any suggestion that I was a snob, 'but the hygiene.'

'Come on Rajan, don't exaggerate. You know yourself that you don't put your mouth to the mugs, and there are no dirty plates; you eat off plantain leaves. And have you seen their kitchens? That's the cleanest spot in the place, cleaner than the ones in your posh hotels. But you don't get to see them do you? And as for the flies . . . Hold on, we'll get this fan on.' He rose and went to the switch on the wall, but it was broken.

'Oh well,' he muttered resignedly, resuming his seat, but perked up again almost at once. 'Anyway germs are good for you, they build up your resistance; take it from a doctor,' and he laughed merrily.

I couldn't help laughing too. I didn't want to, I still ached from the parting with Lali and felt I should remain in mourning a while longer. But there was a vitality in Lal which lifted me despite myself, and I succumbed.

I admired that quality in him, but did not really understand it at the time. Its appeal to me then was a physical one: the energy of the man, little as he was, like a charge from a dynamo, and the spendthrift way he used it up, throwing himself at life. Only in later years would I come to see in that quality of his an attitude to life which was accepting of everything it had to offer, its defeats and victories, its conflicts and contradictions – even saw in them the nature of life itself and, for that very reason perhaps, could never accept defeat.

'Tea or coffee?' he asked, giving the order.

'Anything,' I replied.

We said very little over the *vaddais* and tea. I had returned to nursing my pain and Lal seemed to have other things on his mind. He had just

returned from a policy review meeting of the party and was clearly disappointed by the way it had gone.

'Too self-congratulatory,' he muttered between mouthfuls, 'and not enough self-criticism.' Lal had always been critical of the leadership. He had been especially scathing about their loss of nerve during the *hartal*. But he had been persuaded into taking office in the party to make his criticisms more 'constructive'. It looked as though he was beginning to doubt the move.

'How are you, comrade?' a middle-aged man in a red shirt and sarong greeted Lal in Sinhalese, rising from the next table. 'The meeting wasn't too bad, was it? We are on our way.'

'Where to?' Lal asked curtly. They were obviously continuing a debate begun earlier. I rose to find a chair for the man, who seemed to balance on one leg, but he waved it aside and replied to Lal.

'To power.'

'In parliament?'

'Why not?'

The conversation was reducing itself to short staccato bursts like gunfire, and I was feeling uncomfortable.

'The working class?'

'Our leaders then.'

'I thought we were supposed to take parliament, not get into it.'

The man laughed uneasily.

'Revolution, and all that?' he asked sarcastically.

'Isn't that what we are meant to be, a revolutionary party?'

'You saw what happened to us in the *hartal*?'

The conversation ceased as abruptly as it had begun; they were both, in their different ways, weighing up the cost of rebellion. The man muttered something and limped back to his table. Lal looked downcast.

'Who's that guy?' I asked dismissively, taking umbrage on Lal's behalf.

'Dockyard David?' Lal half-inquired, as though I should have heard of the name. I shook my head. 'Led the harbour workers in the general strike in '46, and had his legs broken by the police?' I shook my head again shamefacedly. The man was apparently a well known trade unionist and a devoted party worker. He had been a party man all his life, Lal said, had virtually grown up in the party. As a young man he had taken part in the *suriya mal* campaign of the early thirties and in the relief work the *suriya mal* group had carried out in the rural areas during the malaria epidemic. Lal remembered that period only too well because his father had served in one of the dispensaries in Kegalle, dishing out *gulli beth* (a mixture of quinine and marmite rolled into a pill) to the villagers

– till he had himself caught the fever and died.

Lal was quiet for a minute or two before he picked up his story again. After the party had been founded in 1935 David, who was then working in the Colombo docks, had helped to form the LSSP union there. And in the strikes that the party had led in the following years – laundrymen, transport workers, mill hands, factory workers – Dockyard David had been involved in one indefatigable role or another. Whatever Lal's differences with him now, there was no doubt about the regard in which Lal held him.

'Our party did some great things in those early days,' Lal reflected nostalgically, 'and we had so much support among the workers. Goonesinha and his Labour Party were finished, sold out, he tried the communal ticket and ended up on the side of the employers, every time. We were the workers' party then, it was we who stood by them, fought with them, radicalized them, and they us.' Lal was warming to his subject, his face all aglow, and he spoke as though he had been there at the time. I was caught up in his excitement.

'And not just in the rural areas and in the towns but even on the plantations. Remember all those strikes before the war? No? You must have heard of them, surely? Mooloya, where Govindan was shot dead by the police? And then Wewessa? Oh come on, you must know about the Wewessa strike, when the workers took over the estate and set up their own council?

'That was great, man, that was great. Can you imagine that white bugger's face, the superintendent's, when he was told he could not move hand or foot without consulting his coolie council? And do you know they disarmed a whole police party, took their rifles away from them and told them to be good boys in future?' Lal exploded with laughter.

'Of course they were defeated in the end,' he added more soberly, 'by the armed might of the government . . .' he mocked.

I had heard Uncle Gnanam and my father speak of the strikes, I had even picked up a detail or two here and there, but their significance had escaped me till now. Lal and I belonged to the same generation, and yet his understanding of the country's history was so different from mine. As so often in my conversations with Lal, I began to regret the 'superior' English schools that my father had lovingly sent me to. The history I had been taught was of the ancient glories of Ceylon and of the present glories of the British. To hear Lal speak, I might well have grown up in another country.

'And our leaders were tremendous too. The British must have been really terrified of them to put them in prison during the war. And when they escaped,' Lal's face lit up at the memory of the adventure, 'with

the help of the prison guards, mind you . . . Oh, they were really heroes then.'

Even after the war, he went on, when they had become free men again, the Socialist leaders had continued their anti-colonial campaign, leading the workers in the two general strikes, which was perhaps why they had been able to win so many seats in the pre-independence elections of 1947.

But then, and Lal was less euphoric now, the rot had begun to set in. Perhaps it was a mistake for them to have entered parliament. It was one thing to have carried on the battle against the British in the State Council, but once independence had been achieved, they should have thought twice about 'playing parliamentary games'. No wonder they had done nothing about the disfranchisement of the plantation workers in 1948. Oh, they had protested all right, in parliament – when they should have been mobilizing the people in the towns and villages and estates and brought the government down.

Lal, I noticed, was getting very close now to his declamatory party style of speaking, and some of my own excitement had begun to recede.

'Once we start playing parliamentary games we are finished.' It was as I feared; this was his party voice. 'Tactics become goals. Elections, from being a vehicle for politicizing the masses so that they can take power, become a way of manipulating them so that the leaders can take power.' He paused, realizing that I was losing interest.

'You know what they are trying to do now, Rajan?' he asked, trying to engage my attention. 'What they were talking about at the meeting today? About defeating the UNP at the next election. And you know how? By entering into a no-contest pact with Banda and his patriots. And you know what that means? Communal politics again. There will be no Sinhalese in parliament standing up for the Tamils now.'

I did not quite understand the import of it all, but to ask Lal for an explanation was to court another party piece. I was more interested in what Lal was going to do. We were both, after all, in a similar state of disillusion, so to speak, he with the party and I with Lali.

'So what are you going to do?' I broke in impatiently, hoping he could find some tidy solution.

'I don't know, Rajan,' he replied despondently. 'The way I feel today, all I want is out.'

'And do what?' I pushed him.

'I don't know. Start all over again perhaps, maybe up-country with the plantation workers, working at the community level, set up a surgery in Hatton, maybe. Ragama is too enclosed, removed, it happens in all

the big hospitals, doctors become a people apart, know what I mean?’

We talked for a while longer, desultorily, and by the time I left Lal to pick up my bike it was already getting dark. I had no lamp and I rode slowly through the busy streets, my mind crowded by the events of the day. So much seemed to have happened to me since I had left home that morning, and yet here on the streets nothing had changed. Men were boarding up their tea kiosks or sitting out on their doorsteps with their neighbours, women were fetching water for the night from the public taps, and children played in their rags with makeshift toys, happy as the day was long.

A drunk stepped off the pavement suddenly and I swayed to avoid him, and almost immediately heard the screech of brakes. I turned round to see the man lying crumpled in front of a big black Mercedes-Benz that was reversing hastily to make its getaway, but before I could go to his help, the whole street erupted. The car was surrounded on all sides and people were beating angrily on its roof and doors, trying to pull the driver out through the window. Someone shouted that it was an MP’s car, and the crowd got madder still. ‘MP be damned,’ yelled a big-breasted basket woman, dropping her basket, and running towards the car with her cloth lifting over her knees to give her more movement, her long grey hair flailing about her. ‘What bloody MP, to knock a man down and run off?’

By this time, the drunk had managed to stand up, more shocked than hurt, and the driver stepped out of the car shouting, ‘I am not the MP, I am not the MP, I am only his driver.’ At this, the anger of the crowd seemed to die down as suddenly as it had erupted, and they fell to scolding the driver. The basket woman went up to the young man and slapped him a couple of times as she would a child, and sent him on his way, warning him to behave like one of them in future and not like his master.

I got on my bike and resumed my journey home, my mind a jumble of images of the incident and the basket woman and Lali and Dockyard David and Sena and the driver, frightened and relieved in turn, and the children playing in the streets, and running through it all some of the things that Lal had spoken of to me that day. I thought I was beginning to see things differently, and I laughed out loud as I recalled the picture of the woman charging the car and the driver’s dismay turning to relief, as he discovered that it was his boss they were after.

By the time I reached home, I felt a queer sense of elation, not un-mixed though with the sadness of losing Lali.

‘Ah, Rajan,’ my father greeted me without ceremony. ‘How would you like a teaching job in Nuwara Eliya?’ He looked all eager.

I was taken aback; I had not applied for such a post.

'Why, what happened to my Colombo applications?' I asked.

'They all say they have no vacancies. Why, don't you want to go out-station? My friend, Obeysekera, the postmaster in Nuwara Eliya, says that Holy Cross College is looking for a graduate teacher.' My father looked disappointed: he had worked hard to get me this post and I wasn't responding.

'No, no *appa*, that's fine. I'll take it,' I recovered, remembering that there was nothing to keep me in Colombo any longer. And Lali herself had thought I should go to a provincial school. It would bloody well serve her right if she never saw me again!

My father looked relieved.

'No, of course I don't mind going out-station,' I added. 'You just took me by surprise. I'm sorry. My mind was elsewhere.'

6

HOLY CROSS COLLEGE was hardly a college, more a secondary school run by the Anglican church, and populated by a couple of hundred pubescent pupils of both sexes. It had a staff of half a dozen teachers (three women and three men, including the headmaster) and was housed in an old church hall partitioned by jute-hessian screens into several classrooms. The headmaster's 'study', as he called it, was at one end of the hall on one side of a raised platform from which, flanked by his staff, he conducted 'assembly'. On the other side of the platform was a door leading to his quarters, in fact a comfortable upstairs apartment commanding a magnificent view of the mountains.

The school itself was situated on a hill, on the outskirts of the tea country, some six or seven miles from Nuwara Eliya town, and must have served as a mission house in the early days of colonization, providing succour to the errant coolie before returning him to the plantation from which he had fled. Or so I imagined, as I watched the headmaster take up his station every morning on the brow of the hill, searching the valley below for signs of an errant schoolboy or the promise of a new one. For it was on admissions and attendances that the headmaster's suitability for his post was judged, and the viability of the school itself.

But Mr Ranatunge was more ambitious than that. He wanted to take his school and himself a grade or two higher in the educational league table. To do that he needed to pick a handful of candidates each year for the Senior School Certificate examination, even pull off a success or two,

and eventually perhaps succeed in getting one of them into university. And that is where I came in: an honours graduate would bring prestige and credibility (in the eyes of the authorities, that is) to Mr Ranatunge's project and, hopefully, success. The important thing, however, was to convince the education department that, with a graduate on its roll in addition to the two trained teachers, the school and its headmaster already had a claim to be upgraded.

John Jameson Ranatunge was himself a trained teacher, and the rumour (which he himself cultivated with admirable reluctance) was that he would have been a graduate too had he not run off with a Tamil girl on the eve of his examination. They had met, it appeared, at a Ceylon High Commission party in London, where J.J., the younger son of an impoverished plumbago merchant, had been sent for higher education, and had fallen in love at first sight. Or Honoria had (according to Vadivel, the maths-and-Tamil master), just as always, brought up as she was on Swinburne and the Romantic poets. Only this time it was reciprocated, not at first sight, perhaps, but certainly on second thoughts. For J.J. was just then on the look-out for someone to pay his gambling debts, and Honoria Ramanathan, though large and widespread (the phrase was Vadi's), had recently come into money. Her widowed father, a prominent criminal lawyer and KC, had died a few months earlier and left her, his only child, two elegant houses in Colombo 7.

When J.J.'s father came to hear of the affair, he had peremptorily ordered his son back home. But J.J. by then was ensconced in Honoria's devotion and was loath to leave her: he had been freed at last from financial worry and had even been persuaded into believing that his brains could be put to better use than to turning over a quick buck or two at the gaming tables. He had pleaded with his father for more time, ostensibly to complete his degree. But when the old man, having arranged a marriage for his son that would revive his flagging businesses, even as it enhanced his social position, sent his emissaries to fetch 'the boy', J.J. took precipitate flight and married Honoria on the wing. They had stayed on in England for another year so that they could both finish their degrees. But J.J. had taken flight from the examination, too, and they had returned home with only one degree between them, Honoria's. Subsequently, however, Honoria had successfully nursed J.J. through teacher training college.

That, in any case, was Vadivel's version, and the true one, he claimed. It was only in J.J.'s telling of the story, he insisted, that J.J. came to assume the heroic proportions of a lover, classically tall, dark and handsome, who had sacrificed everything for love. Or as J.J. himself declared: *amor vincit omnia*.

What puzzled me, though, was why, if J.J. needed a graduate for his school, Honoria had not been his first (and easy) choice. Because, Vadivel explained patiently, she was already deputy head of a posh girls' school in Colombo, and that was where her property was. J.J., besides, wanted to be master in his own house. And it suited him to be modern, which was what Honoria wanted them to be.

I took Vadivel at his word. He was that type of man: earnest, sincere and principled (to the point of wearing the Tamil national costume because he was the Tamil master) but not without a sense of humour, measured, like his maths. Besides, J.J., whom I took on first appearances to be a 'g.g.' (genuine guy), soon turned out to be a devious, grasping, malicious sort of man. In fact, it was only after I had made that discovery for myself (and to my cost), that Vadivel had told me his story, and the other teachers divulged their own distrust of him.

At first, though, I was happy to be his star turn, enjoying his warm embrace and the special favours he showered on me. The children liked me too, especially the ones in the higher forms, perhaps because I was not much older than they, and easy to talk to. And that is where my troubles began, because J.J. felt that I was too familiar with them, especially the girls who, being of a 'sexy age', could well misconstrue my purpose. But I disregarded his warning and continued to enjoy my teaching, so eager were the kids to learn, tired though they were from their chores at home. They were from poor families, most of them children of labourers, small traders and the better off plantation workers (if there was such a thing), and very early on I learned not to add to their load by giving them homework. And that got me into trouble with the headmaster too, for that was no way to get results, he said.

Soon I was losing out on his favours, on his friendship; I was just another of his teachers, an employee, a cog in the wheel of his driving ambition for success. Honoria, on her holiday visits, fought my corner. She found pleasure in teaching me to appreciate her 'darling poets', Swinburne and Tennyson and Rossetti, and I found myself going along with her. Something drew me to her. I didn't quite know what then, and I am not sure that I know even now; she was so utterly plain and barren. But there was something deeply sensual about her plainness, and it roused me. It was like finding sex where you least expected it, and it came out of her voice, which started low and husky with 'The Blessed Damozel' and ended hoarse with unspoken desire in 'Love Laid His Sleepless Head'. One day I kissed Honoria full on the lips as she was reading and, when she reached out, I ran from her, mortified, into the kitchen, and washed my mouth. She must have seen me, for she never spoke to me after that, and I was left to face J.J. alone.

But if I was losing favour with the head, I was gaining the friendship of the teachers, each, in his or her own way, committed more to the welfare of the children than to the success of the school. It was a paradox that I took some time to resolve. But help in the form of little Mrs Aseer was close at hand. She had been taking my classes before my arrival, in English and civics and history, and had unobtrusively eased me into my job and the regard of the children. She could very easily have made things difficult for me, seeing how I had taken from her the most interesting part of her work and relegated her to a lower form. But she was a woman completely without envy or ambition, and felt that she had taken the children as far as she could, and they needed someone with 'qualifications' to take them further. She liked me, too, for my 'youthfulness and zest', as she told me later, and was convinced that, given those two qualities, the kids would do the rest.

Aseer herself was well past her youth, into her middle years perhaps, but she looked even older. She was a small handful of a woman, with a pinched face and a matching figure, the sort of person who brought out the bully in you. But she had a strength and a resolve which belied her appearance, and a smile that lit up the classroom. The children trusted her, obeyed her, listened to her every word. I had thought it instinctive at first, that affection of theirs for her, because she too came from a poor background, had been orphaned at an early age and brought up by nuns. But that was precisely why, Vadivel assured me, they had disliked her at first: she was no better than they. And things had been made worse when J.J., having clashed with her, his most senior teacher, on everything from timetables and homework to discipline and exams, had tried to discredit her in devious ways with her colleagues and her pupils. He had even let it be rumoured that she was the bastard child of some illicit estate liaison; hence her rosy complexion. But Aseer had shown herself proud of what she was, Vadivel chuckled, and the children had begun to sit more easily with their poverty and with her.

Vadivel amazed me with his insight into people, and yet he was not a warm man. Not a cold man either, but distant, aloof, and his height and bony aquiline face, black as night, accentuated his distance from the world. And the world kept its distance from him; J.J. certainly, but the students too. They liked him, for his understanding of them, perhaps, which though impersonal was also unjudging, but dared not show him affection as they did with old Mrs Fernando (Sinhalese and domestic science) and petite Miss Silva (miscellaneous) and Aseer and me. His colleagues, too, respected Vadi's privacy, even as they relied on his loyalty. It was only I, he complained, who did not have the sense to leave him alone. And when I asked him, with even less sense, why he wished to be

left alone, he confided, with a smile, that he had learnt very early on not to betray his feelings. He preferred, instead, to be a 'student of human nature'. And that was all I could get out of him, but I gathered, from the way he spoke Tamil with a slightly Indian accent and from students' gossip, that he was of Indian stock, the grandson of a *kangany*, but educated in Jaffna where his father, now dead, had kept a small oilman store. And suddenly I was reminded of Sanji and the ramshackle estate shop that his father had so valiantly tried to run.

The students, too, took my mind back to my schooldays in Badulla and to my friends from the tenements, with whom I used to play on the green opposite the post office. And something like a conscience began to stir within me. I had come a long way from them. They were probably labourers and peons and storekeepers like their fathers before them. They had never had the chances I had, and here I was complaining that I was a teacher. The least I could do was to see that the kids in my charge fared better. And with that resolve I threw myself into my work and their lives.

Only once did I falter, when, some three months after coming to Holy Cross, I was unexpectedly called to an interview in a Colombo bank, and my ambitions began to stir again. Even then I did not want to go, but J.J., for some reason best known to him, insisted I should try. I did not get the job, however, and I soon settled down to teaching, finding pleasure in it and a sort of fulfilment, even. I had time now to stand still and reflect, after all the buffeting I felt I had taken since I'd left university, time to take stock of myself and the changing world around me. Or at first I did.

School was over by 2 p.m., and I spent the afternoons coaching the senior boys at football or playing rounders with a mixed bunch of kids. In the evenings (I had lodgings with an old couple close by) I would prepare my lessons for the following day or catch up with the reading I had put off till my exams were over. But often my thoughts would turn to Lali, and an emptiness begin to seize me. I had hoped to see her that time I went down to Colombo for the interview, but she was away in Anuradhapura visiting Sena's parents, and I had returned to Nuwara Eliya even more bereft. I sat down to write to her a number of times but, angry and bitter at her silence, never sent her the letters. For a while I took out my anguish in long walks over the hills and in visiting the parks and playgrounds I had known as a child, and the gardens of the post office, now grown to weed, through which Leela and I had roamed on our travelling sticks. Or I would visit Vadivel or Aseer in search of comfort. But Vadi was not given to small talk and Aseer's husband was jealous! And gradually I found myself drifting into Nuwara Eliya's social life.

Not that there was much social life in Nuwara Eliya out of season – ‘season’ being the racing season in April/May when the rich and idle of Colombo, like the British before them, fled the heat of the plains for the cool hills of ‘Little England’. And then Nuwara Eliya was a-bustle with people and activity. The women paraded the parks in their mock-mink coats and saris of pure Bangalore silk, draped on the arms of men in grey flannel suits and astrakhan hats. Or they went to the races, Ascot-dressed and binocularized, to put themselves on show in the Members’ Gallery. And in Tennis Week they ate pears and cream (‘strawberries, dear child, were not to be had for love or money’) from dainty dishes, while they watched some white man from Kent or Surrey or Wimbledon (the borough, not the club) carry off the coveted singles prize to become the new Ceylonese champion. In the evenings, perchance after a game of golf with left-over whites, they sat before the log fires in the Victorian lounges of the Grand Oriental Hotel or danced and drank the night away, in its ballrooms and its bars, amidst a scatter of ‘locals’. And in the marketplace their servants went in search of apples and grapes and the meat of deer and wild boar. Occasionally a master or a mistress would stray into the bazaar or the Sunday *pola*, to be mobbed by the stall-holders like a politician at a mass meeting in Price Park.

When the tourists had returned to the lowlands, Nuwara Eliya went back to the humdrum life of an estate town. But a flicker of social life was kept alive in the two clubs at either end of town. And to one of these, some two miles from where I lived, I began to drift of an evening to drown my memories of Lali, and before I knew it I had become a regular.

At first I was content to have a few drinks over a game of billiards or snooker. But soon I was hob-nobbing with the lawyers and civil servants and planters and the local bigwigs generally, and fell to social drinking. I developed a taste for ballroom dancing and bridge and found myself, on occasion, spending the night with an errant wife or a thwarted girlfriend. I even tried to fall in love, but to no avail. Lali haunted me still. I missed her counsel and her advice, I missed her physical presence, the touch and the taste and the smell of her, I missed her knowledge of me. But in my cups I was glad, glad as the cup was long, because this is who I really was, a drunkard and a womanizer. No teacher I, but a middle-class no one without a social conscience, so there, it served her right . . .

Vadi and Aseer kept me from total self-pity, but it was the kids who saved me from myself. I had gone into the classroom one morning with a bigger hangover than usual and, irritated beyond endurance by the de-

liberate and wilful slowness of their responses, had flown into a rage and laid into a couple of the boys with a ruler. J.J. had watched me from his room and in the afternoon asked me for my resignation. He was not going to tolerate a drunken, violent teacher on his staff, he said. The other teachers had protested that it was a first offence, and quite out of character. Old Mrs Fernando had pleaded that I was 'only a boy'; she promised to see that I behaved myself in the future. And wasn't it the headmaster, after all, she had slyly pointed out, who had encouraged me to find 'social stimulus' outside the school and not be too familiar with the students? But J.J. was adamant: I had thwarted him and challenged him too often, I was bad for discipline, and he was not at all sure that I could give him the exam results he wanted. His wife, who was coming home on medical leave, would be taking my classes.

At assembly the next morning, J.J. announced my resignation. But within hours, the whole school had signed a petition to the headmaster demanding my reinstatement. J.J. had wilted, more through surprise than want of resolve, but not given in. And it was only when the seven students whom I had been coaching for the S.S.C. exams a couple of months away had refused to sit the exam unless I came back, that J.J. had finally relented.

It was Vadivel who brought me the news and regaled me with the stories, only to find that they only strengthened my resolve not to return. I had gone over the scene in the classroom a hundred times and was appalled that I could have behaved as I had. I had never struck a pupil before and, if resignation was the only way, I would not allow myself to strike another ever again; I was a total failure as a teacher and as a man. I wanted to have nothing to do with myself. But Vadivel was insistent. Think of the kids, he said, when his arguments to exonerate me had failed, it was they who wanted me back; and it was they, after all, who should be the judges of my action, not J.J. or me.

'They forgive you, you know,' he remarked as he rose to go.

'But I can't forgive myself,' I cried.

'That's bad,' observed Vadi, looking owlshly at me over his glasses.

'That's bad?'

'Yes, that's bad, because if you don't learn to forgive yourself, you won't know how to forgive others.'

I acknowledged the wisdom of his words, but felt it was too late to make amends now.

'They are here you know, outside, Jaya and the rest,' said Vadi. 'The S.S.C. seven as you call them,' he added smilingly. 'Waiting to see if you'll speak to them.'

'Here? All of them?' I could not believe it. 'Jaya too?' Jaya was the

head boy, a J.J. appointee and his favourite, and the one whom I had struck hardest.

'Yes, it was Jaya who took the petition to the headmaster and led the exam strike.'

'Yes, of course I'll see them.'

Vadi called out to them from the window and the five boys and the two girls from the senior form trooped into my little room and stood awkwardly before me. I looked up at them sheepishly from the couch on which I was seated, not knowing what to say, expecting Vadi to help me out. But even as he began to speak, Jaya broke in.

'I am sorry sir. I am sorry we made you so angry yesterday,' he said sitting down on his haunches before me. He was a tall, gangling boy, all knee-joints and elbows, and they cracked as he sat. His friends burst out laughing. But Jaya went on even more gravely. 'We were all to blame. You were our friend and we let you down. We ... you ...' he faltered.

'You see, sir,' Somawathi interrupted, the brightest and most vivacious of the lot. 'We all knew you were unhappy, but we thought it was with us.'

'We thought you didn't like us any more,' Jaya picked up, 'didn't care about us, and so we tried to give you a hard time. It was not planned or anything ... it just came out.'

I pulled Jaya beside me on to the couch, unable to speak, and the others crowded around us.

'Forgive me,' I heard myself say.

From then on my self-pity took a beating. I forgot club life, I had no time for it. All I wanted to do was to get those kids through the exams. And gradually I began to feel whole again, able to sit at ease with myself. I was even reconciled to not seeing Lali again, in which case, of course, I would never marry.

And then one day, a week before the exams, I had a telegram from Lal to say that his mother had died. I could not go to the funeral, much as I wanted to; there was too much last-minute coaching to do. But as soon as the exams were over and the post-mortem on the papers concluded – the school had already closed for the holidays – I left for Colombo.

I did not get round to seeing Lal till the following week, though. My sister was getting engaged or registered or some such thing in a couple of days and our house was a hive of activity. It had quite slipped my mind that Leela, having turned down all previous proposals of marriage, was considering this last one quite seriously. She was at least acquainted with the man, a distant relative of ours, and felt that though she was not marrying for love (as part of her would have wished to) she

had not entirely succumbed to the orthodoxies of an arranged marriage either. The 'engagement,' I suspected, was her idea of a compromise, to which she had won my father over. My mother, however, went on tchik-tchiking in the kitchen over the *palaharams* she was making for the occasion.

'These modern girls,' she commented deprecatingly. 'I don't know what they are coming to. In my time . . .' she broke off, lowering another batch of *pakora* into the frying pan.

'But you knew *appa*,' I protested. 'Even before you married him. You were distant relatives or something, weren't you?'

'That was different,' she replied impatiently and, anticipating a clever retort from me, quickly added, 'And don't you get cheeky, boy. I know all about your doings.' ('Playings' is how it came across in Tamil.)

'What doings?' I asked, affecting innocence.

'Ah, ha. You thought I didn't know. Just because I am in the kitchen all day long, you think I don't know what's going on in the world outside?' Yes, I did think that.

'Your father doesn't know half the things I know.' I began to believe her.

'He at least doesn't think me stupid; but you, my son?' I had not given the matter much thought.

'You don't give your mother much thought, do you? She is just there, behind you all somewhere, like a mountain – no thoughts, no feelings, no nothing.' What she said shook me, and the way of her saying. 'Like a mountain' in Tamil could also mean 'like rain', a bounty; permanence and bounty, she was both, and we took them and her for granted. Where did she get the words from? That she had strong views I knew, but the words?

'It's over now, is it?' She had finished frying the *pakora* and was arranging them in a tin.

'What is over?'

'Your thing with that Sinhalese girl.'

'Oh, that? Yes, it's over.'

'High time, too. You know what it would have done to your sister's chances, if you had gone off with that girl?'

'She didn't want me, *amma*, so there's no point in talking about it,' I retorted angrily.

'Anyway, it's over now,' she said mollifyingly. 'Here, have a *pakora*, and then go and bring the clothes in. It's going to rain.'

'Clothes? Ah, I'll need another *pakora* for that.'

'Here you are, now go.'

I made towards the door and stopped.

'How is the man?' I asked.

'What man?' All my conversations with my mother seemed to consist of bits and pieces, subjects begun and dropped, emotions entered into suddenly and as suddenly abandoned.

'Leela's man, who else?'

'He is a man I suppose,' she replied drily, 'and the horoscopes match and they say he has a good job, at Brown & Co.' She was putting on the indifference now. 'So what is there for me to say?' Ah, that line again. I might as well talk to my little brother about our future brother-in-law as talk to her.

When the engagement ceremony was over and I finally got round to Lal's house, he was on the verge of leaving for Hatton, where he now ran his own surgery. His wife (he had married his friend from the university days) opened the door to me and, after an exchange of pleasantries, went to fetch Lal from a neighbour's house. I picked up a copy of the *Samasamajist* from the table and sat down to read it, but my thoughts kept going back to the last time I was here. Nothing had changed, physically, but the house seemed emptied of spirit. How full of life and excitement it had been that first time I had come here with Kanniah. There had been too many deaths since then, in the *hartal*, and Sena, and now dear Mrs Perera. All that remained of her presence was a framed photograph on the wall with a wreath of fresh flowers around it. There were flowers too, from the temple tree, around the statue of the Buddha, and as I went up to smell its fragrance I could smell again the fragrance of Lali's hair as I stole up behind her that day, so many many months ago, and laid my hands upon her shoulder. 'Rajan,' I could hear her say in that soft slow drawl of hers, caressing me around my name.

'Rajan?' I heard it now behind me, and turning, saw her framed against the bedroom door, a baby in her arms. 'How are you Rajan?'

'Lali,' I shouted joyously, moving towards her. 'Lali, what on earth are you doing here? I thought you had gone back to . . .' I stopped, noticing the baby, a neighbour's, perhaps, or Lal's. No, too soon. Lali married? Can't be.

'Anuradhapura? Yes, but I thought I'd help Lal to pack up here.'

'Whose baby?'

She did not answer.

'Whose baby?' I demanded more brusquely, frightened by her silence.

'Mine.'

'Yours?' I couldn't help crying. 'Yours?'

'Yes, mine.' She was married, then?

'And Sena's.'

Sena's? How, when? What was she saying . . . Sena's? . . . Before he died? But they were not married . . . oh God . . . no . . . How could she? The whore . . . no wonder she had turned me down . . . couldn't face herself . . . couldn't face me . . . 'I can't', she had said. The shame of it . . . the stigma . . . what she must have gone through . . . and me not there to help her. If only she had told me, I could have coped with it . . . somehow . . . come to terms with it. She was still my Lali . . . if only . . . 'I can't', not 'I won't', a renunciation, not a refusal . . . There was hope.

'Why the hell do you think she didn't marry you?' Lal had come in unnoticed.

'Lal, don't,' Lali pleaded.

'You tell him, then,' he shouted angrily. 'I am sick of this whole business.'

'Tell him what?' asked Lali plaintively.

'Tell him you love him, that's what, and have always done. And if he is not man enough to marry you or prefers to drown you in drink . . . Oh yes,' he turned to me, 'I know all about your escapades, friend.' He turned back to Lali, trying to control his anger. 'If he is not man enough to marry you, he can go to hell.' And he stormed out of the room, his wife at his heels.

Lali sat the baby down on a mat, crying softly.

'Oh Lali, why didn't you tell me?' I asked, the last unkind thoughts of her driven from my mind by Lal's outburst. 'You know I, I . . .' I went and knelt before her on the mat and took her hand.

'I couldn't,' she sobbed. 'I couldn't.'

'Why not, for God's sake?'

'You would have hated me, thought me cheap, loose . . . But we were going to be married,' she said disjointedly, 'and it just happened . . . the day before the *hartal* . . . he wanted me so much, so desperately . . . as though he knew he was going to die. Oh, Rajan!' She started crying again. I was too choked to speak. 'Lal wanted me to tell you,' she went on, trying to compose herself, 'a long time ago . . . and let you decide. But I didn't want you to have me out of pity, out of duty. I know you, Rajan.'

Suddenly I felt cleansed.

'Marry me, then,' I said, 'and let me have your child. I can't go on living without you.'

'You are a good man, Rajan,' she whispered, lowering her head, 'but it's not fair.'

'Fair, fair, fair. I am sick of fair. Fair to me, fair to my parents, fair to your . . .' I took her face between my hands and lifted it to me. 'Just answer me one simple question. Do you love me?'

'Yes.'

'Will you marry me?'

She looked deep into my eyes for a while and answered, 'Yes.'

7

WE WERE MARRIED on the Buddhist and Hindu New Year's Day in April 1955, at the Registrar's Office in Anuradhapura. Only Lal and the Pathiranas, Sena's parents, were present. Lal's wife had just had a baby, and my parents disapproved of the marriage. I had waited of course till Leela's wedding was over, but the repercussions, my father felt, would still affect the family. Marrying a Sinhalese was bad enough, but a hospital attendant with a child by another man? They sent us their blessings, though, and wished us well. My father even wrote affectionately to Lali explaining that neither he nor my mother had anything against her personally but, society being what it was, the stigma of my marriage would attach to my younger sister, for whom they had still to find a husband.

I was surprised by my father's letter. I had not expected him to take it so well, though on reflection I remembered how often in the past he had stepped out of character at the most unexpected moments. But what surprised me even more was to find Uncle Para coming up the Registry Office steps as we were leaving. He had been transferred to the south-eastern region just as I was entering university, and I had hardly seen him since then. The last I had heard of him was when he did not turn up at Leela's engagement because he had decided to chuck up his job and had fallen foul of my father. And here he was, come all the way from Galle so that somebody from the family, as he put it, could bless our union.

I had moved to a school in Anuradhapura in January that year, in deference to Lali's wishes that her son should live near his grandparents. The old couple had not got over Sena's death and, having no other children, poured all their love into little Vijay. And the least she could do, Lali felt, was to give them a grandson for the son they had lost – though, strangely enough, they had already adopted me as their own. For myself, I did not care where I lived, so long as it was far enough from my parents in Colombo to prevent further embarrassment.

The school I taught in was more staid and straightforward than Holy Cross, perhaps because most of the children came from the same sort of rural, small town background. The teachers were pleasant and conscientious, as was the headmaster, but not colourful or exciting. Their sights

were not set on great success, either for themselves or for their pupils, but on modest achievement gently won.

But that, I soon discovered, was a characteristic of the people of the area generally. Everyone and everything here moved at his or her or its own pace and time, as though history for them had stopped with King Parakrama Bahu. And in a way it had, even two centuries earlier perhaps, when the great agrarian civilization of the Sinhalese with its brilliant irrigation works, its temples and palaces and parks and gardens, had fallen prey to dynastic wars and foreign invasions. It had flowered again briefly in the reign of Parakrama, builder of tanks and unifier of the people, but that was some five hundred years ago. No one had passed this way since then, no conqueror, that is, either Portuguese or Dutch, or even the English, who had stamped the whole country with their impress but had left the ancient Sinhalese kingdom to the indifference of officials and the encroachments of the jungle. A New Town with boutiques and bazaars and bus-stops and small businesses had sprung up in Anuradhapura after independence, but it served only to separate the past from the present. And even the tank, which the first prime minister, in emulation of Parakrama's 'sea', had caused to be built, passed the old kingdom by. Raja-rata, the land of the kings, remained unwatered and unsung, except by foraging archaeologists, and fell to the title of the Dry Zone.

All that was left now were memories of a great past shored against the ruins of time in the rituals and traditions of the religion that sustained it, memories that came alive at Poson and Wesak and New Year's Day, when thousands of devotees made their way to the temple of the Bo tree which Sangha-mitta, the daughter of the Emperor Asoka, had brought as a sapling from India, two centuries before the birth of Christ, to inaugurate Buddhism in Lanka. It was a branch of the self-same tree under which the Buddha had attained nirvana, and on it Devanampiya Tissa had symbolically bestowed his crown, signifying the union of state and religion. He built monasteries for the Sangha and tanks and temples for the people, and for himself a palace with a roof of bronze. But it was his grandson, Duttu Gemunu, whom the devotees remembered as they journeyed to the shrine, he who had united his people under the banner of race and religion and wrested the Sinhalese kingdom back from Elara, the Tamil king. He had, it is true, erected a monument to the dead Elara in memory of a just ruler and a valiant foe, but it had faded from memory beside the mighty *dagobas* he had built to the glory of the Sangha and the Sinhala nation. Other invaders would be repelled in the millennium to come, and other *stupas* and *viharas*, more illustrious perhaps and beautiful, be erected, but nothing would signify as clearly

as the works and deeds of Gemunu the definition of the Sinhalese people.

We lived in a small rented house on the outskirts of New Town. We had no lack of callers from the moment we moved in, mostly out of curiosity (to see how a mixed marriage was working out), but also out of a wish to befriend a couple who did not know any better. Whether they knew that Vijay was not my son – he bore my name – I did not know, but he was such an engaging little fellow that they forgot to look into his antecedents. (Mr and Mrs Pathirana they took to be Lali's uncle and aunt.)

There were a few, of course, who openly disapproved of us, but Lali soon won them over. Only the postmaster and his wife, or perhaps the postmaster because of his wife, had little but contempt for the '*parra Dhemmalā*' (Tamil bastard) and his 'low-country Sinhalese whore'.

Mrs Ellapola herself came from the deep south, but, having married into the remnants of the Kandyan aristocracy, felt herself a cut above the natives. She was a dark, squat, ugly woman, weighed down by heavy Kandyan jewellery and thick embroidered petticoats that peered menacingly from beneath her gaudy saris, worn in Kandyan style. She entertained everyone who was anyone in town: the DJ and the GA, the ASP and the DRO, the AFC and the MOH, and the DMO and the headmaster, and at times a police inspector or two – even at times the sanitary inspector – and patronized the lesser orders. With Lali and me, however, she was caught between entertaining (Lal had been in medical college with the DMO) and patronizing, and ended up by ignoring – till, that is, Lali came to be looked upon as friend and adviser by Mrs E.'s lower orders. From then on, Lali was irrevocably damned.

Our friends, however, advised us to take no notice of Mrs Ellapola and her kind. There were quite a few of them about, they assured us, but they were mostly outsiders, commercial people, government employees and the like, who had come with the New Town and were keen to get on in life. The people of the area had other things on their minds like the drought and the harvest, all being connected with the land one way or another. They were tolerant people, anyway, and moderate in everything, unlike the townfolk.

It was an impression that I had already gained from my acquaintance with the Pathiranas. It had puzzled me at first that Sena's parents should be so accepting of me. But that, I now saw, was how they would accept a long drought or a bad harvest, not without question or struggle, but, once the struggle was over, without rancour. It was not a peasant trait as such; northern farmers, I recalled, were much more fatalistic and dour, resigned rather than accepting. But it was not a racial thing either. That

much I had learnt from one of the first things that Mr Pathirana had said to me: 'I don't care if you are a Tamil, son. I am not a Sinhalese politician. I am a Buddhist farmer.'

Soon we were falling in step and found ourselves spending most of our leisure hours on Uncle Pathirana's small farm. Vijay enjoyed being spoilt by his grandparents, while Lali and I pottered about the place trying to be useful.

The routine broke only when Lal and family – he had a daughter now – came to visit us towards the end of the year. He seemed to have filled out a little since I last saw him and become more relaxed. His practice, I knew, had grown apace, and that I had expected would leave him little time for his political work. But how wrong I was I soon found out the following day.

His friend, Dr Fonseka, the district medical officer, had dropped in that evening and the conversation had come round to politics; all our lives seemed to be determined by it at the time, even our friendships. Fonny of course was a staunch supporter of Banda's Sri Lanka Freedom Party, whose Sinhala nationalism was pure anathema to Lal. It was on that issue, in fact, that he had opposed any alliance between them and his own party, the LSSP, even for the limited purpose of defeating the government. Fonny's opening remark, therefore, was particularly unpropitious.

'I hear your chaps are joining us, Lal?' It was said without malice but not without a sense of triumph.

'I can't be one of "your chaps" then,' retorted Lal fiercely.

'He hasn't changed, has he?' Fonny appealed to Lal's wife. But Hema made out that she had to put the baby to bed, and left the room. She clearly wanted no part in the discussion, and I did not realize the strength of her feelings till Lali told me later that Hema resented the time Lal spent on his political work. It had even begun to encroach on his surgery hours: not content with looking after his patients, mostly estate labourers, medically, he also took on their other problems, like housing and sanitation and pay and working hours . . . There was no end to it, and Hema was fed up. But Lal insisted that that was what a doctor was meant to do; there was no point in his dishing out pills and mixtures to his patients if the conditions in which they lived demanded yet more pills and mixtures. And if that got him involved in their fight to improve wages and living conditions, so be it.

'I think I'll go and help Hema.' Lali followed her out of the room. There was silence for a while, broken only by the sound of crickets in the night outside and the buzzing of a bluebottle around the electric light within. I was trying desperately to think of something to say, something that would lead us away from this discussion, but curiosity got the better

of me, and concern that the Left could be abandoning its position on the language question.

'Does that mean that the LSSP is going back on equal rights for Tamils?' I asked.

'No, not a bit,' replied Lal, springing to the defence of his party. 'This is just a no-contest pact, to defeat the government, not a coalition.'

'But Banda is going to the polls with a promise to make Sinhala the official language of the country?' I insisted.

'There are a whole lot of other things we agree on,' interrupted Fonny, 'more important things, like getting the imperialists off our backs and becoming really independent.'

Lal didn't say anything and Fonny was encouraged to go on.

'And how can we do that unless we give up English, stop using it as the medium of instruction, as the language of administration? Sixty, maybe seventy per cent of the people can't speak it. Have they no right to run the country? Become doctors, teachers, whatever?'

I had thought that a common language had helped to unite the Sinhalese and Tamils, but I could see now that the English-educated were a privileged lot. 'And that is good socialism,' Fonny concluded.

'Hold on, hold on,' said Lal, coming out of his reverie. 'Socialism is also about justice. Why Sinhala only? Why shouldn't the Tamils have a right to use their language for official—'

'But it hasn't stopped them from getting all the government jobs, has it?' interrupted Fonny testily. 'Only a tenth of the population, and they are almost half the administration. Can you beat that?' He turned to me for support, quite oblivious that I was a case in point.

'So all the Tamils own half the government?' asked Lal scornfully. 'What rubbish you talk! It's a small handful of Tamils who . . . a small English-educated upper class like the Sinhalese upper class. What about the thousands of workers and peasants and toddy tappers and fishermen and . . . And where do the plantation Tamils come into your argument? You know your trouble, don't you? You are confusing race and class, like your whole bloody party, so that you can keep your class while shouting race.'

'I am not,' retorted Fonny, squaring up to Lal. 'My grandfather, I'll have you know, was a carpenter and if—'

'Don't pull that one on me, man,' roared Lal, beside himself with anger. 'I know you too well for that. Look at you: your car, your suits, your club life.' Fonny looked chastened and Lal went on more quietly, 'You were such a conscientious doctor, interested in your work, and now you don't even look at a medical journal, do you?' He glared at the other man.

'And why should you?' A note of sarcasm had crept into Lal's voice; there was something about Fonny that provoked Lal's anger one minute and his affection the next. Perhaps because the man himself was harmless, but his ideas half-baked and dangerous. 'All you have got to do is to get rid of the Tamil guy above you somewhere and you get your promotion.'

'Is that what you think of me?' asked Fonny plaintively, and for a moment I felt sorry for him. Behind that sleek, fat assurance of his, something like doubt had momentarily quivered.

'No, but that's where the SLFP is taking you – giving you privileges just because you are Sinhalese. Don't you see, Fonny, that all that your party wants is to win the elections? They might have started off with some good ideas, trying to make things more democratic, giving both languages their rightful place and all that sort of thing. But ever since Banda realized that it was a good vote-catcher, each of the parties is making promises that it will be more Sinhalese and more Buddhist than the other, like a blooming auction sale.' Lal got up from his chair and began to pace the verandah. He was getting agitated again. 'Yes, that's what we are all doing, putting the Tamils up for auction, the ordinary Tamil people, not Rajan and his English-speaking lot. They can go anywhere – England, America – the world is their oyster.' He stopped and looked at me to make sure that I wasn't upset. 'But where can the ordinary people go? And the estate Tamils? Where are they to go? This is their country, it is their sweat and blood that built it. That's not words, you can see it in their coolie line-rooms. You can touch it . . .'

He was standing with his back to us, looking into the night, and his voice was tailing off. I had remained outside the debate, not caring one way or the other. But Lal's anger moved me. 'And your party wants to take away their citizenship and send them back "home". Home? India?' I had not seen him so wounded.

For a while no one said anything. In the other room we heard the baby cry. Lal came back and sat in front of Fonny, looking more subdued, chastened.

'I am sorry, Fonny,' he said. 'You are right. We are no better than you lot if we think that we've got to get into parliament in order to bring about socialism.' He rose from his chair again. 'The means do not justify the end. The means become the end.'

Four months later Lal left the party. The SLFP with the help of the LSSP and the CP had swept into power, outbidding the UNP with their promise to make Sinhala the language of the state in twenty-four hours, and outflanking them with their promise to make Buddhism the state religion. Lal was desolate. 'We are dead, Rajan,' he wrote. 'Socialism is

dead; the only decent thing in our lives is dead. We'll no longer be fighting injustice but each other . . . Language and religion: Banda has found the perfect formula for a ready-made majority. God knows what'll happen next.'

At first I thought Lal was exaggerating. The party, after all, had been his life, and the few communal skirmishes I had seen around New Town during the elections did not look so portentous. But when I went down to Colombo the following week to see Uncle Gnanam, who had been taken seriously ill with consumption, I could not help detecting a definite change in the atmosphere, in the mood of the people, in their attitudes, even. Already on the train coming down I had felt alienated by the petty communal talk around me. I was still inclined, though, to put it all down to the rivalries that gripped the country at election time and to my own imagination, which my marriage to Lali, perhaps, and my talks with Lal had honed to too fine a sensibility.

But there was no mistaking the significance of the incident I witnessed in the Pettah market the next day. I was on my way to the education department that morning to see Mr Silva, the chief clerk, for the third and, hopefully, the last time, to settle the matter of my back pay, when I ran into a disturbance on Main Street. I paid it no mind at first, because it was the hour of day when the policemen on the beat cleared the street of pavement hawkers, and there was always a little drama played out between the parties before the hawkers finally left, to return, of course, as soon as the police had gone. (They in turn would be back again on their beat in the evening, but by then the hawkers would have gone home.) Today, however, a crowd had gathered round the scene and, as I went up to investigate, I could see the constables being all but set upon by a couple of hooligans who had rallied to the side of the hawkers with cries of '*May appé anduwa, thang*' – this is our government now. The constables were getting the better of them, for all that, when someone, pointing to the policemen, muttered '*Moo dhemmalu*' – they are Tamils. And suddenly the mood of the crowd changed from mild amusement to ill-concealed hostility. Bewildered by the turnaround, and frightened, the constables were reaching for their batons when an inspector drove up in a jeep and dispersed the crowd.

Sickened by the scene, I retreated into a café close by for a cup of tea, but the talk around me was about the incident I had just witnessed, most of it delighting in the discomfiture of the *dhemmala kosso* (the Tamil cops). I was about to leave, my tea half drunk, when the elderly man at the next table addressed me in Sinhala.

'You are not one of these stupid people, are you, who think –' I shook my head.

'Good, good,' he continued, 'that makes for one sane person at least.'

'But I am a Tamil,' I declared, whether out of honesty or a sense of bitterness I was not sure, but my Sinhala must have impressed him.

'Better, better,' he rejoined in Tamil, 'that makes for two sane persons, you and me,' and he roared with laughter. 'A Sinhalese who speaks Tamil and a Tamil who speaks Sinhala. Excellent, excellent, now we can make a nation.' He rose to go. 'Don't give up hope, *thambi*, the fight is just beginning,' he said in Tamil.

Only as he was leaving the café did I notice that he wore a white coat over a white shirt with a white cloth to match – he was probably a senior peon or *aaratchi* in some government department.

Mr Silva had my file ready when I arrived at his office. He was as courteous and as dim-witted as before, but kept breaking, I noticed, into Sinhala. Perhaps he had spoken in the same way on previous occasions, and I not given it much thought. But now I found myself making it a point to reply in English, and we carried on like that, in a sort of mutual hostility, till the whole business was concluded.

When I got home that evening (I was staying with my parents) I told my father about the sudden change I had noticed in people's attitudes – or was it a change in me? I asked him.

'No, it is not you, son,' he began gently, when his friend Visvappa, who was visiting with us that evening, guffawed.

'Of course it's not you.'

'And it is not sudden,' my father went on ignoring Visvappa's outburst. 'It's been going on for some time, certainly in all the government departments. You don't work there, so you haven't seen it. I have. But now it has come into the open, that's the difference, they are no longer ashamed of being communalists. To insult the Tamils is a patriotic duty.'

'Your Uncle Tissa is very high in the SLFP you know,' he added, muttering, 'S.W. must be turning in his grave.'

He sounded more and more bitter, remembering perhaps his own failure to live up to S.W.'s teachings. Perhaps he regretted giving up his political interests after he had got married, perhaps he blamed himself for losing touch with Tissa.

'You don't understand these *Cheenapulis*, *thambi*,' Visvappa broke into my thoughts. 'They are not civilized. They have no culture. What can you expect from them? Where are their poets, their Valmiki and Barathis, their . . .'

The man's arrogance infuriated me. I had half a mind to tell him that my wife was a *Cheenapuli* too, and my son, but he was my father's friend and a guest in our house. I turned off, waiting for an opportunity to

escape and wondering how a learned man like him – he was a contributor to the *Madras Hindu* and a popular Tamil novelist – could be so proud of his prejudices.

‘Perhaps that’s why the Sinhalese want their language back,’ I heard my father say, emphasizing ‘Sinhalese’ as though to give Visvappa notice that he would not have them derided as *Cheenapulis*. ‘We never lost ours, you know, even under the British.’

‘But that’s because it’s an ancient language.’ Visvappa was unabashed. ‘And spoken all over the world, not just here and in India, but in Malaya, Fiji, Africa, even. Where is Sinhala spoken except here in Ceylon among a handful of people?’ Visvappa looked triumphant: he had sealed his argument with incontrovertible fact, and now fell silent, puffing complacently on his Jaffna cigar. I was beside myself with anger and disappointed with my father. Why didn’t he kick the man out?

‘You really have taught me something, Mr Visvappa, sir,’ my father said after a while, in measured tones. ‘You really have.’ Visvappa smiled, acknowledging the compliment as his due, and even I was taken in. ‘Here I was getting mad about this Sinhala-only business and it dividing our people and all that . . . but you, you have put me right.’ He was angry, there was no mistaking it now, cold, cold angry, but the man didn’t even see it. ‘You have shown me that it is precisely because Sinhala is spoken only in Ceylon that Ceylon must preserve Sinhala.’ Visvappa’s mouth fell open. ‘And it is people like you,’ my father went on relentlessly, ‘so-called learned people – oh, they are among the Sinhalese too, make no mistake, people like you – who make communalists of us all.’

Visvappa was shattered, and I was myself taken aback. I had not expected such monumental anger from my father. I had expected even less that he would violate his own protocol of behaviour: the man was a guest, and an elder, and should not, in any case, have got a dressing-down in front of a youngster like me. But perhaps it was because of me . . .

‘I don’t have to stand for this you know,’ Visvappa blustered, recovering from his initial shock. He picked up his umbrella from the stand beside him and rose to go but, seeing my father’s anger subside, went on more boldly. ‘So this is how you treat your guests, is it?’

My father shook his head wearily. ‘I am sorry,’ he murmured, ‘but I can’t bear all this communal talk –’

‘And that allows you to insult me in front of your son?’ Visvappa was on the attack again, sensing retreat.

‘But you insulted him. Have you forgotten he is married to a Sinhalese?’

‘No, but I thought you disapproved.’

'Disapproved? Disapproved?' Father was getting worked up again. 'I don't disapprove of her. She is a fine girl, a much nicer person than my son, much too good for him. I don't disapprove, society disapproves. And it is up to people like you and me to try and change society's attitudes, values. But you -'

'Don't start on me again, Sahadevan,' interrupted Visvappa. 'I have had enough from you for one day.' He wrapped his shawl around him and relit his cigar. 'I am going.' But my father did not stir from his chair and Visvappa left, with the parting crack that my father was unlikely to have any friends at all unless his manners improved.

As the door closed on him, my mother emerged from behind the curtain of the bedroom door and sat down solicitously beside my father on the settee. She had probably been alarmed by the sound of raised voices and had come out to investigate. But now, with her usual lack of ceremony, she went straight to the point of her own concern.

'Of course she is too good for him,' she said, snuggling up to my father. 'So why can't she come here?'

She had liked Lali from their very first meeting, and, although there had been only three or four occasions when I had brought Lali home, a strange bond had grown up between the women - strange, because I had become the unspoken cause of their common concern when Lali was still only a friend.

My father of course had looked on her as such.

'What are you talking about, woman?' he asked impatiently, his mind still on Visvappa. 'That man -'

'Ah, never mind that codger,' my mother broke in recklessly. 'What about the girl?' She had heard my father make a public admission of his affection for Lali, and was determined to make him act on it. 'Can she come home?'

'All in good time, all in good time,' he agreed irritably.

'When? Now that your favourite daughter is determined to become a "career woman", as she says?' My younger sister Premi had decided that she did not want to marry and settle down, like Leela; she wanted to do law instead, and my father had capitulated.

'So when?'

Father did not answer.

'Or are you going to wait for society to change?' she went on jocularly.

No answer.

'Or Visvappa to change?' she asked mischievously. Father burst out laughing.

'All right, all right, do what you like,' he said, and left the room.

I couldn't believe my ears. I had long ago given up trying to persuade my father to recognize our marriage, and I didn't remember my mother pleading my cause at the time. Perhaps the rising communalism in the country had put his own in question, and perhaps my mother knew, instinctively, that the time was right for her intervention. I looked at her in amazement, but she just beamed at me as though to say that there was nothing to it: life was a simple matter, no need to complicate it by striking poses and making gestures and taking positions. And once again I had that fleeting realization that she was no simpleton, just uncomplicated; it was something I could nestle into from the rigours of that day.

We gossiped merrily for a while, about our relatives and friends and my brothers and sisters, our family and her family, till the talk came round to Uncle Gnanam.

'You'd better go and say goodnight to him before he falls asleep,' she urged me.

'Yes, I'll do that. How is he?' She shook her head.

I slipped into Uncle Gnanam's room, hoping he would be alert enough to enjoy my story about Visvappa. The bedside light was on.

'Gnanamma,' I whispered, mischievously, contracting Gnanam and *mama* (uncle) into a girl's name, as I used to when I was a boy. 'Gnanamma.'

There was no answer. I went up to his bed. He was dead.

8

'WHY EVERYTHING HAPPENS all at once, I do not know,' I ended, recounting for Lali my eventful week in Colombo. It was late evening, and we were seated on the steps of the back porch, watching Vijay play with a stray kitten.

'That is how it looks at the time,' Lali got up to fetch Vijay's dinner. 'You had better feed him; he has been off his food while you were away.'

She brought Vijay's plate to me and called to the boy who, having run out of flowers to feed the kitten, was now tugging at the leaves of a shoeflower bush. 'Come to eat; *appa* will feed you.'

That seemed to appeal to him, because he immediately gave up his fight with the bush and waddled towards me.

'It wasn't all bad, was it?' inquired Lali, as I sat Vijay down beside me. But he insisted on being fed correctly, with him in his little wicker chair and me in mine.

'You mean about my father sticking up for you?'

'Yes.' Lali resumed her seat on the step. 'Your mother I understand, but -'

'It didn't surprise me. He is not a prejudiced person, my old man, just correct. Duty and principle and all that sort of thing - how our actions shouldn't affect other people or go against social custom. It is -' I broke off as Vijay began to show impatience at my lack of attention to him. 'Come on, *putha*, just two mouthfuls more, one for *amma* and one for *appa*, all right?'

'*Seeya?*' he put up his little finger to indicate that there was one for grandfather, too.

'Good boy,' I commended him as he proudly finished his last mouthful and clambered out of his chair. 'Now you can go and play.'

'What was I saying?' I turned to Lali. 'Ah yes - the old man, it is the Hindu in him . . .' I trailed off, watching the last rays of the sun fall across Lali's face and light up the ruby earstuds I had brought her from my mother that day. How lovely she looked in that light, all curves and rounds and softnesses, like those women in the Sigiri frescoes, her hands holding the shoefflowers Vijay had thrust into them. And I was grateful just to have her there, to look on her. She healed me, took me out of a jagged world and healed me. I went and sat on the step beside Lali and took her hand in mine; she nestled gently into my arm and somewhere something opened up within me like a womb and took her in.

We sat there for a while as the evening closed in on us and the fireflies began their dance against the night. My hand lay lightly on Lali's breast, cupped around the beat of her heart. Vijay, tired out by his playing, stretched himself across our laps and fell asleep. We carried him to bed and lay down beside him.

It had struck me as odd at the time that Lali had not reacted to the tales of racial troubles I had recounted for her on my return from Colombo. But then, unlike me, she never made a drama of things; she set about trying to resolve them instead. So when I found her bundling up some old clothes early the following morning (including a shirt or two of mine and a sarong I had hardly used), I had an uneasy feeling that there had been trouble closer to home.

'What happened?' I asked.

'Ponnan's boutique was set on fire,' she blurted out, as though the secret burned her.

'Ponnan? For God's sake why? What has he done to anybody?' It seemed inconceivable to me that anyone would want to attack the old man or burn down his oilman store. He and his wife were a fixture in

the town, in the poorer part of it, giving credit to those who could not afford cash till pay day, and helping out the more needy with the occasional loan.

'It all started when a couple of thugs from out of town bought some cigarettes and soft drinks from him and refused to pay. Ponnann might not have minded even that, but they abused him and called him names and threatened to kill him and his wife if they didn't go back to India.' Lali broke into a flood of words, unable, even for my peace of mind, to hold herself back any longer. 'To India, I tell you, the man has hardly been to Jaffna, let alone India. He has lived here as long as Uncle Pathiranna, and so has his wife. Their daughter is buried here, their only child. India, what India?'

'Did no one go to his help?' I asked.

'Yes, the Jayagiri stores manager came and chased the fellows away. But they came back, at night, it must have been them, with a whole lot of others. Ponnann says they were outsiders, dead drunk on election money.' She was becoming incoherent. 'It was the day after the election . . . burnt his place down while Chellamani was asleep . . . Ponnann . . .' and she broke down and cried.

'And I thought it would be different here,' I muttered helplessly.

'Oh, it is,' she pleaded, 'it must be; we will make it different, for Vijay, for children' – there was a great intake of breath – 'children are children, for God's sake.'

The sound of her crying woke Vijay, who sat up in bed and stared silently for a moment at his mother and me, and then crept into her arms and burst into tears. I could scarcely hold back mine.

'What a family we are,' I managed to get out at last, 'cry-babies all.' At which Lali essayed a tearful smile and Vijay quickly followed suit. She wiped her face and his with her sari and went back to her packing. I offered her some money for the Ponnans from the back pay I had received.

'They won't stay, you know,' Lali remarked. 'They want to take whatever Mrs Ellapola is offering for the shop – she has had her eye on it for some time – and go and live in Jaffna.'

'But they have no people there!'

'No, but they have no people here, either, not any more, or so Chellamani thinks. She claims that Mrs Ellapola brought in the thugs.'

'What rubbish,' I guffawed. But Lali was not laughing. She was not sure that Chellamani was not right. What better way to get rid of them and take their property? Mrs Ellapola had let it be known that her husband's people were in power now.

'And how are people towards you?' I asked.

'Oh, no different . . . I have my usual arguments, all the same old hostilities. But I think I am getting tougher. I hit back harder, show no mercy.' And she started laughing. I laughed too; the prospect of Lali showing no mercy was laughable.

I didn't see the Ponnans that morning as I was already late for school. But when I visited them with Lali the following weekend, they were already packed and ready to leave. There was hardly anyone to see them off, only the boy who worked in the shop and the old woman who cooked for them, and of course Mrs Ellapola who wanted to make sure that they left.

'They'll be better off in Jaffna, anyway,' observed Lali. 'People are much nicer there.' And when I looked questioningly at her, she explained that she had spent a few days in Jaffna town some time ago. Her cousin Vinitha was senior matron at the general hospital there. And Vinitha loved the place, spoke Tamil like a native, and wouldn't dream of living anywhere else.

'I think I'll go and live in Jaffna, too,' Lali said when we got home. And when I didn't react to that, she turned her anger on me. 'When are you going to take me, then, to your village? Or are you too ashamed of me?'

What on earth had brought that on? I wondered, hoping it would go away. But Lali would not budge. I tried to reason with her, pointing out that it would be wiser to be reconciled to my father first before visiting our folk in Sandilipay (not that they took their cue from him) but Lali was not in a reasonable mood.

'So I need a certificate from your father, do I, to go anywhere?'

'Don't be such a stupid . . .' I flared up and stopped, realizing that it took a lot to make Lali so small and petty.

But try as I would to smooth things over, Lali would not ease up. She wanted me to do things, be more active outside the school, influence people, like teachers and parents, work for a fairer society, for socialism or something, away from communalism, anyway. But Banda, I replied laughingly, covered both contingencies: the government was both socialist and communalist, it nationalized the buses and communalized the nation. So where was I going to insert my influence? The joke did not go down very well with Lali, though it gave me the excuse to do nothing. And that provoked Lali into more good works. She started doing a stint at teaching night school, leaving me to look after Vijay, since I had nothing better to do!

I did not mind that at first. Of course I missed Lali of an evening when I returned home from work. But Vijay helped to cover the empty spaces. He was such great company that I found myself keeping him up

well past his bedtime. And that got me into further trouble with Lali.

In late September, my parents came to see us on their way to Jaffna for a wedding, and the occasion brought Lali and me closer together again. They were only stopping for a few hours between trains, but Lali went to great lengths to prepare a grand meal for them. She prevailed on Auntie Soma to gather all the greens she could from her garden because I had told her that my mother was partial to them. And she sent Uncle Pathi to find wild boar for my father, why, I could not say, except that for some reason best known to her, she traced my taste for it to him. I refused to take part in all this fuss, but had to admit to Lali later that it had helped to loosen people up. My mother, of course, needed little loosening, for no sooner had she arrived than, in her usual unfussy way, she went scouting round the house with Vijay, found the greens in the kitchen, and straightaway set herself down to 'perform' her *sambol*. My father, for his part, roasted pieces of wild boar on an open fire to 'taste' with the special double-distilled arrack he had brought for Uncle Pathi. His Sinhala wasn't good enough for serious conversation, however, and Uncle Pathi had little English, so that after the first friendly skirmishes over the comparative merits of venison and boar, they spoke of little else but of Vijay and me and Lali, and of their concern for our future in a land darkening with communal hatred. Beneath that concern I thought I detected an unspoken understanding between them that we were the future. My father even remarked, approvingly, how Vijay called me *appa* in Tamil, but addressed him in Sinhala as *siya* – but that gave them no solace for now. What it did give them though, it seemed, was a sense of companionship in a common elderhood that embraced us all.

When the time came for my parents' departure, everybody was heavy-hearted. Auntie Soma literally hung on to my mother as though she had found again a long-lost friend from her schooldays. (They reminded me of the photograph that hung proudly in my mother's room at home: of herself in a Kandyan sari and her great friend Sumana in Tamil attire. They had gone to the studio to be photographed and on a sudden girlish whim had swapped clothes.) Vijay was trying desperately to hold on to all his grandparents all at once with his two little hands. Lali glowed quietly.

But when they had gone, she picked up the subject of going to Sandilipay once again (encouraged, no doubt, by my mother), and not till I had promised that we would go there before our anniversary in April the following year did I finally get any peace.

Sandilipay had changed. It was some seven years since I had last been to

the village for my Aunt Lakshmi's funeral, but something drastic had happened in that period. Or it had been happening slowly all the time, and I hadn't seen it. In fact I hadn't even seen till I saw it through Lali's eyes that the village was not a village at all, but a hamlet set back from the main trunk road, in a semi-circular hollow that exited at the back, somewhere beyond the cluster of houses, through a dense grove of palmyrah trees to the sea. What had given it space and life was the hustle of children and the bustle of grown-ups. But there was only silence now, and it hit me even as we descended from the road and into the winding lanes that led to my cousin's house. The lanes had not changed – they were the same narrow, muddy paths I had walked as a boy, and the fences were still of woven palmyrah leaves. But there were deep ruts in the lanes now, and gaping holes in the fences, through which you spied a deserted house, its mud walls crumbled into ant-heaps to reveal a broken chair or table, at which some uncle or aunt and their children had once sat to eat – on which, perhaps, my great-uncle Vythi had set down his Sunday chicken and arrack. The tamarind trees were still there in their appointed places, one by the temple well, and the other by the school-house door. But the well was parched and dry and the school bell rang no more. And through that flat and eerie silence I conducted my wife and son to Cousin Kanni's door.

She cried as she embraced me and Lali and the boy in turn, and me again, this time to bewail the loss of her husband. He had died some five years earlier, but this was ritual; she had to cry again, for me, and, crying, bind me back into her family. Her two young daughters came out to join us, but they were too modern to cry. They merely embraced us and fell into an easy conversation with Lali, whose fluent Tamil had surprised them into uninhibited speech.

'Do the girls know?' Lali asked me later, 'that their mother was married before?' I had told Lali how Kanni's first husband had left her on her wedding night and how it had made her bitter towards all men. Till, that is, her second marriage, to a man much older than herself, had restored her faith in people.

'No, I don't think so,' I replied, 'but then it's probably been wiped off Kanni's memory.'

'Oh no,' Lali disagreed. 'Did you see the way she was crying? She was crying in remembrance of that too – because it was you, wasn't it, who brought the news from the bridegroom's house that morning? To your father?'

I nodded, submitting to her truer perception.

'You have a special place in her affections,' Lali went on.

'Is that why you think she's being nice to you?' I needled her, wanting

to know what she thought about her reception.

'What, for your sake?'

'Yes.'

'Oh no. She likes me for myself,' Lali said matter-of-factly. 'What's more, I think she likes me for you. That surprised you, didn't it?' She laughed and dishevelled my hair. I smiled sheepishly. 'We women are not so complicated, you know. I don't think Kanni cared one bit whether I was a Sinhalese or my son a bas—'

'Lali,' I stopped her. I did not like to be reminded that Vijay was not my child or that his father was Lali's lover before me. But that was why, perhaps, Lali liked baiting me in the first place with what she called my 'manly prejudices'. It was her theory that men were more conservative than women, more keen to uphold tradition for its own sake, to be safe in, whereas women stuck to it only so long as it promised new life.

'You never know when to stop,' I added, working myself into a fine anger.

'You are right,' she began and stopped, noticing my mood. 'I am sorry.' She came over to my chair and kneeling before me put her head in my lap, all kittenish now.

'Will you take me to Jaffna town tomorrow?' she asked after a while. 'To see my cousin Vinitha?'

I gestured grandly: yes.

'To stay with her a few days?' she urged, putting her arms around me and lifting her large eyes to mine in mock promise of reward.

'Hmm, hmm.'

But I went down with fever the following morning and Lali had to postpone her visit to her cousin for a few days. By the time I had recovered, she was virtually a native of Sandilipay. She had visited all our relatives, learned our gossip and folklore, and even winkled out of Kanni the stories of my youthful escapades. To which of course Uncle Para had had a few things to add from my schooldays with him in Colombo.

Lali in fact was quite enamoured of Uncle Para, looked on him as a sort of rebel turned philosopher, and spent endless hours on the stoop of his ramshackle house listening to his vagrant tales. She had liked him the very first time she had met him, at the registry office, when he had embraced her warmly and asked her why her son was not at the wedding. Lali had laughed outright at his brashness and made some comment about it, whereupon Uncle Para had confessed that he was a 'love-child' too.

He had chucked up his job in the railways — too much hassle, he said, with his damn bosses, and he had seen enough of his country anyway —

and returned to Sandilipay to take up farming. Of course Grandfather Pandyan's land was all gone by then, he told Lali, and all that the old man had left Saha and him was just a tiny plot on which he kept a cow and a goat and grew a few vegetables. But he was not complaining; he had had a good life, a full one even, and it was time to divest himself of material needs and desires. One must leave the world as one entered it, with nothing.

There was nothing in Sandilipay to take, in any case, he grumbled in a less exalted mood, or in the whole of Jaffna province, for that matter. The land was dry and ungriving (had Lali seen a river or a mountain anywhere?) and broken up into a thousand dowry claims. Was it any wonder that the village was dying of old people? What was there for the young to do?

In his time, at least, there had been government jobs for the asking, for Tamils anyway, and a government job was like a piece of land, and like land they had shared it out among their people. But now, there was nothing: no land, no jobs, no future, and what was youth for, if not a future?

Lali had come away from that conversation in a mood of impenetrable gloom, and recounting it to me did nothing to cheer her up. She had begun to get a glimpse of the north as never before, and the prospect saddened her. This was indeed another country, not because of its language or its people, but because it was so barren and bleak, so different from her own lush and prosperous south. There were no natural resources here to lift it up, except 'the fish in the sea and the palmyrah tree', as Uncle Para put it, and no jobs, except fishing and toddy-tapping. And those, Uncle Para had pointed out, were low-caste jobs; the high-caste *vellalans*, the so-called landed gentry, would not touch them or put money into them. So, no fishing or liquor industry either, just a lot of high-caste people working a profitless land and a lot of low-caste people stuck in profitless jobs.

Lali could understand now why government jobs had such a claim on the Tamils. But what she could not come to terms with was the way they kept looking back on 'the old days', as though it was preferable to have been underlings of the British than a free people. What was even harder to stomach was that Uncle Para should hold that view. Or perhaps she had misunderstood him. She looked at her diary again (oh yes, she kept a note of her conversations with Uncle Para) and plagued me with questions I could not answer. And finally, the following morning, even before I could wake up from my fevered slumber, she had taken herself to Uncle Para's house. I followed slowly.

Uncle Para had finished his prayers and was sitting himself down on

the sofa beside his morning toddy pot. My aunt was away in Kopay visiting her daughter Devi.

'Ah-ha,' chuckled Uncle Para, seeing Lali. 'Up early, I see, to filch my toddy. Ah, and Rajan too. Oh well.'

Had he really said that they were better off under the British? Lali burst out precipitately.

Uncle Para laughed at that and offered us a drink. I declined and, saying that I still had a fever, went and lay down on the sofa.

'Well?' Lali persisted, and sat down on the floor before Uncle Para.

'Well what, my daughter?' Uncle Para was expansive.

'Didn't you want the British to leave?'

'But they never came here,' he protested, 'not to the north. There was nothing here for them to take, except the people. So they sent us teachers and missionaries to colonize our minds with their schools and their churches and prepare us for service in the British Raj. And not just in Ceylon, mind you, but in Singapore and Burma and Malaya.'

Lali picked up a coconut shell, blew the ants out of it and poured herself a bit of toddy.

'Hmm, this is nice, refreshing, different from coconut toddy,' she murmured.

'But we played them out you see,' Uncle Para continued. He turned towards me, but I affected indifference and he proceeded to address Lali. 'We took their jobs all right and their education, but we kept our language and our culture. Wherever we went, we kept our language and our culture, and they sent us to some god-forsaken places, malaria-infested areas, jungle areas, and they shoved us from place to place at a moment's notice, the bastards!' He was getting quite heated now. 'We could never settle down, have our families with us, send our children to proper schools, we never saw them from one year's end to the next.' He fetched a deep sigh.

'All we had was ourselves and that which had made us what we were. And that we held on to with what was left of our lives. Because that was all we had, you see, that was all we had.' He was talking more to himself now than to Lali. 'That was all that kept us from becoming slaves.'

He poured himself another coconut-shell full of toddy and emerged slowly out of his reverie.

'We were like those workers in South Africa shunted all over the place,' he said slowly, looking into the distance as though searching for a correct analogy, 'or those people you hear about in Europe nowadays...'

'No, no,' he corrected himself, his eyes lighting up at his discovery,

'we were coolies, high-class coolies, administrative coolies who kept the government services running. Yes, that's what we were.' And then, encouraged by Lali's laughter, he summed it up in one of his aphorisms. 'From south India they got the plantation coolies and from north Ceylon, the service coolies.'

'And from the south?' Lali asked, joining in the game.

'The south? From the south they got the peons,' he chortled. 'All Tamils were clerks and all Sinhalese were peons. And today the peons are fighting to become clerks.'

Lali was certainly taken with Uncle Para, with his gaiety and his shrewdness, his turn of phrase, with his physique even (short and stocky and as broad as a house), and amazed too that she should find such wisdom and understanding and tolerance tucked away in a little hamlet beyond the reach of civilization. (How was it, she asked in an aside, that I had failed to be touched by all this?) But then there was Uncle Pathirana, too, who had the same qualities as Uncle Para, though perhaps not the same way of expressing himself. What a pity they had had no proper schooling. But what, on the other hand, had schooling done for me, she wanted to know. People like Uncle Para and Uncle Pathi were the real backbone of the country. They were the real custodians of our history and our culture, and they were everywhere. There was hope for the country yet.

But when she returned from her stay in Jaffna town – my fever hadn't let up and I couldn't go – Lali was less optimistic. What she had seen there, and heard from her cousin Vinitha and her friends, made her feel that things had changed since her last visit some years ago. Then she had been struck by the tranquillity of the place, but now she sensed a disturbance permeating the calm. A town that had once slumbered had been prodded awake by Banda's Sinhala Bill. It had never been a busy town, except around the bus terminus and the marketplace, and the exaggerated activity around there only set off the somnolence of its surroundings. It was not an opulent town either. Everything about it – except perhaps the old Dutch buildings, which were high and large and vacuous, and the old Dutch fort, emptied of everything now but the silence of its prison and its keepers – was neat and bare and functional. Its streets ran in neat rows of main roads and crossroads from one place to another (no chance of getting lost here, thought Lali), its houses were stark and simple, just shelters from the sun and the rain; even its poverty was not ostentatious. Or, rather, it wore its poverty like a virtue, as though to make do with what you had was more important than to get what you hadn't, a sort of stoicism which Lali had put down to Hindu beliefs and culture. But now that the language through which that culture was

lived was under attack (and Uncle Para, she seemed to think, had given her those eyes to see with), the stoicism was turning to angry protests against the government. Already Sinhala sign boards were being defaced and Sinhala letters blacked out on the number plates of government vehicles. To Vinitha it had appeared a petty and vindictive campaign against the Sinhalese, but Lali saw it as a fight against the government, not against the people. She did not as yet quite understand it all fully – and no doubt my telling of it now after all these years gives her conversation a greater clarity than it perhaps showed at the time – but even that partial understanding made her troubled and uneasy. The old order was changing and the new did not look too bright. And I could neither counter her arguments nor allay her foreboding: she was one of those people in whom the world sits and spins out its events even before they transpire. I was afraid.

9

IT WAS THE NIGHT of the full moon when we arrived back at Anuradhapura. The scent of temple flowers hung in the evening air. Women and children, all in white, were making their way to temple. Their menfolk straggled along behind.

‘What a beautiful night!’ I exclaimed, hoisting Vijay on to my shoulders.

‘It’s a night for worship,’ said Lali. ‘It’s so long since I’ve been to temple.’ She sighed.

‘Let’s walk home,’ I suggested and, taking my wife’s hand in mine, I led her out of the bus-stop.

The roads were still hot, but a light breeze wafted against our faces. The moon broke through the trees above us, and Vijay ran ahead playing hide and seek among the shadows. By the time we got home, he was ready for bed.

Lali and I sat on the verandah and ate our dinner by the light of the moon.

‘Good Lord,’ she said suddenly, ‘look at the size of it. Do you think they have the same moon everywhere in the world, or is ours the best?’ She laughed.

‘You love this light, don’t you?’ I asked.

‘Yes, it’s soft and gentle and paints everything in pastel, like a woman.’

‘You are in a jolly mood today.’

'Must be the news.' The prime minister had announced a meeting that morning with Chelva, the Tamil leader, to work out a peaceful solution to their differences.

'It's going to make such a difference to people's attitudes,' Lali went on. 'You are lucky, you only get the children's prejudices. I get the full blast from the adults at night school.'

I did not want to tell Lali that it went a little deeper than that for me. Until a few months ago, I had not thought of myself as a Tamil, I had no need to. I was a Ceylonese, a Ceylonese first, anyway. But that was not how people looked on me any more or addressed me, even my colleagues at school. I was an outsider, an alien, and being married to a Sinhalese made me more alien still.

'You silly bugger,' she said and kissed me.

'What?'

'I know what you are thinking. Come on, let's go to bed.'

The following week the head of my school sent for me and informed me that I had no need to put in for a transfer to a Tamil-medium school (a move which he himself had suggested in the first place). My Sinhala was improving, he felt, and, besides, English was going to remain the medium of instruction for a while. I should feel free to come and talk over my problems with him at any time. In the staffroom, my colleagues went out of their way to be friendly to me, as though to compensate for their past coldness. Even Mr Gurugé, the Sinhala master who took orders from above with the alacrity of a waiter, greeted me with assumed warmth.

Ah well, I thought cynically, there was no official obligation to hate me any more. But even so, the relief in not having to tip-toe my way through life put me back at ease with myself.

Strangely enough, it was Lali herself who dissuaded me from being too sanguine. She had taken to going to temple with Auntie Soma and liked it at first: she found peace, she said, just sitting there and gazing at the still, silent form of the Buddha. But as she began to meet people and talk with the priests, she became uneasy. Something was going on there that she could not put a finger on. The monks were all the time trying to make out that the temples were in some sort of danger from the pact the prime minister was making with the Tamils, and people were beginning to believe it. Even Auntie Soma was inclined to go along with popular sentiment. Priests don't lie, she told Lali. Why should they? They had nothing to gain from it. And it was true what the chief priest had said: when the land is in danger, the race is in danger, and when the race is in danger, religion is in danger. The Tamils could always go back to India. The Sinhalese had only Ceylon. Not Rajan, of course, she

had added. But then he was not a proper Tamil, was he?

'Dear Auntie Soma,' I laughed, pushing Lali's fears aside. 'People are just confused at the moment, even the priests. They'll soon go back to being themselves once the pact is signed.'

But one evening, a few weeks later, I had put Vijay to bed and was seated on the verandah watching the fireflies and waiting for Lali to come home, when the radio blared out the news that the monks were on the march, hundreds and hundreds of them, marching from Colombo to Kandy, to the temple of the Buddha's Tooth, to announce to the world that Bandaranaike had betrayed Buddhism and had forfeited the right to be prime minister.

When I told Lali the news, she cried. Unlike me, she had expected some such eventuality all along. But she still could not accept it. 'This is the beginning of the end,' she muttered gloomily. 'There'll be trouble here soon. We'd better take Vijay to his grandfather's.' But the march of the monks fizzled out before it got to Kandy, and Lali's fears were allayed.

In December the rains came and battered us all down, Sinhalese and Tamils alike. The rivers broke their banks and drowned the towns, the endless monsoon turned the rice-fields into lakes. Uncle Pathi's crops were ruined, as were everyone else's in the area, and there was a general shortage of food. But people came together in their hardship and helped each other out, forgetting their differences. It was, of course, the time of Lali's flourishing. She was everywhere, helping everybody, wearing herself thin. 'You see, Rajan,' she announced in triumph. 'People can live together.'

'Yes, yes,' I replied impatiently, worried about her wild swings of mood. 'But slow down. You are rushing about like there's no tomorrow.'

She would not listen to me. I tried to get Lal to speak to her when he visited us at the end of March. By then the flood relief work was over, but Lali had taken to organizing weekend excursions for her students to little-known places of historical interest – Retigola and Kantalai and Padaviya – which, in ruin and in legend, showed how Hindus and Buddhists, Sinhalese and Tamils had together built a common civilization. I went with her on occasion to drive the hired van, and Vijay came with us, but our presence did little to slow her down. And all that Lal would do was to prescribe her some vitamin pills and fob me off with the unoriginal remark that if I couldn't beat her I should join her.

'But it's not just her health I'm worried about, Lal,' I protested. 'Things are getting pretty dangerous on the roads. On our last trip to Kalawewa, we had a small accident with a bullock cart. It was nothing at

all, just a knock. The bull fell to its knees but was all right and the carter was happy to get a few rupees. But the crowd that gathered got nasty when they realized we were Tamils – or rather, and this is the funny thing, they thought Lali was a Tamil because she had put a *pottu* on her forehead. Of course Lali gave them hell in good Dematagoda Sinhala and they fled, but still . . .’

‘Ah, all that will blow over soon, Rajan,’ Lal remarked to my surprise. ‘I have faith in the common sense of ordinary people, and once Banda and Chelva sign the pact everything will be fine.’

Pact, pact. I was sick of the bloody pact. Our whole life seemed to be suspended between pact and no-pact; our simple, little everyday deeds were being determined by politicians hundreds of miles away who knew nothing of me or Lali or Vijay. And Lal seemed to care more about politics than about his sister, and I told him so. But he just laughed and said that medicine could not treat society, only politics could, and Lali of course was more sensitive to changes in the air than most people. ‘And being married to you makes her even more sensitive. That’s why I think she’ll be fine once all this Sinhala-Tamil business blows over,’ Lal finished.

I put Lal’s argument to Lali that night. She looked up at me from brushing her hair and said, ‘It’s not going to blow over, Rajan.’

I sat down on the bed beside her. ‘Why do you think that?’ I asked.

‘It was something Uncle Para said.’ She put away the brush and plaited her hair thoughtfully. I waited, it was useless trying to rush her. ‘Do you remember that day I came back from Jaffna town feeling rather uneasy?’

‘When you went to see Vinitha?’

‘Yes, that day. I asked Uncle Para where all this was going to end, and he answered: “war”.’

‘War? What war?’

‘Communal war, between the Sinhalese and the Tamils, that is what he said. He said it was already there, written into the constitution.’

‘Into the constitution?’ I could not believe my ears.

‘Into the voting system: one man, one vote.’

‘Rubbish,’ I laughed.

‘Is it? What if you turn one man one vote into one Sinhalese man one vote, one Buddhist man one vote?’

‘Well, what?’

‘You have a ready-made majority – and that is what Banda has done.’

‘Good Lord, I never looked at it like that.’

‘And that is where politics is going to be fought out in future, he said.’

That is the legacy the British left us, he said: divide and rule, only this time Banda will do it democratically with the vote.'

'Uncle Para said that, ha?' I gave it more thought now. I had grown up under his aegis and remembered only too well that his judgements, often delivered offhand, were seldom wrong. I only hoped he was wrong this time.

'But Banda can't go back on the pact now?' I remonstrated.

Lali did not respond at once. She seemed to be lost in her own thoughts, and when she began to speak, it was from a distance still. 'That's not what Uncle Para thinks.'

'That's the funny thing about Uncle Para, you know.' She was addressing me now. 'You know how he hates Banda's guts, but suddenly one day he began talking about the man as though he was some old friend of his who had gone astray, lost his way. Lost himself on the way to an Oxford education, was how he put it. A divided man, he said, Banda was, who thought west and felt east. It was so . . . so . . . what's the word?' Lali looked at Vijay. 'Shrewd? And then he suddenly went off into philosophy. You know what he's like when the toddy gets to him, he was in his seventh cup, and he said, he said . . . Wait a minute, I put it down in my . . .' and fetching her diary, she began to leaf through it. 'Ah, here it is: "we may recover from betraying the trust others have placed in us, but the wounds of self-betrayal bleed us to death".'

I took the notebook away from her and pulled her towards me. Vijay stirred in his cot. All I ever wanted was to be with my wife and my son. But they wouldn't let me. If only the pact would hold.

I began to pray. I prayed at every turn, in every place, wherever I found myself. In lavatories, in the classroom, on the streets, with every agnostic nerve in my being. I did not know what else to do, I did not know how else to hold on to myself, my wife, my son.

It all depended on the *bhikkus* now. They had the ear of the prime minister, the prime minister hung on their every word. We hung on his. The country was on tenterhooks waiting for his pronouncement.

On April 9th it came: there was going to be no pact with the Tamils, the country belonged to the Sinhalese. Official.

April 9th was the day my mother died. I had heard from my father the previous evening that she had suffered a heart attack, but I could not get to her in time. The trains were delayed, the buses held up. Everyone from the station-master to the bus driver was glued to a radio, waiting for the prime minister's announcement. By the time Lali and I got to her, my mother was dead.

I could not take it in at first; I could not accept it. She had always been there, permanent, indestructible, a part of me, like a hand or a leg that

you did not miss till it was gone. I took after her, everyone said: easy-going, understanding, quick to make friends. But I was porous, like a sponge, I thought, or if not porous, absorbent, never hitting back. She was not weak though, she had protected us all her life like a fence, fought for us. Was I like that?

I gave up trying to find her in me and listened instead to what the odd assortment of mourners who had come to her wake had to say of her. But their conversation kept alternating between my mother and the demonstrators at Rosmead Place, outside the prime minister's residence, and gradually I found myself piecing together in monstrous collage a picture of my mother and the events of the day.

Among the mourners that afternoon were the pedlars and mendicants and fortune-tellers and beggars who came to my mother's door and stayed for a chat or a morsel of food, Sinhalese most of them. And yet it was these same people who were encamped outside the PM's residence, shouting 'Death to the Tamils'. This Tamil was already dead, she who spoke Sinhala better than they, knew how to go down on one knee and bow her head as she offered up *pinna-patha* to the mendicant monks of the Buddha . . . she was dead, this simple, unsophisticated woman whom my father, in the moments of wonderment she brought him to, called 'a profound innocent'.

As my mother's cortège left the house, the prime minister was laying a wreath on the pact. I cried inconsolably, but for which death I did not know, there was so much dying that day.

Lali and I stayed on another week, for the traditional feeding of the poor, at my father's request. But I had already turned my face against it; there was an end to feeding the mouths that bit you. I was beginning to get bitter, hating those who had betrayed my mother, perhaps because I had stumbled on her myself only when she was dead. I even looked at Lali askance. Why should she be different from the rest? She was a Sinhalese after all.

I was bitter and I began to take it out on Lali and, when she struck back, I put it down to more of her Sinhalese arrogance. I ridiculed her wearing of the *pottu* and accused her of trying to be more Tamil than the Tamils. And on the train going back to Anuradhapura, I suddenly leant across her and wiped the *pottu* off her forehead – whether in fear, because the compartment was full of Sinhalese, or in hatred of them all, I still do not know.

By the time we got home, we had stopped speaking to each other for the first time in our lives. I began to notice that her blouses were stained with the sweat from her armpits, that she did not spend enough time with Vijay, and had never learnt to cook *rasam*, and I resented the

time she spent on saving Sinhalese morons from themselves. I decided to teach her a lesson and go to the Tamil convention in Vavuniya the following weekend. It was time to stand up and be counted.

Some of my friends were going by car and offered me a lift, but I was still undecided when they left. Besides, I thought, if I took the night train I could meet some of the delegates coming from Colombo. At the last moment, though, I changed my mind again and did not go; it was not worth all the trouble just to get my own back at Lali. She wouldn't know in any case, since she had taken Vijay off to Uncle Pathi's. Besides, I had a stomach upset and didn't want to make it worse with all that convention food. I took to bed instead.

I was woken up in the early hours of the morning by the sound of Lali crying in the front room and being comforted by her friend Chandra, and I was tiptoeing to the door to see what was going on when Lali burst in sobbing. Her face was drawn and weary and she shook as with malaria. But the moment she saw me, the weariness fell off her face, and her eyes became bright as suns. With a cry of joy she flung her arms round me.

'Oh *panna, panna,*' she cried. 'You are safe! You are safe!' She turned her head. 'Chandra,' she called out, 'he is here, he is safe!' And then turning back to me she said more calmly, 'You didn't go then?'

'What is all this? What do you mean I'm safe?' I was bewildered and moved. 'Stop crying!'

'You don't know then?'

'Know what?'

'That the Colombo train was derailed and the Tamils going to the convention were beaten up? One of them died on the way to hospital.'

'Good Lord! And you thought I was on the train?'

'Yes, naturally. Thank God you didn't go. What changed your mind?'

'I didn't feel like it,' I said sheepishly, feeling I had let myself down again. It was not Lali I had been angry with, but myself.

'I am sorry,' I heard myself say. 'I did not mean all those things. Forgive me.'

'Oh Rajan,' she whispered holding me close.

'I think I should go down to the railway station and see how Chelliah is making out,' I said contritely.

'Let me see Chandra off and I'll come with you,' Lali offered.

When we got to the station, however, everything seemed quiet and peaceful, and station-master Chelliah was brewing his 10 o'clock tea on the kerosene stove in his office. He was surprised to see us, and even more surprised when we told him what had brought us there.

Yes, of course, the Jaffna train had been derailed, he explained. But at Polannaruwa, not here. That did not mean that the trouble was not going to spread to these parts in the near future, he warned, wagging a finger at us. He himself would stay at his post, but his family? He was a short, dour man with a ferocious-looking handlebar moustache (I'd always wondered how he'd act in a pinch). He brought a cup of tea over to Lali and urged her to give up her excursions for a while. True, the rumours were worse than the facts, but they added fuel to the fire. Mrs Ellapola, the postmistress, he said, was having a whale of a time dishing out the news from her own private telegraph. Mr Chelliah himself had thought of sending his family to Jaffna, but it was already too late: the 'Sinhala Army' was on the march. Did we even know there was such a thing? Indeed, we had heard of the raggie-taggle army of landless squatters and labourers who called themselves the Sinhala Patriots and vowed to rid the ancient Sinhalese capital of Polannaruwa of Tamils, but we had paid it scant attention. According to Mr Chelliah, though, it was the only army in operation; the government's army was going to do nothing to protect the Tamils.

'Ah, but the government agent here is a good man,' I said comfortingly. 'And he is not going to let anything happen to people here.'

'What about Polannaruwa, then?' protested Mr Chelliah. 'He is GA of Polannaruwa too, and he did nothing there. And it's not as though it's a hundred miles away.'

'Yes, but he can't be in both places at once,' I remonstrated.

'I don't know, R.S.' said Mr Chelliah, scratching his head. For some reason best known to him, he always addressed me by my initials, to give distance to familiarity, perhaps. 'You may be right,' and then more gravely, 'or you may be wrong. You can never say about these things.'

'What things, Mr Chelliah?' Lali asked.

'These things,' Mr Chelliah repeated. 'These communal things. You can never say with Sinhalese people, whether they are GAs or SPs or postmasters or anything . . . whether they will do their duty. That sort of thing, Mrs R.S.'

'Me too?' Lali laughed uneasily and looked to me for reassurance. But I could give her none. I knew what Chelliah meant, knew it in my marrow like an ache, and I couldn't lie to it. The sign posts were gone, we did not know which way to turn, whom to turn to, whom to trust. I got hold of Lali's hand and took her home. I had to steer her and me through all this, hold myself steady till all this passed. It would pass, it had to pass.

I waited for news, hung avidly on every word that came over the radio. But there was no news, no government broadcasts, no official

announcements. I scoured the newspapers, but they had gone silent like the government, and people were making up their own stories out of a fear of silence, and passing them around like news. And they were stories of such savagery that I shut my mind against them. They were rumours after all, and rumours of rumours, and I was a man of reason, no reasonable man could believe them. Or I looked for a hero on the horizon somewhere, who would come and rescue us . . . Sir John, maybe, Sir John Kotelawala, the 'white knight' who lived in England now, scorning the nativism of his countrymen . . . maybe he'd stop playing the white man and come back home and be prime minister again.

And then Fonny came to see us. The army of Sinhala Patriots, he said, had taken Polannaruwa and were even now marching towards Anuradhapura, and the people in town were getting ready to welcome them with their own little deeds of communal mayhem. Already Tamil shops in Main Street had been burnt and looted and a Tamil beggar stoned to death. We were not safe here, any more, he had come to take us to his place.

I felt afraid and grateful and relieved, but my bitterness broke through like bile. 'But this is your government, Fonny.'

Fonny wilted for a moment. 'Yes I know, Rajan,' he began shamefacedly, and then got angry. 'But not any more, not when people are being killed and the government does nothing because it's not their people. What sort of a government is that?'

But the bile was still there and I was about to make a sarcastic remark when Lali broke in. 'Thank you Fonny. Of course we'll come when things get really bad.'

'No, you must come now,' replied Fonny with unusual determination. 'You don't know what these people are like, and they are marching this way to town.' He sat down heavily on a chair and put his head in his hands.

Lali and I looked inquiringly at each other. He was rather a large man who kept himself in trim and was always neatly dressed. But today, slumped in the chair, he looked shabby and rumped and worn out. And his voice came out in a drone.

'You know what they did? In Polannaruwa?' He took a deep breath. 'They went to the government sugarcane farm two nights ago and drove the Tamil coolies out of the line rooms into the cane-fields. And then . . . they set fire to the cane . . . and when they ran out, children, mothers with babies . . . when they ran out, they waited on the other side . . . like a game . . . and hacked them to death. I . . . I . . .'

Lali went up to him and put her hand on his shoulder.

'We'll come,' she said.

Fonny's house was full of refugees, most of them from Polannaruwa. Fonny introduced us to them as we went through the house in search of his wife. When we finally came upon Rohini in the annexe, where Fonny had his surgery, we found her dressing the wounds of a grey-haired man. Her eyes lit up when she saw Lali.

'I am glad you decided to come,' she said. 'I could use another pair of trained hands. Hello, Rajan. This is Mr Arasu,' she introduced me to her patient. 'He was in charge of the Polannaruwa government farm.'

I noticed then that his hair was not grey but singed and his whole right side swathed in bandages. I was about to commiserate with him when a woman came bursting through the door, followed by half a dozen others.

'Mrs Fonseka, Mrs Fonseka,' she said agitatedly, 'you missed the PM's speech just now on the radio. I couldn't find you.'

'What did he say?' asked Rohini.

'Is he bringing out the army?' inquired Fonny.

'No, no, nothing like that -'

'He said it was an unfortunate -' began another woman, trying to remember the PM's words, when the older of the two men who had just entered the room helped out.

"An unfortunate situation", those were his words. "An unfortunate situation has arisen, resulting . . . resulting -"

"Resulting in communal tension," the younger man finished the sentence.

'Is that all he had to say, the . . .' Fonny burst out angrily. 'Nothing about the east coast massacres or Polannaruwa or . . . God almighty, for four days the man is silent, and now -'

'He called on the nation to heal the communal breach,' the young man intoned sarcastically.

'He is so damn weak,' commented Rohini.

'He has given the green light to the *bhikkus* and the bigots,' Mr Arasu bit out bitterly. 'The whole country will be in flames now.'

And the whole country was, and we were marooned in Fonny's house, not daring to go out. We got a message through to the Pathiranas, to say we were all right. But we could not get through to Colombo to find out how my father and the rest of the family were. The lines were down or busy, or the one friend of Fonny's who had a phone and lived close to my father's house was never at home. When, after three days of trying, we finally got through to him, all he could tell us was that Kotahena was still safe, though the riots were even now moving from the south towards Colombo. The only good news was that the prime minister seemed to be bowing to international pressure to bring out the troops.

I didn't care any more. I was exhausted from five nights of worry and sleeplessness, of events crowding in on each other like a cinema reel gone mad. The stories that people kept piling up on each other like corpses swirled through my head like a nightmare without end. None of this could be happening, I said to myself from time to time, closing my eyes. It had never happened before, not in 2,000 years of history, not like this; the Sinhalese were my friends, I had married one, my son was a Sinhalese; none of this could be happening . . . only to open my eyes again and find more of Fonny's friends seeking refuge in his house. Lali and Rohini and some of the other women were cooking food in huge cauldrons in the garden and the children were playing around under the mango tree as though nothing had happened, nothing was happening. But threading through all that ran a fresh batch of rumours brought by each new refugee. I could no longer tell fact from fiction or sleep from waking. The only bit of sanity I could cling to was the note from Vinitha assuring Lali that she was safe in Jaffna. 'They have not touched a hair of a Sinhalese here,' she wrote – and I was proud of my people. My people?

That afternoon, the governor-general proclaimed a state of emergency and brought out the troops. The prime minister had handed the government over to the governor-general but, as Fonny commented shrewdly, it was only to keep himself and his government clean of Sinhalese blood.

Not that it mattered one bit. The important thing was that it was all over, the nightmare week, or soon would be. We embraced the radio and threw it in the air, as we heard a sigh of relief go through the land. Fonny's wife brought out a bottle of brandy and some sherry for the ladies and, carrying a crate of Vimto, went in search of the children. Lali and I didn't stay for the celebrations. We wanted to hurry home to fetch our son from the Pathiranas and get back to a normal life.

But the next day Fonny was back again. He needed our help at the town hall, he said, with the people who had fled the riots into the jungle and were now slowly coming out of hiding. Women and children, mostly, who had not eaten for days, and men, old men, young men, he could not say, they all looked old. Would we –

'Of course we'll come,' I interrupted him. 'Is there anything we can take from here?'

'No, the car is full already, but some old sheets perhaps, Lali?'

'There is a train-load of refugees stranded at the station,' he added, more to himself than to us, 'but I don't know what we can do about them.'

The town hall was full of refugees and more were coming in by the

minute, the old and the weak on bicycle pillions or bullock carts. Lali went off to help Fonny with the sick and the injured. My job was to go round talking to people and finding out what they needed.

There was very little room to move about in, but some sort of order had emerged to create a path from the kitchen and the water tap and the toilets to the knots of people huddled on the floor. There was tension in the air, but an undemanding stoicism among the people; they asked for nothing. Old people sat on their haunches and looked blankly ahead of them, chewing what little arecanut and betel-leaf they could lay their hands on. The children played around in a subdued fashion as though they were in a funeral house, while their parents sat around and spoke quietly in whispers. No one moaned, and those who could helped out with the cleaning and the clearing and the looking after. They had lost everything, except, it seemed, the will to live. Some had lost their minds, like the Cambridge scholar who kept reciting English nursery rhymes and uttering childish noises: he had witnessed his wife and mother being stripped of their clothes and beaten, and his daughter's ears ripped of their earrings, before they were all killed, and his mind had cracked. Someone had found him roaming the streets around his burnt-out home some miles from Colombo, and put him on a train to Jaffna – when, nobody knew. He reached out for my hand as I passed him and, pulling me down, bade me stay awhile and play with him; the other boys and girls wouldn't, he complained, because he had eczema.

As I rose to go, someone held me from behind. I turned round to see Mr Chelliah.

'What on earth . . .' I began, and stopped. He didn't look quite normal.

'I didn't desert my post,' he said, wagging an admonitory finger at me for thinking such a thing of him. 'The post deserted me.' And he laughed.

'Yes, of course,' I nodded, not knowing whether to laugh or to cry.

'What was I to do?' he asked more seriously. 'Ha? Tell me, what was I to do? There was this train, stuck in the station, with all these refugees from Colombo, and the drivers refusing to go into Tamil country, that's what they said, "Tamil country"', and he chuckled at that. 'And I had no Tamil drivers. So what to do? No trains could come or go. So I closed up the station and came here to join my wife and children.' He sounded quite sane for a moment, and with a little bit of discreet prompting, I managed to find out that a day or two after I last saw him, one of his own porters had turned up at his house and brazenly demanded protection money from Mrs Chelliah. When she offered him all the money she had, some Rs 25/-, he had caught the youngest child

and put a knife to her throat. Chelliah had come home just then and had bravely picked up an iron bar and gone for the man, who released the child and fled. The shock had been too much for Chelliah's wife and he had brought her here for safety. He, though, had remained at his station. He had to, he said, it was his duty.

'When duty is gone, *thambi*,' he had dropped the R.S., 'everything is gone.'

A few days later, the trains began to run again and the refugees to pick their way back to whatever lives they had left. Lali and I went to fetch Vijay from his grandparent's home. Auntie Soma flung her arms around me and sobbed, while the old man raged against the dying of Sinhala civilization.

On the streets, hate and anger had burnt themselves out, and shame followed in their wake. There was an equal silence among my colleagues at school and a conscious attempt by my students to be on their best behaviour. But there were empty places where the Tamil students had sat that called out to an emptiness in us all.

I waited for Lal to come. I needed his understanding, strength. I could not take them from Lal now. But he did not come. He wrote:

Dear, dear friend,

I did not come because I could not face you. I can hardly face my patients, but then I am a doctor.

I am so ashamed, so terribly, hopelessly ashamed for my people. I say 'my people' only to take the blame. I hope you understand that, because I know how impossible it is for you to make such distinctions.

You are such a true Ceylonese.

I am ashamed to be a Buddhist, even in name. How could a creed of non-violence be so horribly deformed into a religion of violence, and by its own monks? Banda started something when he brought them into politics. God knows where it will all end: religion and race, what better recipe for genocide?

I am ashamed, most of all, for my old party and the unions. All their talk of working-class unity is sullied with communalism. Where were they when their fellow workers were being slaughtered?

You see, Rajan, unless we throw up our own leaders, not borrow them from the upper classes, we will never have a revolutionary party. But the tragedy is that this combination of religion and race will finish class politics for ever, and these buggers can't even see that.

I don't know where it's all going to end, my brother, but I have a feeling in my bones that the worst is yet to come. Maybe that's

because more and more I find myself looking at the world through the eyes of my 'coolie' patients, and I see little hope there, certainly no hope of justice. I don't think that anything has demoralized them more than their disenfranchisement.

Not to belong, not to have roots, that's terrible. I remember you reading out a poem to me once long ago, in Hakgala Gardens. Remember? You used to carry an anthology with you all the time and you read something from a fellow called Hopkins. Something about 'Birds build – but not I build' and 'Time's eunuch', and suddenly you stood up and cried, 'My roots need rain'. Well, these people have had the roots taken from them. What use is the rain?

Forgive me this dismal letter, but I had to tell somebody.

Take care of yourself, my friend, look after my sister and nephew.

Yours,

Lal

The following week I went down to Colombo to see my father. He had aged, and talked of retiring. The government had provided early retirement for those who could not work in the Sinhala medium and, though my father had a working knowledge of the language, he did not have the heart to go on. He had witnessed his junior Tamil colleagues in the post office being humiliated and assaulted by their Sinhalese subordinates, and he had been helpless to do anything. He could not bear to go back to work there again. It reminded him of his cowardice, he said, his worthlessness. Only the sudden and now frequent visits of Uncle Tissa, who had come looking for his old friend when the troubles had started, had raised my father to himself. But neither Uncle Tissa nor I could keep him from sending in his papers. Nor could we persuade him to leave Colombo, and go and live in Sandilipay. His country might have left him, he said, but he was not going anywhere.

I sensed then that an era had come to an end and, involuntarily, I drew my wife and my son closer to me. Vijay had been more affected by the events of the past few weeks than Lali and I had suspected. He was no longer the cheerful, self-sufficient boy who created his own games and spun his own stories around him, even getting us to act in them. He was withdrawn now and moody, sad even, sometimes, and at night he would wake up from some frightening dream shouting for his mother. And shuttling him back and forth between us and his grandparents, we realized, was too unsettling for the lad.

So we finally decided to find a servant to look after him when we were at work. We had never liked the idea of having servants – Lali in particular was dead against it – but she had either to give up her social

work or leave Vijay with his grandparents. And that we were both reluctant to do. Luckily, one of Lali's friends in Polannaruwa, a wet nurse, wrote to say that she knew of a young woman with a child of about Vijay's age, who would be happy to look after Vijay and do the housework in exchange for food and lodging. And that seemed to overcome Lali's reservation. So the following week we hired a van and went to pick them up.

Lali was in an ebullient mood and had suggested that we make an outing of it. She had made *string-hoppers* and *pol-sambol* and some of Vijay's favourite *haal-massas* for lunch, and by Minneriya lake we sat down to eat.

As we ate, Lali told Vijay the story of the great King Mahasena, who had been a rascal like him, Vijay, when he was young, but had later helped his people by building great tanks like this one to water their rice fields. At first, the banks would not hold, but then the king had a dream, in which a God appeared and demanded the sacrifice of a royal prince – 'Like me?' Vijay piped up – before the dam would hold. His sister had offered up her son (the king had none) but the king's minister, without telling anyone, had substituted the body of an animal instead. The banks held, and to everybody's delight the prince was found to be alive and well.

'Did the king know?'

'Yes, I think he did, because he was a wise man, who had one eye on God and one eye on his people.'

'Ah?' inquired the little fellow, yawning.

'I'll explain some other time. Now we must all lie down and rest a little, all right?'

It was late afternoon and the sun had begun to decline. A slight haze hovered over the water, like gossamer, filtering the sunlight through a prism of rainbow colours. Storks and spoonbills and sand-larks walked loftily along the wash of water on their stilted legs, as a kingfisher, spreading out its red and blue wings, swooped past them in a flash of electric blue and came up with a silver prey in its beak. It was all colour and stillness and quiet, except for the chattering of the parakeets on the *pipal* tree and the mynah's futile attempts at song. In the reeds by the bank a water-snake wriggled about, drawing Vijay's attention. But the quiet had got to him too, and he watched it without a word. After a while he snuggled up between Lali and me in the grass and fell asleep.

We must have fallen asleep, too, because we were woken by voices raised in raucous conversation. Three men were walking towards us, labourers, probably, who had been working on a sluice somewhere, judging from their wet clothes and the tools they were carrying.

'Master,' the tall, swarthy man accosted me in Sinhala, 'give us a cigarette.'

'I don't smoke,' I replied, also in Sinhala.

'Give me a light, then,' the man said, taking out a packet of beedi and staring brazenly at Lali whose blouse had come undone in her sleep. My instinct was to ask him to go to hell, but he was a well-built fellow, and I didn't want any trouble I couldn't handle. I gave him a box of matches. He squatted with his friends a few feet from us and smoked, ogling Lali, but his companions were impatient to get a drink, and finally got him to go with them. And as they left I heard one of them remark on my accent, and the other reply, '*Dhennala nemay, thambiya*' – not a Tamil, a Muslim.

It was dusk by the time we resumed our journey; we were staying the night with Lali's friends and there was no need to hurry. But some ten or fifteen miles from Polannaruwa the van stuttered to a stop. I knew very little about engines, and Lali even less, and after tinkering with the carburettor and cleaning the plugs, we sat down to wait for a passing car. It was a lonely stretch of road with very little traffic on it, and thinking we'd have a very long wait in front of us, Lali got into the back of the van to put Vijay to sleep. But just then, by the light of our headlamps we saw four men coming towards us on bicycles.

'Ah, what have we here?' I heard one of them say drunkenly. 'Why, it's our master again.' It was the swarthy man and his companions. 'Where's your beautiful wife, sir?'

'Carolis,' he called out to the fourth man, who was larger and drunker than he. 'Carolis, it is this man's wife I was telling you about, nice piece, beautiful. Ask Charlie *aiya*.' But Charlie and his companion were settling themselves down drunkenly on the footboard of the van, passing a bottle of arrack between them.

'Where's she then?' Carolis asked, putting his hands on my shoulders. He was a huge man and the weight of his hands alone was enough to crush me. I began to tremble, hoping and praying that Vijay wouldn't make a noise. (Lali would have twigged what was going on.) 'In the van, is she?'

I shook my head and, summoning up my last ounce of courage, replied boldly that I had dropped her and my son off at a friend's house.

'You don't think I am going to drag them around this time of night with jackals like you around, do you?' I heard myself say. The man hit me and, as I was falling, the swarthy one held me up and kneed me in the groin. I fell, but even as I fell I could hear Lali leaving the van, and I began to shout insults and abuse at the top of my voice, hoping to drown her movements.

'You bastards are in big trouble,' I screamed, raising myself up from the ground and wiping the blood off my face. 'Do you know who I am -'

At this, the two on the running board burst out laughing.

'Who are you, then?' asked the man they had called Charlie *aiya*. 'The governor-general?'

'No, he is a *thambiya*,' corrected his weasel-faced companion, 'or maybe even a *dhemmala*, who knows?'

And that started off the shouting man again.

'Come on, what's your name?' he asked tugging at my swollen nose. 'What's your name?'

'Ratnayake,' I shouted back, beating his hand away.

'Buddhist are you?'

'Of course,' I replied, and felt a warm trickle run down my trouser leg.

'Then ask him to recite a *gatha*,' Carolis called from behind the van. 'There's no one here.' Lali and Vijay must have slipped off into the bushes. 'Go on, recite.'

'*Namo, namo, Buddha dhivakaraya*,' I reeled off in relief, remembering the hymn the lady next door had taught me when I was a little boy. '*Namo, namo gothama chandimaya. Namu namo Sakya nan . . . nan . . .*' I couldn't remember the words, '*Bath mindha, dhevindha, narindha rajang . . .*' I couldn't go on. Carolis kicked me in the groin again and I yelled out from the searing pain. And the others began to lay about me too, prodding me to remember the words, when Lali rushed out of the bushes brandishing a stick and shouting to the men to leave her husband alone.

'Oh Rajan, what have they done to you?' she asked trying to stem the bleeding from my nose.

'Rajan, Rajan, did you hear that? Rajan?' Weasel-face screamed in triumph. 'A *dhemmala*. What did I tell you, he is a *dhemmala*.'

'Tried to cheat us, did you, you son of a whore,' the swarthy one yelled at me. 'We'll teach you a damn good lesson. Cheat us, hah, you Tamil bastard?' And with that he tied me to a tree while the others ripped off Lali's clothing, shouting, 'We will show you what we do to Tamil cunts.' And one by one they raped her. I lost consciousness.

The next day I learnt, in hospital, that my Lali was dead. They would not let me see her mutilated body, but as I looked on her noble head lying on the stone pillow of a mortuary slab, I felt my senses leave me.

BOOK THREE

False Memories

'When memory dies a people die.'
'But what if we make up false memories?'
'That's worse, that's murder.'

Uncle Para to Vijay

HERE WAS A TRICKLE of rain at the window. Vijay did not notice it at first. Engrossed in the thoughts provoked by his repeated reading of the Communist Manifesto, he stared blankly at the parched land that stretched before his eyes. His grandfather was out there, somewhere, digging, harrowing, ploughing, but seldom, it seemed to the boy, harvesting. A parched land, and now this drought.

'A spectre was haunting Europe.' Why a 'spectre', he thought inconsequentially. Was he clear about the meaning? Perhaps his English was not as good as he thought. He had looked up the word in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* that his father had sent him from England: 'spirit', it meant, 'ghost'. He toyed around with the dictionary, picking up new words, and came back to the inscription again. 'For my beloved son', it read, 'on his thirteenth birthday. From his loving father.' Another ghost, his father, appearing and disappearing in his letters and gifts and his promises to return. He hardly remembered him and had to keep referring to the photograph he kept in his old tin trunk to remind himself what his father looked like. So much like himself, he thought, tall and thin and . . . good-looking? . . . though he was not his real father.

The memory of his mother was more real, more immediate. He lived with it all the time. He even blamed himself for not having been old enough to have saved her life. And, as a boy, his one ambition had been to find the men who had killed her and avenge her death. That seemed the only way to escape his guilt, and all the adventure stories he read pointed to such an end. But, as he grew older, he realized that her death was too real for him to dream up a tidy ending, and the reasons for her death too puzzling to be resolved so easily. Her memory, not her spectre, haunted him now, like an experience whose meaning he had to find, not later but now, not in the next world but here.

His grandfather said that there was no meaning in these things, it was all due to one's karma, like the drought was his. His grandmother, a more devout Buddhist, declared that all life was sorrow and one had to accept it as such. Only Uncle Lal held out that the events that had led up to his mother's death need not have happened, and should never happen again. To be killed for a Tamil, what sort of life was that, his uncle would ask – but, in a way, that was how she had lived, without a sense of difference. And through him, through Uncle Lal, Vijay began to find understanding for his mother's death and meaning for his own life.

'Philosophers interpret the world,' he remembered his uncle quoting, 'our business is to change it.' The dark night of her going had somehow to be turned to day.

The rain beat against his window like drum-beats and broke into his reverie. From somewhere deep within the house he thought he heard his grandmother call. He looked out on the darkening land. The monsoon had broken.

'*Putha*, where are you?' He heard her now. She was in the front of the house but the rain had muffled her voice. 'It's pouring in here – fetch a bucket, hurry.'

Vijay ran to the kitchen but couldn't see a bucket anywhere. He found a large tin, instead, and took it to his grandmother in the front room.

'I told that old fool to fix it,' she was muttering, trying to mop up the water dripping steadily through the roof, 'but he said it wouldn't rain. Ah, here you are. No faith, that's what it is, no faith.'

'What?'

'Your grandfather, that's what. Where is he, he's going to catch his death of pneumonia.'

Just at that moment the old man came in, easing his tall sodden frame through the half-open door, a mad grin on his face as though he had brought down the rain all on his own.

'Yes, yes,' said the old lady crotchety, 'but we don't want you bringing it in here. Shut that blasted door and take your clothes off.' She sent Vijay off to fetch a fresh sarong and shirt, and sat the old man down on a stool. Then taking the towel she had slung across her shoulder she began to rub him down vigorously.

'Where's Raman? Isn't he coming to eat?' she inquired after the Tamil labourer who helped them on the farm.

'No, he and his wife are both sick, he went off early ... nothing serious.'

'You can give his share to Vijay,' he added, as the boy held out the sarong to him. 'Look at him, how thin he is getting. What's the matter, don't they feed you at that university? Or is the food terrible?'

'Oh, it's all right,' replied Vijay, picking up the wet clothes, and then more brightly, 'I am not thin, grandfather, I am wiry.'

'Wiry, wiry,' snorted the old lady. 'What is wiry? He doesn't eat, that is all. All that jungle food has killed his appetite, and all that funny exercise he does, all the time, exercise, training he calls it, training for what? Ask him. Go on, ask him.'

'Now, now,' admonished her husband. 'We don't want to go into all that again.' He rose from the stool shrugging into his shirt.

They had both hoped that once Vijay got into university he would

give up his madcap ideas about overthrowing the government. He was just 16 when he joined the People's Liberation Front, straight from high school, and could not have been expected to know any better. But he was going to be a graduate soon and had a future to look forward to.

'Ask him something else then,' the old lady pressed. 'Ask him whether he is preparing for exams or preparing for something else.' She tried to glower at the boy but her face pulled back into its well-worn folds of anxiety.

Pathirana looked at his grandson standing quite still in the middle of the room, his head bowed against the breaking storm. How well he knew that stance: the boy had made up his mind, except that he was a boy no longer, but a grown man, almost as tall as him and wiry.

'Well, son?'

Vijay fidgeted uneasily and put his hands behind him, as though in surrender to their love, but made no answer.

The old man sat down again, beside his wife, on the settee. This was going to take longer than he wished: grandmother and grandson were both primed for a row. It had been building up for a while now; he had felt the tension between them ever since the boy had come home for the holidays, but he had been too busy saving his crops from the drought to give the matter much thought. And his wife had kept him from that extra worry, till now.

'Well?' he asked again, knowing full well that he would have to ask a few more times before he got an answer. It was not that Vijay was stubborn, but that he would not let himself be easily shaken out of a conviction or a course of action he had arrived at through his own experience and reflection.

Soma had warned her husband that Vijay, with his final exams only a few months ahead, had begun to look impatiently beyond them, not to a job but to resuming his 'real work'. It was just like that other time when he was in high school, she recalled, when he was impatient to get through his O levels and please his grandparents, only to join the PLF and please himself. He had that same distant look in his eyes and that same urgency in his behaviour; her husband should not be taken in by his studiousness.

Vijay's mood had not altogether escaped his grandfather's notice. He knew, besides, that the events of the last two years had agitated the boy's mind again. His closest friend, Deva, had been killed the previous year when Sinhalese police had opened fire on a Tamil cultural congress in Jaffna, and now the government was ejecting Tamil coolies from the plantations and sending them back to India. Raman's turn couldn't be far off.

'Come on, son, speak up,' the old man tried again. 'What is it you want to do when you leave Peradeniya?'

'You see, I told you,' whispered Soma in her husband's ear, 'he is up to something.' Vijay's silence was beginning to confirm her worst fears. She could not bear the thought of him getting mixed up in 'all that' again. She wouldn't give it a name, it was all so horrible, the bodies floating down the Kelani river, young kids, boys and girls, murdered by a government led by a woman, a mother . . . she had seen them with her own eyes when she had gone in search of Vijay. Luckily he had been only six months in 'that thing' when all the fighting started and he had managed to get out of it unscathed. But a number of his friends were dead or in jail or simply missing. She herself knew Padma's parents and Nanda's and Hector's and . . . She could not go through all that again. First her son Sena, then her daughter, she had never accepted Lali as anything else, and now her grandson, her last-begotten . . . well, that's how she felt about him.

'The next time, he is going to get killed,' she sobbed softly behind her husband's shoulder.

Vijay went up to his grandmother and put his arms around her.

'Don't cry, *aatchi*, please,' he pleaded. 'I would tell you if I knew, I would, but I don't know myself what I am going to do after I leave university.' All the student union activities he got up to were nothing, he assured her, there was no PLF any more, and, in any case he was not going to be so stupid the next time. His grandmother was not mollified.

'There is nothing going on anyway,' Vijay went on, and more to himself he added, 'no one cares about anything, everything is dead.'

The old man nudged his wife gently.

'Go on, don't trouble the boy any more, tell him it's all right.'

Vijay took his grandmother's hands in his. 'Don't worry, *aatchi*. I'll probably find a job, like everyone else . . . And settle down,' he muttered self-deprecatingly.

The rain, now that it had come, would not let up, and old Pathirana's smile began to fade from his face. The rice fields could do with the water, but his vegetable plots were going to be ruined if this kept up much longer. For seven days he and Vijay and Raman had worked themselves to a standstill, deepening and widening the drains and drawing off the water, but the rain kept flooding out their efforts. The old man stood every morning now at his door, looking bleakly out at the lakes and rivulets and mud-piles that the rain had made of his land. The drought at least had kept him busy and taken his mind off things. The idleness unsettled him more.

Vijay too was impatient to return to Peradeniya and get down to serious work. He had hoped to spend a few days with Uncle Lal in Hatton before that, but landslides were reported to have washed away some of the railway track up-country. There were reports too that the Mahaweli was rising and that minor floods had already caused some damage around Peradeniya and Kandy. He chafed at the delay. He was no use to his grandfather while the rains lasted, and he had not brought all the books and notes that he needed to get on with his own work. He might as well go to Kurunegala, he thought, and do some combined study with Gamini. He had written to his friend a couple of days earlier, but decided to set off without waiting for a reply, lest the roads became impassable. His grandmother did not much like the idea of his leaving so soon but acknowledged that his studies came first. There was no point in the boy kicking his heels here, the rain was not going to let up. But if he was leaving, he should leave before the roads got too hazardous for travel.

Early the following morning, Vijay gathered his few belongings together and crammed them into a canvas hold-all. He was just finishing his packing when a hand reached out from behind him and stuffed a handful of notes into a corner of the bag. Vijay turned round and confronted his grandfather.

'You can't do that, *seeya*,' he protested and, taking the money out of the case, he tried to stuff it back into the folds around the waist of his grandfather's sarong. 'I don't need it, honestly I don't. I have enough money from the tuition I have been giving high school children. I told you about it. Go on, *seeya*, keep it please.'

But the old man merely took out the bunch of notes from his waist and replaced it in the bag. He kissed Vijay on the forehead, saying, 'I don't need it either, so you throw it away,' and left the room.

His wife slipped in a minute later with a parcel of *string-hoppers* and *seeni-sambol* she had made for 'the boy's journey'. The journey itself was little more than a couple of hours, but there was no use telling her that: a journey was a journey.

'Raman and his family are here to see you off,' she announced. 'Have you finished packing? Hurry or you'll miss the bus.'

It was always such a ceremony when he left home, and it always followed the same pattern. On the previous night his grandmother would lay out his favourite food – how she managed to get it together at such short notice and with no money, he never found out – and his grandfather would conjure up a bright new Palayakat sarong from somewhere and thrust it into Vijay's hands. (The old man had probably hoarded it year after year waiting for an auspicious day to wear it.) Early the next morning, Raman and his family would turn up to say their goodbyes.

Only now Kamala, Raman's daughter, all grown up and 17, would not come the evening before to put some sticky sweet in Vijay's hand, and would, this morning, stand aloof and shy as he waved goodbye. And Raman's wife would rush up to him with a bottle of lime pickle that she had just that minute finished making, and Raman would carry his bag to the bus stop, though Vijay was a little boy no longer.

It had all begun with his first send-off to 'foreign parts' when he was 12 years old. He had won a scholarship to the Central School in Kurunegala but his grandmother did not want him to go. The boy had grown up with her and not been taken from her side ever since his mother had died. The wrench was too much to bear.

'You kill us in our wombs, you men,' she had cried out bitterly to her husband. 'You never let a thing lie and grow and put forth in its own season. You pluck it out. I should have had daughters. When they leave, they still carry you with them.'

The old man had bowed his head; there was truth in what she said, he knew it from his farm, only he could not apply it to people. It was a useless knowledge, it tied him to the ground. But it kept him safe. His wife soared, and fell, and soared, and, although she herself was prepared to accept her joys and her sorrows equally, he could not often bear her anguish. Not given to pain himself, he lived vicariously, in hers.

'Never mind,' she said, her anger leaving her as quickly as it had come. 'The boy must study, and stand on his own two feet. We have nothing to leave him.' Her husband agreed, cheering up. The farm indeed was not worth speaking of, and she was right; the boy must learn to fend for himself. There was Lal, of course, who was always helping out with money and advice and encouragement, but he had his own family worries to cope with. Besides, a scholarship was not something to be scorned or treated lightly.

'Let's give him a proper feast then,' he had proposed, 'and dress him up in some new clothes and get Raman to take his bags to the bus station.'

2

THE RAIN HAD CEASED by the time Vijay got to Kurunegala. Neither Gamini nor his mother were at home and the front door was shut. Vijay found a dry spot on the verandah steps and sat down to wait for his friend.

The garden looked even more overgrown than when he was last here, and the last rusty hinge had finally given up the gate. The grass lay thick and matted on the ground, and convolvulus and hibiscus roamed wildly along the broken fence. The house too was in bad repair, isolating it even further from its neighbours. Tiles hung loose from broken rafters in the verandah, and the paint hung like scabs from the slatted windows. Even the steps on which Vijay sat seemed dangerously close to collapse. Everything spoke of hard times and neglect.

The Bandaras had once been a prosperous family. The first Bandara was a village headman from the Kandyan district who, refusing to kowtow to British overlordship, had moved south to his wife's home in Kurunegala. There he began to practise some of the craft of the native physician which he had picked up from his father-in-law, a *vedarala* famed for his techniques in bone-setting and in treating ulcers and kidney complaints. His son and eldest grandson had followed in his footsteps, but by the time Gamini's father, Herath, was born, western medicine had overtaken *ayur-veda*. Herath, having neither English nor money to go to medical school, opted to become a schoolmaster instead. He clung on to the large, rambling ancestral home, dreaming of the power and influence his family had once wielded, and waited for independence to restore his fortunes again. But 1948 came and went, with only his marriage to a fellow schoolteacher from Kurunegala Central to make it memorable. Padma was born the following year and Gamini five years later.

'That is when we should have given up the house,' Gamini had recalled to Vijay one rainy afternoon in school, 'when there was an extra mouth to feed. Father wanted to, I think, but he had got into debt. And then, 1956 happened.'

'1956?' Vijay had queried; Gamini had even then a habit of talking in dates.

'Yes, when Sinhala was made the official language. Old Silva had to go. He was a Christian and had no Sinhala qualifications to stay on as headmaster. So father got his job.'

Their good fortune had not lasted very long, however. For when Gamini was 12 years old, and just entering Kurunegala Central School, his father had died, of kidney failure. Padma was at teacher training college at the time and their mother, though hard put just to maintain them in school, continued to keep the house – for Gamini, she said, when he became a doctor, or maybe for Padma, for her dowry.

Vijay got up from the steps and looked around him. The walls were still solid, and the foundations firm. He went slowly round to the back of the house, playing the building contractor, examining the brickwork, peering at the gutters, and found the kitchen door ajar. Mrs Bandara

could not be far away; by the well perhaps, or gone to the Sunday *polla*, down the road, to buy her vegetables.

'Auntie,' he shouted a couple of times and, getting no response, went into the house through the kitchen and came to the sitting room. The room was dark except for the firefly light of burning joss sticks and spluttering oil lamps set around a framed photograph on a corner table. Vijay went up to it and saw again Padma's brightly shining face; there was enough light there to illuminate the world. She had certainly lit up the dark corners of his brooding, and drawn him out of the private pain of his mother's death to the feel of injustice in the world outside.

Padma could not have been more than 19, and he hardly 15, when he first set eyes on her outside the school, and all he saw then were the gentle mould of her breasts and the proudly lifting buttocks – perhaps because all Gamini's talk of his sister had suggested a dried prawn of a woman. Vijay in fact would not have been surprised if Padma had turned out to be a man, so insistent was Gamini about her ability to get things done, and to run, climb and jump with the best of them.

But Padma, he discovered within days of coming to stay with Gamini, was not only beautiful, but everything that her brother had claimed her to be. She was also a sympathetic listener. He could talk to her as he never could to anyone else, about the most personal things and, if she did not understand anything, she would worry over it till she did, taking him along with her, every step of the way, as though it was her journey she was taking him on. She was so open that it was impossible not to be open with her. He talked to her about his mother and how she had died. He could not help thinking that his mother would still be alive if she had not put up a fight against her attackers. But, oh no, she had to be different from other women, and see where it had got her. Padma had flinched at his bitterness and puzzled over it for days, till Vijay himself was caught up in the quest, and came upon his fear that, like his father, he too could not measure up to his mother, could never be her equal – and that somehow made him less of a man. Padma had no answer for that then, but 'we have different strengths', she was to say later, 'and different ways of fighting, but it is our fighting for what we believe in that makes us equal.'

'She would have been 25 today, if she had lived,' said a voice behind him, and Vijay turned round to see Padma's mother set down her provisions on the dining table. 'Well that is fate.' She sat wearily on a chair. 'Open the windows, *putha*, the rain has stopped. Have you been waiting long? Gamini thought you'd come.'

Vijay prised open the shutters and came and sat beside Mrs Bandara.

'No, not long Auntie,' he answered softly. 'I had forgotten it was

her birthday.' He was cross with himself. How could he have been so crass? He was like a son to the old lady, and she had clearly been expecting him.

'You didn't forget,' she replied gently. 'You came.'

'But that was because —' Vijay was determined to own up, but Mrs Bandara cut him short.

'Oh don't go on, *putha*,' she said, pushing playfully at his shoulder, 'you should believe in your feelings a little more.' And with that she got up and waddled off to the kitchen, muttering that she could not sit there and talk with him all day; there was the cooking to do, and hadn't she got a lovely slice of *pollo*s 'from somewhere' which would make a nice *mallung* 'for someone'?

Vijay remained seated at the table, smiling after the friendly bow legs which propelled the squat figure along; she must have had to scour the whole country to find young jak fruit at this time of year. She certainly knew he was coming. Perhaps it was true that there was an emotional pull that had brought him there that day.

Mrs Bandara set great store by impulse and instinct and imagination. Her students liked her for it and found a rapport with her that they seldom did with other teachers. But it was the administration's despair. Anarchy, they called it or, in their more kindly moments, innocence, but certainly not a quality that recommended itself to a headship. It got the school's accounts into a mess and set no clear line of discipline that teachers could follow, let alone students. Not that the students had been particularly troublesome during Mrs Bandara's stint as acting head, but they did tend to go off into things like social work and nursing, and it showed in the poor results of the school at public exams. And so Mrs Bandara never got to be head.

She did not mind that, though; she was not particularly ambitious and, whatever ambition she had, she had invested in her children, in Padma mainly. Padma, her mother felt, had the makings of a great teacher, an educationalist even, like Kannagara. She had a sense of people and was utterly gregarious. Even as a child, she would go off with strangers at the slightest show of friendship, or play around with the beggar children who came to the house. And it was she who led them into mischief, stealing food for them not only from her own house but from the neighbours' houses as well. 'We eat too much anyway, *amma*,' she would plead when her mother punished her for it.

Gamini was different, less outgoing, selfish even, and ambitious, more like his father. And, like him, Gamini took his disappointments badly, almost resentfully. The world, he felt, owed him a living as befitted his station, and he meant to get it. But he was devoted to his sister, and his

love for her blunted the edge of his ambition and opened him out to friendship.

Vijay himself had not counted for a friend till he had become Padma's friend. And then there was little that Gamini would not do for him. It was a generosity that Vijay could never quite fathom, that willingness of Gamini's to share his sister's affections, to shower them even, like rose petals, on her thousand friends; it was as though he knew beyond verifiable proof that she was not for possessing. Vijay learnt that too, but more painfully, as she guided him from his first choking unspeakable love for her to an easy outspoken friendship.

Thoughts of that first meeting with Padma flooded into Vijay's mind. She was seated at this very table, right there, opposite to where he sat now, poring over some book, when he had entered, with Gamini lugging his suitcase. Gamini did not want to disturb her and Vijay had a moment to study the bright ebony of her face and the mass of hair piled on top of her head before she looked up and said, without much surprise, 'Ah, *malli*, you have come. This is Vijay?'

'*Putha*', the old lady called, startling Vijay out of his reverie. 'The firewood's running out.'

'Yes, coming, Auntie,' he called back. 'I'll cut some.'

'And here, fill up this bucket at the well,' Mrs Bandara requested, handing him the vessel as Vijay passed through the kitchen to the firewood shed at the back.

The logs were damp from the rain and it was some time before Vijay finally managed to get through that chore and go down to the well for the water. He had lowered the bucket into the well, and was admiring the deft flick of the rope with which he had filled it, when he heard a shout and, looking up, saw Gamini staggering through the muddied fields beyond. He was still some distance away, but appeared to be bleeding from his head. Vijay ran towards him in alarm.

'What happened?' he cried as he came up to Gamini and stopped to examine his wound. 'Hold still.'

Vijay could not detect any serious injury under the dried blood, just a gash across the forehead which had bled profusely.

'I'm all right, just tired,' Gamini kept muttering as Vijay examined him. 'I had to walk all the way.'

'What happened? Where's the bike?'

'Got into a stupid fight,' Gamini replied tersely, 'over some bloody estate coolies.'

'Coolies?' Vijay expostulated. 'Here?'

'Yes, in the bazaar, quite a few of them, families. God knows how they got here from up-country, but they had been thrown out of the estates

and they were starving. One little girl, couldn't be more than 9, was caught stealing a piece of stale bread, and they slapped her and kicked her . . .' Gamini broke off, shaking his head. 'I still can't believe it.'

'For a piece of bread?' asked Vijay. 'A child?'

'Yes, those layabouts in the tea-shop.' And when the parents had intervened, they had got beaten up, too, for putting the girl up to her thieving little tricks. "Bloody thieves, the lot of them," Gamini mimicked. "Yesterday they stole our land, today they steal our food."

'Who said that?'

'Sarnelis, who else, our local philosopher and thug. Yes, he was there all right, cleaning up after the politicians.'

'And it was he who hit you, right?'

'Right,' Gamini chuckled, sitting himself down by the well. 'I had got the girl and her parents away from the crowd, but like a bloody fool I stayed back to tell Sarnelis that it was the British who took our land, not the coolies, and he hit me, with my own bicycle pump,' Gamini looked offended, 'and smashed up the bike.'

Vijay drew some water from the well and washed the blood off Gamini's face. Gamini started laughing.

'Shush,' his friend warned, 'your mother will hear you. What the hell are you laughing about anyway? It's not at all funny.'

Gamini could barely control himself by now.

'No, no,' he managed to get out between bursts of laughter, 'not that, it's you. The way you came running towards me. Crouched, looking left and right,' he weaved from side to side imitating Vijay, 'as though you were in the jungle again.'

Vijay began to laugh, too, but broke off when he heard the old lady call for the water.

'Bringing, Auntie,' he shouted back, but Mrs Bandara was already halting down the path to the well.

'Gamini? What are you doing here *putha*? Why didn't you come the front way? Where's your bike?'

Haltingly, Gamini explained to his mother what had happened. Mrs Bandara listened through to the end with deliberate calm, she was not going to let the incident upset her, and then summoned Gamini to the house to have his wound dressed. The boys exchanged glances as they followed the old lady into the kitchen; they could not appraise her mood.

'It's not too bad a cut,' she remarked, cleaning it with condys. 'Where was Hassan Ali when all this was happening? After all he owns the wretched place, and he owes us a favour or two.' She was getting worked up and the boys decided to keep silent. 'Just like a *thambiya*, never there when you want him.'

'Oh come on *amma*,' Gamini exploded righteously, not following his mother's mood. 'What has being a Muslim got to do with anything? You are spouting the same communal rubbish as them.'

'Stop it, then,' she shouted flinging the bowl of condys to the floor. 'You stop it,' she shook an angry fist in his face, 'stop getting involved in communal rubbish.' She strode to the door trying to calm herself.

'I can't take it any more,' she cried to the world outside, halfway between anger and pain, 'first my daughter and now my son.' She turned to Gamini, trying to control herself. 'You nearly got killed the last time, and for what?'

Gamini got up from the chair as though to move towards his mother but stopped when he saw the mounting anger in her face.

'Well, what did you achieve? What did any of you achieve?' She now included Vijay in her anger. 'Go on, tell me.'

'That was different, *amma*,' Gamini muttered uneasily, trying to fold up his small frame even smaller into himself. Ever since Padma's death in the '71 insurrection, Gamini had been careful not to revive his mother's memory of those times. Gamini himself had got off unscathed – like Vijay he too was not a fully-fledged member of the PLF – but Padma was a section commander and was caught and tortured by the army before being shot.

'Different is it?' rejoined Mrs Bandara, sitting down heavily on a chair. 'What was different about it?' The anger seemed to be leaving her now, and her youth with it. Suddenly she began to look old; the grey in her hair stood out more and the lines on her face became more deeply etched. 'She too started like that, getting mixed up in things that didn't concern her, fighting other people's battles . . .' And then more to herself she said, 'she could have got a job any time.' A tear stood on the brim of each eyelid, like a sadness, and then rolled down her cheeks. 'And on her birthday too.'

3

VIJAY LAY AWAKE half the night, caught in Mrs Bandara's grief. Had Padma thrown away her life then? Had she achieved nothing? A moment of glory, perhaps, when, with a handful of comrades, she overcame a whole army battalion to take Elgama. That was something. But, knowing her, she probably had more satisfaction occupying the area for those three heady weeks before the whole world came to the aid of the government.

Boy, were they scared, chuckled Vijay inwardly. America, Russia, China, the lot. Couldn't imagine that a few thousand unemployed, educated village youth could try to take over a whole country; scared that it could happen to them.

He was 16 when he joined the movement, but he could remember some talk in his grandfather's family, when he was still in junior school at Anuradhapura, about a distant cousin who had got mixed up with some young revolutionary group. By the time he had reached his second year at high school, there was whispered talk among his friends of a people's liberation party – army, some said – that was springing up all over the countryside, recruiting village kids little older than him.

Avidly he had listened to every bit of gossip about the young revolutionaries, stored up bits and pieces of news about their organization (they were said to operate secretly) from the older boys at school and pledged, with the rest of his class, to join the party one day and relieve the hardships of their people. They would steal from the rich and give to the poor like the robber Sardiell had once done.

Padma had earthed the dream. There was long, hard work to be done, she said, before any of that could be achieved, and what was to be achieved would loom larger even as the work got harder. That was how she had put it when he had first broached the subject, thoughtfully perhaps but indifferently, as though she herself had no time for such things. But a couple of weeks later, rummaging in Padma's bedroom for evidence of the furtive trysts that kept her away so often from home and from him, Vijay discovered a secret diary which showed up her involvement with a group of youngsters calling themselves the People's Liberation Front. He had not been able to decipher the squiggles and symbols and complicated abbreviations at first, convinced as he was that they were meant to conceal a clandestine affair, but when he finally managed to work them out, his heart pounded to a different beat. All those times, when he thought Padma was out with her lover, she was attending political classes or undergoing military training. Shamed into silence and even greater devotion, Vijay spent the rest of that holiday in suppressed curiosity, and not till his next visit, some six months later, did he bring up the subject with Padma again.

By then, news of the Front's existence was out in the open. The government had picked up its leader and a dozen other youngsters at random and charged them with conspiring against a democratically elected government. But it was the government that had conspired against the people, retorted the youngsters; its mandate had long expired and it was using the army to stay in power in what was a burgeoning dictatorship. And slowly the country woke to the truth of it. The group's name was

on everybody's lips, and people marvelled that it should be their children who were taking up their fight. They seemed to have appeared from nowhere, or had grown up on them when their backs were turned. It was as though the little bit of land the tenant farmer had tilled so unavailingly had suddenly sprouted an army of youngsters ready to do battle for the grievances of their fathers.

Padma not only felt freer now to talk to Vijay about the Front, but made no secret of her own long involvement with it. It was not a party, she explained, but a movement, and it had risen and grown in the countryside because it was there that three-fourths of the population lived. Yet they were the people all the parties ignored.

'One lot feeds us on American flour,' she pointed out angrily, 'the other lot on patriotism. And the socialists feed us every five years with revolution to get elected.

'And now,' she added sardonically, 'the patriots and the socialists are getting together to feed us patriotic socialism.'

But the way the present government was going, she felt, there might be no more elections at all, and even if the hornets' nest they had stirred up forced the government to hold an election, it would be rigged. They had to stay in power so as to go on selling out the country to America and putting the money in their own pockets. That was why the PLF was preparing for armed struggle.

'There is no other way, you see,' Padma had said and, when Vijay had demurred at the prospect of violence, she had gone on to explain to him that no one chose to be violent; violence arose from the fact that you had no choice.

Luckily for Vijay's peace of mind, the moment of violence had passed. Despite Padma's fears, the elections were held and, despite Padma's doubts, the United Front of patriotic socialists had won. They promised land for the landless and food for all and a peaceful path to socialism; there was no need for revolution. Padma went back to her books and waited – waited for her comrades to be released from prison, waited for the tenant farmer to get back the land the big companies had taken from him, waited for the free rice ration to be restored to the poor. And when the months went by and none of it happened, Padma began to disappear again.

Vijay saw very little of her after that, but he did not miss her as poignantly as before. Or, rather, he missed her like he would miss someone who was being woven into the ordinary pattern of his life – comfortably, like a routine absence. He had thought to spend his sixteenth birthday with her, lay his passage to manhood before her like an offering, but that day had come and gone without his having seen her at all. And

he was just getting over his disappointment when Padma wrote. She had meant to write earlier, she said in her letter, but had been out on a 'trip'. Gehan, her leader, and the others were shortly to be released, but make no mistake about it: it was the threat of insurrection that had forced the government's hand. So long as the government refused to carry out its promises to the people, preparations had to be made to bring it to book. Surely Vijay could see that? Perhaps he did, and perhaps he should make a birthday resolution to join the movement when his exams were over.

Vijay was not sure. There were still ways of helping people like his grandfather without having to overthrow governments. He could still become an irrigation engineer and . . . Strange how, as his love for Padma had grown stronger, his romantic notions of becoming a revolutionary had grown weaker. And yet the two were not directly related. Perhaps it was his hatred of violence that moved him most. But then it was Padma who had drawn out, like a poison, the violence he had so long bred in himself around his recurring dream to kill his mother's killers. He could not understand it. How could all the things that Padma had done for him be the very things that made him indifferent to what she cared about the most?

Then one day, on the 21st of August 1970 – the date was etched in his mind – Vijay, back home in Anuradhapura for his holidays, had gone along with his grandfather to hear Gehan speak at a public meeting. He was excited at the prospect of seeing and hearing Padma's hero at last, but he had not been prepared for his grandfather's enthusiasm. It was difficult enough trying to tear him away from his unending work on the farm to go to temple even on *Poson* or *Wesak* days, but to get him to something as unnecessary as a political meeting so willingly was beyond Vijay's comprehension. 'Well, they are our lads aren't they?' was all his grandfather would say when Vijay pressed him for an answer. But, at the meeting itself, the old man could not hide his excitement, leaping around like a flea-bitten dog. And when Gehan appeared on the platform, he burst into applause, exclaiming, 'why, he's just an ordinary fellow'.

'Yes, I know,' declared Vijay loudly (Padma had told him often enough). 'But wait till he speaks,' (not that he had ever heard him). When Gehan began to speak, Vijay looked at those around him and smiled his approval of their applause. He was tall for his age and people took him to be one of 'them'. And, basking in their suspicion, he was slow to catch the changing mood of the crowd. Suddenly, he noticed, the cheering and the shouting had died and the air become charged with attentiveness. His grandfather had stopped leaping about, and his tall,

stooped frame had come erect as though he was standing in his own height at last.

'To my elders I say,' Gehan was reaching the end of his speech, 'you have waited long and patiently for what was due to you. You have sacrificed beyond your means for your children. But we have no jobs to help you, we have no money to give you. Our rulers, once they have got our votes, do not care about us. They look after their own. Whatever they may call themselves – nationalists or socialists or national socialists – they all belong to the same class, the taking class, of those who have and want yet more.' He paused and took a sip of water from a bottle. 'And if those who have do not give, those who haven't must take – with arms if necessary.'

The following week Vijay joined the PLF. In April, when the insurrection broke out, he, like Gamini, was still bringing up the rear, but their sister, Padma, was in the front line. Three weeks later, Comrade Sister was dead.

And here he was, on her birthday, four years on, still unable to break out of the past which clung to him like a stigma.

Vijay woke the next morning determined to forget the events of the previous day and get down to his studies. Mrs Bandara had gone off to work and Gamini had just returned from the bicycle repair shop with the good news that his bike had not been irreparably damaged. He had even got an apology from the owner of the tea-shop and a promise to pay part of the repair bill.

'You should know better than to interfere in these matters, young master,' Hassan Ali had rebuked him. 'It's not like the old days, you know. I may be the owner, but Sarnelis is the Minister's man. And there's nothing anyone can do about the coolies, anyway.'

The remark kept cropping up in Vijay's mind right through the morning's work on the binomial theorem. Nothing anyone can do? . . . Uncle Lal did . . . in his own way . . . he looked after them at least . . . but, then, he was a doctor. How was higher maths going to help anyone?

'You are not really in the mood for work, are you?' Gamini broke into his thoughts.

'No-o, I suppose not,' Vijay dragged out. He got up from his chair and paced the room. Gamini watched him closely, admiring once again the panther gait of the man. A lope was how Gamini would have liked to describe it, but did panthers lope? Maybe it was the impression that had abided with Gamini from their days in the jungle. Or perhaps it was Vijay's temperament – a combination of long contemplative silences in-

terspersed with sudden impulsive action – that got Gamini so mixed up in his imagery.

‘I thought I’d go up to Hatton and see Uncle Lal after all,’ explained Vijay, ‘now that the rains have stopped.’

But Gamini was not taken in by the explanation. It was only last night, he pointed out, that Vijay had set down a programme of joint work for the exams in front of them, and now he was off up-country. If he thought he was going to be of any use to those poor coolies who were being thrown out of the estates, he was silly and romantic. Lal was probably doing what he could and would have sent for Vijay if he was needed.

‘I just want to go and see what’s happening on the plantations, that’s all,’ Vijay protested. ‘And find out what our campus socialists are doing about it.’

‘What? Our lecturers?’ guffawed Gamini. ‘Don’t make me laugh. They are advisers to the government now, and they don’t give a damn about your coolies or your peasants. As far as they are concerned the estates have been nationalized – you are the one who called it “con-socialism”, remember? – and if all that your Sinhalese peasant can get out of it is a handful of paddy-seed, a coconut tree here and there and a coolie job, that’s his bad luck.’

That was a long speech for Gamini, thought Vijay, and the eloquence, Vijay suspected, came from his friend’s concern for him. But it could be that Gamini was changing. Maybe the previous day’s incident . . .

‘But somebody has to do something,’ he burst out.

Gamini shook his head, as though despairing of his friend, and went back to his books. Vijay got up and gazed gloomily out of the window.

‘I am going to make some tea,’ Gamini broke the silence. ‘You want some?’

Vijay shook his head in refusal but followed Gamini to the kitchen and leant against the door.

‘Will you come?’ he asked after a while and, getting no response from his friend, turned back into the room and began pacing it again.

Gamini came in with the tea and put it down on the table.

‘No,’ he said slowly and deliberately. ‘I will not come.’

Vijay was disappointed: he had expected the answer, but not its finality and certainly not after the incident of the previous day. Gamini had always regretted his participation in the PLF ‘exploit’ as he termed it. He had gone into it like a dog, after his sister, and her death had made him doubly regretful. And yet some of her caring had rubbed off on him, and his intervention yesterday had encouraged Vijay into believing that events were beginning to change his friend’s attitude.

'I have got my work to do,' Gamini reasoned, 'and I must get a class. I am not going to get another chance, nor are you.' Vijay stopped pacing and sat down at the table. 'And whatever you may say about this government, it is they who gave us the chance to get to university.'

'Weighting the exam papers in our favour,' retorted Vijay, 'and providing us more places? Quotas for the majority?' He flung his chair back in anger. 'For God's sake man, where on earth do you get safeguards against minorities? In what constitution in the world? The only thing the Tamils have going for them is education, and we have taken even that away from them.' He banged his fist on the table upsetting Gamini's cup of tea all over his neat white shirt and flinging him into a rage.

'You are a bloody Tamil too, that's your trouble,' Gamini shouted, dabbing at his shirt and, then, catching himself in mid-flight: 'Half a Tamil anyway.'

'I didn't mean that,' he went on sheepishly, realizing too late that he had opened up an old wound in his friend. Gamini was one of the few people who knew the full story of Vijay's parentage. It had all come out at a meeting of a PLF cell in the course of a discussion of the 'fifth thesis' on 'Indian expansionism'. The party line was that India was an imperial power and that the Indian estate workers in Ceylon, and all Tamils for that matter, were a fifth column. Vijay had opposed the view vehemently and was accused, in the ensuing row, of having been fathered by a Tamil. Pathirana, it was alleged, was not his real name though that was how it stood in his birth certificate. Vijay was suspended from the party 'for further enquiry' and, though Padma fought for him tooth and nail, it was not till Vijay was discovered to be the 'real' son of a real Sinhalese hero of the *hartal* of 1953 that he was allowed back into the fold. But the aftertaste of that adolescent discovery, that even a bastard was preferable to a Tamil, lingered like a bitterness in Vijay's mouth long after the PLF had gone from him.

'Yes, you are right,' he said. 'I am a Tamil, and a Sinhalese, and a bastard,' and, finding that his bitterness had suddenly left him, he added more lightly, 'and that's why I am more civilized than you.'

Gamini accepted laughingly that he was not as lucky as Vijay and that was why he had to get his civilization from books, and from travel, perhaps. If he got a good degree, he could go abroad for his doctorate. It was not, of course, the type of doctor his mother had wanted him to become, but it would have to do.

'Oh come on, man,' Gamini suddenly exploded with exasperation. 'Stop being a bloody romantic. What the hell do you think one man can do? How—'

'I want to see what's going on,' Vijay replied doggedly. 'I've got

friends there from all those times I spent as a boy with Uncle Lal.' He had lost touch with them when he was in the Front, neglected them even, and now felt compelled by guilt as by concern to find out what was happening to their families. 'You have only seen the people thrown out of the estates. Have you seen the families broken up and thrown out of the country?' Even the handful of students who had managed by sheer effort to get to higher education were being uprooted and sent back to India, a country they had never seen.

'One of them was a poet, you know,' Vijay continued to a subdued Gamini. 'I met him once, and recently a mutual friend sent me a poem of his, I have forgotten his name, his last poem, translated from the Tamil, and it killed me. "Farewell to my motherland" it was called, and it spoke of the mountains and the streams and the vegetation of his native Badulla as I've never seen it evoked by any of our Sinhala countrymen.'

Vijay could not control his emotions now. 'He gave me eyes to see my country with, his country, he was born here, but by government definition he was not a citizen, just a number in the agreed quota of "coolie Tamils" that India would take back.'

Vijay had got up from his chair, halfway through his monologue, to pace the room again. He now stopped before Gamini and repeated, almost pleadingly, 'he gave me eyes to see with, my mountains and his, and shall I stop because he is gone?'

Gamini weakened for a minute; that was how his sister had spoken to him and won him over to her cause. Yet somewhere in the translation of that vision, its beauty had blurred and its course altered, and the memory of that violation caught like vomit in Gamini's throat.

'I am a scientist,' he protested, 'and I want to improve the life of our people by applying my knowledge, my skills, not by killing them. What's wrong with that?'

'How would you apply that knowledge? On whose behalf? Whom will it benefit?' Vijay ran off a string of questions. 'Mankind? In the mass? But a scientist must differentiate, dissect, classify – that's his discipline, that's what makes him a scientist. So, why doesn't he bring that same mode of inquiry to his understanding of society? Because, it is only in doing that, that he can answer the first question as to how he will apply his knowledge and for whom.'

Gamini remained unmoved. A rational person himself, he was irrationally moved more by Vijay's passion than by his argument.

'That is why I read "all that revolutionary stuff", as you call it,' Vijay continued, 'to understand what is going on in society, in all sorts of societies, so that I can understand what is going on in ours. I am not trying

to copy their solutions, you can't have revolution by analogy as Uncle Lal says, but I want to know how they go about understanding their own reality, because everything that we are taught teaches us how not to see it.

'You want us to know the facts, don't you?' he asked Gamini. 'As scientists? Then we must go and find them.'

4

HATTON WAS A TEA-TOWN. People did not choose to live in Hatton, they were posted there, and left it as quickly as they decently could. Except, that is, for the coolies, who lived and perished among the tea-bushes and nourished them with their remains when they were dead. Even the one proper road that ran through Hatton entered it with a rush and, leaping over the bus-station, left it precipitately. On either side of the road were bunched the lodgings of the artisans: the carpenter, the mechanic, the odd-job man, and on its tributary stood the houses of the professionals: the doctor, the teacher, the lawyer. Behind and beyond them rose row upon row of interminable tea-bushes reaching up to the skyline, on the brow of which stood the *Peria-Dorai's* mansion. And somewhere in between, in a break in the bushes, not far from the factory, huddled the dark, dank line-rooms of the coolies.

In one of these had Sanji grown up. He had been born in another line-room, in Badulla, but he had little recollection of it because, by the time he was 6 or 7, his father had managed to set up a small shop on the edge of the estate and send him to a school in town. In fact he had thought of himself as a proper little schoolboy going to a proper little school till his father's 'business' fell on bad days and he himself was sent home from school for not wearing shoes. Shortly after that, his father had died and Sanji had gone to live with his brother-in-law on a coolie line in Hatton and attend a coolie school in between work-shifts.

But now Sanji was the top gardener in the *Peria-Dorai's* household. The *Peria-Dorai* himself was no longer an Englishman, Mr Willoughby having left even before the government took over the estates, but a Sinhalese, Mr Liyanage, a relative of the Prime Minister, no less. He was a nice man, though, and was happy to leave the running of the estate to his subordinates, so long as they left him to get on with his drinking and his wild parties. But, then, he was an eligible bachelor and a hospitable one, with a large house and lots of money, and friends always 'dropping in' from Colombo for the weekend. Sanji hardly slept those nights,

waiting for the morning to reveal the damage to his garden and the mess in his flowerbeds.

It was on one such morning, after a particularly wild night, that Sanji ran into Dr Lal Perera. Lal was his brother-in-law's doctor, all the estate workers went to him, but the last place Sanji would have expected to see him was at one of the PD's wild parties, and certainly not at this hour of the morning.

He did not recognize the doctor at first. All he could see in the half-light before dawn was the figure of a man standing at the edge of the lawn, peering through the mists at the mountains far away waiting for the sun to break through. No one did that any more, certainly not any of the PD's guests, or even the PD, not since he took to drink. But it was how Sanji himself began the day, standing on the same spot on which the man stood, watching the mists unveil the sun, and the sun unveil a cluster of green hills and mountains, from the folds of which sprang streams and rivulets and waterfalls that caught the sun in flight. For just that minute, though, for no sooner caught than it was gone, high into the sky, refusing to be looked at, but lighting up now the tangle of trees and shrubs and creepers in the valley below, to the greetings of a thousand birds and a hosanna of colours from the jasmine, the jacaranda and the frangipani. Day had broken, and the onlooker's eyes, returning closer home, would look immediately below him and see again the serried ranks of tea-bushes and, breaking among them now, a swarm of *cumbly*-clad tea-pluckers.

'Come this side, sir. Fence not safe,' Sanji told the figure in halting English. Startled, it turned round, and Sanji, recognizing the doctor, removed his turban from his head.

'No, no, keep it on, it's damp still,' enjoined Lal in Tamil. 'Why are you up so early in the morning?'

'Ah sir, garden sir,' Sanji continued in broken English. 'Big mess, no sir?' He spread out his hands over the trampled flowerbeds, inviting agreement, and then, thinking he had gone too far, murmured in Tamil, 'but only after master's parties.'

Lal laughed uneasily; it had been the PD's engagement party, after all, and they had been at university together. It was Sanji's turn now to feel uncomfortable: he had not meant to . . . But Lal quickly put him at ease. A seed packet gardener himself – he still had them sent from Cargill's in Colombo – he was keen to learn the finer points of gardening. And Sanji was only too glad to treat him to the secrets of budding and grafting and pruning. Soon they were talking like old friends and Sanji was amazed by the doctor's simple and easy-going manner. No side, he thought, no side to the man at all, and his Tamil is as good as mine.

'Ah, I know where I have seen you,' said Lal suddenly. 'With Perumal. You are,' he hesitated and, when Sanji tried to help him out, he held up his hand. 'Wait, wait. You are . . . his brother-in-law, aren't you?' He sat down on a bench and pulled Sanji down beside him. 'Sit, man, the work can wait.'

Sanji obeyed him reluctantly. 'Yes sir, he is married to my sister,' he said, falling back on Tamil. 'You must know him from those meetings.'

'Yes, that is where I get to speak to him properly. He is a good trade union man, very good organizer. But you don't work on the estate, do you? How did you become a gardener?'

'That's a long story, sir,' Sanji answered dismissively, and then went on garrulously, and interestingly, to talk about his life. No one had ever asked him before, except his daughter, and the doctor seemed genuinely interested.

Lal listened with professional patience and attentiveness, interrupting Sanji only once to mutter that his brother-in-law too had gone to school in Badulla, to the same school perhaps. But Sanji was not to be stopped, and it was only after he had finished his narrative that he picked up on what Lal had said, and even then for courtesy's sake.

'Your brother-in-law, sir? Who? What's his name? He must be our age, no?' And before Lal could reply, he added, 'But I was friendly with only one Sinhalese boy, and he was in an upper class, I was in the school only a short time anyway.'

'No, no, he is a Tamil, my brother-in-law, Rajanathan,' Lal corrected him.

'A Tamil?' Sanji said it matter-of-factly as though nothing about Lal could surprise him any more. 'Rajanathan?'

'Rajan, everyone calls him.'

'Rajan? Not Rajan?' Sanji leapt out of his seat. 'The postmaster's son, Rajan?'

Lal nodded.

'Where is he? What's he doing? Your brother-in-law?' And he laughed joyously. 'Where is he?'

Lal told him, briefly, that Rajan had gone to England, and why, passing quickly over the circumstances of Lali's death.

Sanji's joy left him as suddenly as it had come. He was a mercurial man and, unlike most of his fellow workers, seldom bothered to hide his feelings and, on that tar-black face of his, they shone out of his eyes like neon lights. He collapsed back on to the bench, trying to control himself.

'That was terrible, what the Sinhalese . . .' He broke off. 'That was terrible, wasn't it? Sir?' The light had gone out of his face and a dark bitter-

ness was creeping into it. 'And it's still not finished, is it? Sir?' He prodded the doctor with his bitterness. 'Why do people do such things?' He meant Sinhalese people. 'Human beings?' How could they answer to that name? How could Lal, he implied. 'Over a hundred years we have been here, and you want to drive us out.' His anger spilt over his new-found friend.

But Lal was seized in his own pain; Lali seldom left his thoughts. She rode him like a conscience, and he thought he saw her now, leaping like a mist across the mountains, chanting over and over again, as though in counterpoint to Sanji's plainsong, the terrible lines of that ill-begotten hymn she had learnt at convent school: 'Where every prospect pleases and only man is vile'. He writhed in discomfort.

'Look at those tea-bushes, sir,' Sanji bit out the 'sir' this time. 'That's not leaves and buds they're plucking you know, our women and children, but bits of their lives – and for you.' He dropped the 'sir'. 'And even what little is left of them you want to send back to India. They never knew India. They were born here. Even the British let us die here and be buried among the tea-bushes for manure, but your people . . .' He stopped, suddenly aware of Lal's brooding silence and aghast at his own temerity. But he refused to relent; if the master wanted friendship he had to pay the price of the slave's honesty. He got up to tend his plants.

Lal walked up to the edge of the lawn and looked over the hills. The rain clouds were gathering. He turned to go into the house and stopped by Sanji. 'His son is here you know, in Ceylon. Rajan's I mean, stepson really. He is coming to see me soon. Would you like to meet him?'

Sanji looked up from the hydrangeas and saw Lal holding his nephew out like hope, and remembered how his parents had dressed him up all in white and sent him to the town school all those centuries ago. He sat down heavily on the bench. And Lal sat with him.

As Lal was leaving for home that evening, Sanji came up to him with cuttings from a rose bush Lal had admired. 'I'll come and help you in the garden some time, doctor,' he said.

Vijay broke journey at Peradeniya and hurried along to the university hoping to catch his lecturer, Mr Mendis, before he went home. But the bus had been delayed on the way, and it was already dusk, and Vijay wasn't sure where Mendis lived. He was the one man, though, whom he could talk to about the campaign he had in mind. It was useless going to the students' union which had recently kicked him out of the presidency because of his suspect 'Tamil background'. There were others, not so active in the union, who probably thought like him but, like Gamini,

they were final year students with only a single purpose in mind.

Vijay could not understand how students, who only a few years earlier were so full of idealism, could so soon become inward-looking and careerist. It was only yesterday, it seemed to him, that they had got rid of a bigoted vice-chancellor, and Podi Appu had blown himself to bits concocting explosives in the bicycle shed. And his own election to the presidency of the students' union in just his second year seemed to Vijay to have been a tacit homage to his involvement with the PLF. Yet the malaise must have already been there somewhere, and the defeat of the PLF brought it into the open. Perhaps revelations of the PLF's conspiratorial politics had turned the public against it, and the bitterness with which the PLF leadership had gone for each other during the trials had disillusioned the young. But nothing could explain the sudden and total disinterest of his fellow students in the world outside the campus. Even their nationalism was tied up with their own personal futures. Nothing else seemed to matter. The massive demonstrations they had mounted for Vietnam only a couple of years ago might never have occurred. And the unique gathering of Third World leaders at the Non-Aligned Conference in Colombo the previous month had passed them by without the slightest tremor of excitement.

Only among some of the teaching staff was there any sign of concern for what was happening in the country, but most of them were regimented along party lines, or broke ranks only to reassemble on different lines of the same party. Mr Mendis was an exception. He had no politics and he had no party. He had 'connections'. All sorts of connections, in the army and in the police force, among thugs and among priests, with politicians and pimps, and he used them, whenever he was asked, to redeem an injustice here or return a favour there. And, on his own initiative, he was reputed to have got together an assortment of his connections and gone about rescuing Tamils from Sinhalese mobs in the race riots of '58.

He was not a big man, hardly more than five foot five in height, and slightly built. He was not wiry, either; rather, he was rubbery, malleable, as though he had no muscles or bones and, though he seemed to move slowly and lazily, languorously almost, he was deceptively fast, as his fielding at cover point for the Staff XI could testify.

But he had gone to seed after his wife had left him – for his best friend, as it happened, and a Tamil at that, taking their two children with her – and now he was more often to be found at the bar of the Faculty Club than at home. It was there that Vijay ran him to earth.

Vijay almost turned back at the entrance to the building, though, seeing that it was full of people bunched around tables crowded with glasses

and bottles and short-eats, talking and drinking like a convention of alcoholics. He took a closer look through the glass pane of the door and thought he recognized some of the more progressive tutors and lecturers on the campus. (The reactionaries, Vijay reflected bitterly, were presumably more self-disciplined or did their drinking discreetly, at home.) Mr Mendis he espied in a room beyond, perched on a ping-pong table that had long lost its original purpose and become a venue for the more serious thinkers and drinkers.

Vijay shrank back into the night, not knowing quite what to do. He had come a long way to talk to some of these people, but he doubted now that they could hear him, let alone advise him. He had not seen them like this before, like dead souls from the lower depths. The picture saddened him profoundly and he was about to go when Mr Mendis came out through the door, tugging at his fly.

'Dying for a piss, man,' he explained as he brushed past the shadowy figure.

'Yes, sir,' Vijay replied automatically.

Mendis peered from the bushes after the first burst of relief.

'Who is it?' he asked. All he could make out was the soldierly figure of a man.

'Pathirana, sir. Vijay Pa—'

'Ah Vijay,' Mendis acknowledged without hesitation. 'I thought I recognized your voice.'

He emerged from the bushes buttoning up his trousers. 'What brings you here?' he asked, and then taking Vijay by the elbow, ushered him towards the club. 'Come in anyway and have a drink,' he said warmly.

Vijay drew back instinctively, muttering that all he wanted was a few minutes with Mr Mendis.

'Let's go in and talk then,' his teacher responded. 'I know it's not your scene, but it's getting a little chilly out here.'

He found a vacant table at a quiet corner of the lounge and ordered a large arrack for himself and a bottle of orange barley water for Vijay. Vijay blinked against the fluorescent lighting and looked around. Everything was harsh in here, functional, the tables, the chairs, the bare walls, with no effort at comfort or elegance, as though drink was comfort enough, and style.

'What's up then?' asked Mr Mendis. He knew Vijay well enough to know that the lad had brought him trouble.

Vijay began and stopped. This was a different world now. He should not have come.

'Well?' pressed Mendis, leaning forward in his chair, wanting to get it over with, whatever it was.

'I came to ask you . . .' Vijay began again, but the other man's ill-concealed impatience to get back to his drink angered him. 'You don't know a damn thing about what is going on around you, do you?' Mendis sprang up from his chair as though he had been shot. 'And what's more, you don't want to know.'

'What on earth are you talking about?' blustered the older man. The drinkers at the bar had heard Vijay's outburst and turned to see what was going on.

'Oh stop acting, sir, and sit down,' Vijay instructed his lecturer, and Mendis sat himself down gingerly on the edge of the chair, looking deflated.

'Yes, I know, you mean the coolies,' he said dejectedly, the drink leaving him. 'It's terrible, terrible . . . never seen them begging . . . in my whole life . . . whole families . . . starving . . . dying . . .' and he lapsed into a shamed silence, allowing Vijay to beat out his anguish on him.

Suddenly Vijay stopped. 'What is the point in talking?' he asked hopelessly. 'You are not going to do anything about it, are you? You don't even care, any of you.'

'But we do, we do,' remonstrated the older man. 'That's where you are wrong. We do care. My God we do. That's why we drink. To forget all that out there, and then we drink to forget that we have forgotten.' He laughed bitterly. 'Don't you see, every drink is a betrayal, but every other drink helps you to forget it.'

Neither of them spoke for a while and then Vijay said more gently: 'All this money you spend on arrack, sir, not just you, all of you. If only a small portion of it went on providing food and shelter for these people.' Vijay realized now that he had expected too much; the only support he'd get here was financial, if that.

'He has got two bloody coolie families staying in his house,' Botany Bertie broke in angrily, coming up to their table, 'and four or five children as well. What more do you want?'

'One family,' corrected Mendis modestly. 'My servant boy's relatives.'

Others began to drift over to their table now, overhearing the conversation, all with silly nicknames like Econ Eka, short for Ekanayake (to distinguish him presumably from English Eka) and Gyno Gané (the other Ganeshan was in the maths department with Mendis) and Philosophy Phil and Dental David. (Mental David, the psychologist, was seated at the next table.) They were clearly upset by the events and had probably been discussing them when Vijay walked in. They knew Vijay from the students' strike he had led a couple of years earlier and had some regard for him. What would he do, they asked him, in the circumstances.

It was not a matter of individually doing, Vijay replied, but of organized campaigning by students and teachers. How could a university in the heart of plantation country ignore what was happening to plantation people?

'But the students come from all over, not just here,' protested Gyno Gané. 'Certainly not in the medical faculty.'

'Very few from the up-country in my department,' confirmed Econ Eka.

'You know what students are like these days,' began Philosophy Phil.

'That's why standardization -' began VD Bertie, launching into one of his pet themes, when Mendis interrupted him.

'No point in shifting blame,' he said impatiently. 'What about us? What are we doing? We have been here for ten, fifteen, twenty years. We live here, this is our home. Wherever we came from, we are now natives of this place. We should have taken the lead.'

Mendis' contrition was greeted with silence and a growing wariness. Few knew what he was getting at, the others were afraid that he was going to cast them adrift from their moorings once again. That's how he had earned the nickname of Mad Menda.

'We are teachers for God's sake,' Mendis pressed on recklessly, overcome by realization and drink, 'and we should know better. But we have done nothing, have we?'

'Like what?' asked Botany Bertie sardonically.

'Like what old Vythi was doing for instance,' replied Mendis, rifling through his memory for a concrete example. 'We could have given free tuition to those kids. He went on teaching them even after he retired as registrar, till the day he died.'

'But I don't know Tamil,' Bertie remonstrated.

'Their Tamil is different from ours anyway,' interjected Vishnu (mechanical engineering), a high-caste Hindu.

'That's another thing. Why don't we learn Tamil?' asked Mendis, who had never bothered to do so himself.

Vijay saw the subject spinning away from his grasp and made a desperate attempt to bring it back to earth.

'We could have at least tried to break down the barriers between the villagers and the estate workers around here,' he began tentatively.

'That's exactly what the Party is trying to do,' broke in Econ Eka, a long-standing Trotskyite of one hue or another, 'through nationalization, to give Sinhalese village labourers work on the estates side by side with the Indian coolies.'

'The idea,' he pontificated, 'is to break down the division of labour that colonial capitalism has created.'

Vijay lost his temper. Turning landless peasants into slave labour was no solution, he retorted angrily, and 'the Party', with its long record of indifference to both peasants and 'coolies', could hardly speak to either.

'I thought Vijay was a Marxist,' murmured Gyno Gané in a small voice.

'That is true, you know,' Mendis said reflectively, returning to Vijay's earlier point. 'We could have done so much to break down the barriers. Little things, like, like,' he hesitated, fingering them out from the stuff of past prevarications, 'like opening up our schools to the estate children, helping the workers to get some proper housing outside their damn line-rooms, finding them other work than coolie labour, serving in the shops even.'

'But that's the government's business, not ours,' Bertie pointed out.

'Menda is right, though,' interjected the quiet-spoken Livera, a new recruit to the sociology department. They had not given him a nickname yet but, seeing that he was a small man who dressed himself smaller, someone had suggested 'Diminishing Returns'. 'If we took care of the social problems, the political problems would take care of themselves.'

'Listen you chaps,' boomed a voice from the bar, 'don't get so damn serious. There's going to be elections soon and when we come into power, everything's going to be all right, for everyone.' H.P. Pieris (Eng Lit) had recently married into Mercantile Credits and was now in favour of a dose of what he called IMF capitalism which only his party, the UNP, and his leader, Dickie Perera, could deliver. 'We'll make this country rich, and the bloody coolies will get their share too. God knows we need them to get out the damn tea.'

They all laughed at that and, making witty remarks about hiring out multinationals on HP and getting them on the ever-ever, began to drift towards the bar to pick at a topic that would go down better with their drinking, till only Vijay and Mendis were left at the table.

They did not say anything for a while, and then Vijay got up to go. It had been a wasted journey.

'Don't go, Vijay,' Mendis reached out to him as though to his conscience. 'We can work something out.'

Vijay put his hand on his teacher's shoulder and squeezed it gently. The older man looked up. 'It's too late, isn't it?' he asked disconsolately and poured himself another drink.

SANJI FINISHED HELPING HIS SISTER, Sellamma, to clean out the drain that ran behind the line-rooms and settled down on his haunches by the kitchen door for a cup of tea. His daughter was due home that evening and he wanted everything to be clean and tidy for her. Perhaps a little more Jeyes fluid, he thought, and fetching the bottle, emptied its dregs into the gully.

'That woman up there, Rani, you don't know her, the old fellow's new wife, clogs up the drain with onion-peel,' Sellamma remarked matter-of-factly, handing Sanji his tea. Their 'rooms' – a tiny sitting area in front, a tinier cooking area at the back and a space between – were at one end of a line of seven and, though Sellamma had cordoned off a portion into a sleeping area for the women with a makeshift curtain, there was still little privacy for them, and Sanji had moved out permanently to the *Peria-Dorai's* garden shed even before his daughter, Meena, had left for the convent in Kandy.

Sellamma herself had borne no children and, when Sanji's wife died in childbirth, she took Meena into her care like a blessing, careful not to hold her too tightly or let go of her too soon. And it was she who had got the *Peria-Dorai* interested in the child's future.

Even in her late forties, Sellamma was an attractive woman, tall and slim and fine-featured, a little gaunt perhaps where hardship had touched her, but proud beyond her means – and the *Peria-Dorai* wanted her. He had wanted her for a long time, wanted her more than any other woman on the estate, wanted above all to violate that self-assurance of hers which somehow seemed to diminish his. But when, time and again, he had tried and failed and his pride ran raw as a wound, it was she who had covered his shame and kept it like love, a secret between them, and he was grateful. And so, when Meena came of age, he persuaded the nuns in his home town to take her as a serving girl. The convent there was attached to the school in which the nuns taught, and there was always the chance that Meena would get some formal education.

Sellamma was not a little surprised, though, when things worked out better than she had hoped for. Meena was not only a willing and cheerful worker but a highly intelligent girl, and she quickly captured the hearts of the nuns. The Mother Superior took a particular liking to her, and soon Meena was going to school like everyone else, and serving the Reverend Mother in her spare time.

Sellamma had seen little of Meena in the seven years she had been away. The school holidays, often a time of retreat for the nuns, were given over to convent work and, during term, Meena had no time even

to think of getting away. Today she was coming home for good with a school leaving certificate under her belt, and Sellamma was getting ready to receive her illustrious 'daughter'.

She had early that morning pounded and roasted her special blend of coriander seed and cumin and dried chillies and peppercorns and cloves and cinnamon and cardamoms, and was now trying to knead the mixture into the mutton, but the meat kept resisting her.

'Where did you get this mutton from, a dead goat?' she asked her brother acidly.

'They have got to be dead before. . . ' Sanji began but, seeing his sister's expression, changed tack. 'Why, what's wrong with it?'

'It's tough and it's going to take hours to cook, and I haven't got much firewood left,' Sellamma laid out her complaints.

'It's still mutton, isn't it?' Sanji said defensively. He had sent his last few rupees to Meena for her ticket and had got the mutton as a 'forward loan' against his salary from the PD's cook, who had found it unfit for the master's table.

'Mutton, indeed,' he muttered as he got up to water the pitiful little lime tree that stood in the back yard.

'You are spoiling that girl, you know,' he said, sitting down once again on the kitchen step.

'Spoiling? What spoiling?' Sellamma demanded angrily. 'What have I been spoiling her with? Clothes? Jewellery?' She shook her ladle at her brother. 'She has only one good sari, and that one necklace which I have not sold I've put aside for her wedding.' She put down the ladle and added more sadly, 'And I don't even have money for her *thali*.'

Sanji was quick to comfort her. It was not that sort of spoiling he had meant, he assured her, but giving the girl ideas beyond her station. Education may be a good thing, but it depends on what you do with it. And God knows what silly notions the nuns had put into her head.

'She is 19,' Sellamma protested. 'Aren't you going to get her married?'

'There's Nagappan's son Gopal,' she went on to suggest, 'he's a clerk now in the union office. *Appa* speaks well of him.' For some strange reason, or perhaps in anticipation of the children she never had, she had always referred to her husband as 'father'.

'And you think Nagappan will be satisfied with the few hundred rupees I've been able to put aside for her dowry?' Sanji retorted. 'He has got four daughters of his own, two of marriageable age. What's the boy to do?'

'He likes Meena, and the last time she was here, they went to that trade union meeting together. With *appa* of course.'

Just at that moment 'appa' returned from the hospital where he was being treated for bronchial asthma as an out-patient. He sat down on the bench on the 'verandah', sweating heavily and gasping for breath. Sellamma brought out a rag that passed for a towel and began to rub him down.

'No beds, huh?' Sanji asked.

Perumal nodded in agreement.

'I should have gone with you.'

Perumal shook his head, indicating that there would have been no point.

'Not even with Dr Lal's letter?' Sanji went on.

Perumal shook his head again: not even with the doctor's letter.

Lal had told him that there were empty beds at the hospital and had hoped that, although he did not work in the hospital any more, a letter from him would have some weight.

'The bastards,' Sanji burst out, 'they are not doctors, they are murderers.'

Perumal held up his hand as though to stop Sanji from exploding. He was a gentle man, unlike his brother-in-law, but a strong one, with a sort of lean, bending, tensile strength that belied his stocky figure.

'They don't need us any more, *thambi*,' he said between breaths. 'Tea is down, votes are up. The unions belong to the politicians.' He smiled at his own enforced shorthand, while shrugging away Sellamma's admonitions to save his breath.

'The estates belong to the government.'

'And we don't belong anywhere, right? Our fathers and grandfathers are buried here, but when we want a hospital bed, we are foreigners.' Sanji shook his head in disbelief. A week or two of constant care would have made his brother-in-law fit again, whereas the days he spent queuing up at the hospital gates waiting his turn, which kept being pushed back because his citizenship papers were not in order (some bit was always missing), made him even less fit for work. And, good worker though he was, he was also a 'trouble-maker' and the PD had received instructions from above to throw Perumal back on a daily wage.

Sellamma had succumbed to the cold and the damp of estate work even sooner than her husband, and the nimble fingers that once flew over the tea-bushes, rhythmically plucking two leaves and a bud, were now stiff with arthritis. Only Sanji's wages stood between them and hopelessness and bought Perumal the time to recover.

'You should be going,' Sellamma said to her brother. 'The bus is due at five o'clock.'

The bus had broken down even before it left Kandy and Vijay chafed at the delay. He had slept on a friend's floor the previous night, and had been bitten by a thousand mosquitoes. And memories of the Faculty Club had soured his sleep. Usually a cheerful traveller, he was in no mood for company this morning, as a fellow passenger, looking for a match, quickly found out.

'I don't smoke,' Vijay snapped and the man, an elderly out-of-work labourer with half a cigarette stuck between his lips, recoiled in surprise; the anger was as inordinate as it was unexpected. The girl standing close to him must have thought so too, because she cast a venomous glance at Vijay and went on to find a match for the old man from another passenger. Vijay took it all in but was too tired to care and too fed up with himself to do anything about it. As soon as the bus was ready to leave, he just tumbled into a seat at the back and fell into a fitful sleep.

Someone shook him awake at Gampola.

'We are stopping for tea,' the man announced, and Vijay smiled his thanks. He followed the man out of the bus and went up to wash his face at the public tap outside the tea-shop before he went in. At the counter he ordered a coffee and a bun and sat down at a remote table, only to find the girl seated at the next. He smiled a greeting but she ignored him. Vijay was amused, but said nothing. She did not look the haughty type and, judging from the cheap cotton dress she wore, she had as little to be haughty about as he had.

He sipped his coffee and tried to get into the book he had brought with him, while keeping the flies from his bun, but his eyes kept wandering back to the girl. There was little about her that attracted attention. She looked like any other girl of her age, with a nice enough figure and a pleasant enough face, of medium build and dark complexion. Vijay forced himself back to his book, waving more vigorously at the flies, and knocked the steaming hot coffee all over himself. He leapt back from the table clutching at his trousers (the girl chuckled) and knocked over his chair (the girl burst out laughing). Vijay scowled at her.

'Serves you right,' she said unabashed, her laughter rising another octave. Vijay strode across and stood over her, his arms akimbo, in mock resentment. She laughed some more, her eyes dancing bright as stars in the dark of her face. Vijay laughed too, and felt the world fall away from him.

'Where are you going to?' he asked.

Just then the conductor called out that the bus was ready to leave.

'To the bus,' she tinkled merrily, 'and if you don't get cleaned up in a hurry, you won't be going anywhere.' She picked up her ridiculous little plastic handbag and hurried towards the bus.

Vijay followed her quickly, dipping his handkerchief into a bowl of water and cleaning himself on the way. There should be a few empty seats in the bus by now, and he was hoping to persuade the girl to sit by him. She would have none of it though, and all he managed to do was to sit across the aisle from her, and that only because her neighbour, the canny old labourer who had asked for a match, had moved along the seat and taken the girl's place by the window.

Vijay tried to get the girl into conversation but she kept laughing him off. He took an orange out of his bag, peeled it and offered a piece to the old man and then to the girl. They ate in silence.

'I was wrong to . . .' Vijay began tentatively.

'Yes,' she agreed curtly.

There was nothing left to say after that, and Vijay picked up his book again. But he had read only a few pages when, from the corner of his eye, he saw the girl craning her neck to get a look at the title.

'What are you reading?' she asked.

'Oh, it's something on China,' Vijay explained vaguely, hoping it wouldn't put her off.

'That's where I'd like to go.'

'What for?'

'To become a doctor.'

Vijay was taken aback. The girl's English wasn't very good, and she spoke it with a Tamil accent, but with the old man she had spoken fluent Sinhala. Vijay took her for a receptionist or a clerk, just out of school, and was surprised that she should be interested in China.

'Why China?' he inquired.

'Anyone can become a doctor there, can't they? A people's doctor? No, "barefoot doctor", that's what they call them, don't they?'

'Why a doctor?'

She was diffident at first and would not answer, but Vijay pushed her. 'Well?'

'Well what?'

'Why a doctor?'

'I'd like to help people, I suppose, our people, on the estates, they have no one to help them when they are sick.' She was thinking of her uncle, her everyday father, hearing again the sound of his agonized breathing as he succumbed to yet another attack of asthma. She remembered as a child lying on the mat beside him, with the damp of the floor coming through and biting her skin, listening to him reach out desperately for every single breath. She was sure that he would die that very night and waited, with bated breath matching his, for each breath to be his last. And in the morning when she awoke and felt him breathe naturally

again there beside her, she was sure that her prayers had been answered and that she was now more bound than ever by her oath to devote her life to tending the sick.

'What else can I do?' she went on and then, almost to herself, she added, 'I have no money or anything to give them, only me.'

She had become very solemn and withdrawn, as though she was coming to terms again with a wound that she had carried from birth. Vijay fell silent.

'Why? What is it you want to do?' she asked him suddenly, ashamed that she had shown so much of herself to him and challenging him to show as much.

'No, no, I agree with you,' Vijay was quick to reassure her, 'but I wouldn't go about it your way, helping people, that too, yes, I also come from a poor family, but I want to change the things that make us poor.'

'Like what?'

'Everything, the whole of society, like they did in China.'

'Communism you mean,' she said dubiously.

'Yes, why not?'

'No thank you. See what it has done here. It is only after that lot got into government that we are being thrown off the estates.'

'I don't mean that rubbish,' retorted Vijay angrily. 'That is not communism or socialism or . . . those guys just want power for themselves. No one takes them seriously any more.'

The girl was interested now. Vijay looked like someone who had given some thought to the questions that bothered her. What was his idea of socialism, then?

Sensing her interest in him, Vijay began by trying to impress the girl, but soon got caught up in his own enthusiasm. And, like a Pettah salesman unwinding a bolt of prime calico on a Colombo pavement, he laid before her a vision of society unblemished by greed or hunger or exploitation or injustice.

But how was such a society to come about in their own country, the girl wanted to know. (Vijay had by now changed seats with the old man, to hear her better, he said.) Would it not incur violence and the loss of innocent lives? Isn't that what had happened in the PLF rebellion in 1971? And weren't they against the Indian workers too?

Vijay confessed that he did not have all the answers. But it was a mistake to think, like the PLF, that it was up to some special revolutionary group to take power and hand it over to the people. That never happens: those who take power, keep it.

'That is what Sister Nanda used to say,' interrupted the girl.

'Who?'

'The nun in the convent I worked in. She must have been connected to the PLF or something, she knew quite a lot about them and she used to talk to me about revolution and things like that, and give me books. I don't think she is going to be a nun for long.'

Vijay stopped in his tracks; the girl no longer seemed interested in what he was saying.

'No, no, go on,' she urged him on. 'Please, I am listening. What is the answer then?'

The answer was quite simply that the people themselves should take power, Vijay replied, ordinary people, and in Sri Lanka that meant workers, peasants, fisherfolk, market women, artisans. But for them to want to do that, each of them, each of these groups had to be shown how the new society could improve their own lives while improving the lives of others. And even within those groups there were sections whose interests might be different, like the *andé* cultivators, or dock workers who owned a bit of land back in the villages, or estate workers who worked the land but had none, or fishermen who fished for pearls not fish. It was a mistake to think that all workers or all peasants or all clerks had the same incentive to change things. That may have been how things had developed in Russia or China, but in a country like Sri Lanka, which had been colonized at different times by different European powers in different ways and even in different areas, there were bound to be different developments, different interests, different . . .

'Phew,' the girl let out her breath sharply. 'I didn't understand a word of what you said,' and laughingly she added, 'but you said it well.'

Vijay laughed too and apologized for his earnestness. He was really working things out in his own mind, he confessed, and not speaking to her, and that, he said self-deprecatingly, was what was wrong with 'lefties' like him: they spoke 'from', not 'to' – from themselves, not to others.

'There you go again,' the girl exclaimed, throwing up her hands in mock horror. 'You are not a lecturer or something are you?'

'I am a student,' sulked Vijay.

'What's your name?'

'Vijay.'

'I am Meena.'

Vijay had gathered by now that they were both going to Hatton and wanted to find out where she lived, but was too abashed to do anything more than answer her questions. It was only when they were getting off the bus that he finally managed to express the hope that he could meet her again.

'I doubt that,' Meena replied smilingly. 'I live on a coolie line.'

For days afterwards, Vijay cursed himself for having wasted his time going on about socialism when he should have been finding out more about the girl. But, then, it was she who had propelled him in that direction, he thought, absolving himself of blame. Even so, he should have known when to stop. Now he'd never know where she lived and what she did. He could not believe that she worked on an estate. Her parents probably did, but it was about her uncle that she had spoken. Perhaps she was an orphan. That would explain her having been brought up in a convent. And, of course, that is where she had learnt her English, and Sinhala too probably.

He smiled, recollecting the way she tilted her head when she asked a question and the mischief in her dancing eyes as she brought him gently down to earth.

What a beautiful thing the human face was. There was nothing on earth to compare with it. Why? What made it so? It couldn't just be the uniqueness of each one, surely, though what could be more commonplace than a face? That too, yes, but also perhaps its ability to express, hint at, signify, summon, a thought, a feeling, a passing mood, be a window on the imagination. It was not a statement without also being a symbol. It could not be specific without also being ambiguous. It was an act and, at the same time, an intimation, of the act to come. It left so much unspoken, unsaid, unsung. It did not exist, could not exist, by itself – for the moment it was looked on, it was participated in. That's it; like all great art, it needed you to be a part of it.

That must certainly go down in his notebook, as one of his better reflections.

But what of Meena? How was he to find her? His Uncle Lal was no help; he was busy fighting the health department for better sanitation in the line rooms, following another outbreak of typhoid, and Aunt Hema, who had begun to give herself airs since her daughter married the Education Minister's son, did not deign to know 'those people'. He made discreet inquiries of their little Indian servant girl, but she was from 'other parts', his aunt being of the firm opinion that the further 'they' came from, the more unlikely they were to run away. He haunted the bazaar for a couple of days, and even stood guard over Lal's surgery for a while, hoping she would have fallen ill (though there was no Meena on Lal's books) but to no avail.

All of which had not gone unnoticed by Lal, who worried that the boy was sickening for something: not only was he off his food, but, more noticeably, off his conversation as well. There was none of the heated political discussion this time that Lal was accustomed to. And so

he knocked off work early one evening and dragged Vijay off to a garden party at the *Peria-Dorai*'s. Vijay's inclination was not to have anything to do with 'these colonial types', but he could hear Meena chiding him for his pomposity: it was enough that it pleased his uncle who, after all, was only trying to please him.

Vijay had not been to the PD's house before and, like Lal before him, was stunned by the view from the edge of the garden, only this time, the sun was going down at the back of him somewhere and the shapes and the shadows it cast on the valley below filled him with the eerie melancholy of dusk.

'Do you want a drink, sir?' A voice behind him broke into his reverie and, roused by its faint familiarity, he turned round to see a figure in a sari silhouetted against the light from the window.

'No, thank . . . Meena? No? It's not you, is it?' He approached the figure. 'What are you doing here?' he cried. 'I have been looking for you everywhere.' He looked her over. 'And why are you all dressed up?'

'Shush,' cautioned Meena. 'People can hear you. I saw you coming with Dr Lal. Is he a relation?'

'He is my uncle – but what are you doing here? You don't work here, do you?'

'No, my father is the gardener. He . . .'

Just at that moment her father came up to her and, excusing himself for the intrusion, whispered to Meena that the patties were running out.

'This is Mr Vijay, father,' Meena said to him in Tamil. 'I met him on the bus, I told you.'

Sanji bowed in a dignified but distant salaam.

'Dr Lal's nephew,' Meena added.

Sanji started as though he was stung.

'Dr's nephew? Vijay? Mr Vijay, I mean. Not Rajan, Mr Rajan's son, are you?' he began in Tamil and then repeated the question in Sinhala. 'Are you?'

'Yes, yes, I am,' replied Vijay, equally startled. 'Why, do you know him?'

'Know him? Yes. No, not really, not any more, what I mean is . . .'

and Sanji went on to tell Vijay and Meena about his meeting with Dr Lal and his 're-discovery' of Rajan.

'You see, we are not so far apart after all,' whispered Vijay to Meena as she went off to fetch the patties. 'I must see you, tomorrow, please, in the morning? I'm going back on Thursday. Please, in the bazaar?'

Meena nodded.

SELECTIONS WERE A TIME of great upheaval for everyone, from the beggar in the street, selling his sores, to Jinasena *mudalali*, merchandising his loyalties on the political stock market. Everything was uncertain, in flux. One moment it looked as though the mock-socialist policies of the Patriots would carry the day, the next that their years of elaborate masquerade were at last at an end. The Super-patriots, with their promise of instant World Bank prosperity, were now the favourites; Yankee Dickie Perera, prime-minister in waiting for forty years, was champing at the bit to make his blueprint run. The waters of the great Mahaweli would be dammed and directed to irrigate the land, and free trade zones open up the country to 'the robber barons of international industry'. (He was proud of the phrase.) There would be work for everyone and money to buy all the foreign goods they had so long set their hearts on. There would be no import controls and no exchange controls, and no need for subsidized rice or free medicine. There would be a free market for the rich and poverty coupons for the poor, and television and coca-cola for all.

Patriotism and capitalism, the package was appealing, and it came gift-wrapped in the gold braid of the Yankee dollar, and sold at a carnival of Madison Avenue-style election meetings.

To the more discerning, Tricky Dickie promised an end to corruption in high places – he would bring the former PM herself before the tribunal of the people – and a quick settlement to the Tamil question. To the Buddhist Sangha, Saint Dickie presented his programme as the sublime expression of *dharmista* government and himself as the reincarnation of an ancient Buddhist ruler, Parakrama the Irrigator no less, but this time, as befitted the times, in the guise of executive president, not king. And accordingly, on the marshes of Kotte, he would decree to be builded anew the mythic city of Dickie-pura, from where to dispense his righteous rule. But first, his people must choose him. For had they not in ancient times chosen their local rulers and their local councils, the headmen, the chiefs, sometimes even the schoolteacher? Only the monarch had been handed down by divine decree. Now they would be called upon to elect him too, the once and future king, twice over, first as prime minister and then, when he had arranged the constitution to his satisfaction, as president.

For ten years, declared Democracy Dick, *Ballu Amma's* 'people's government' had kept the people from the polls and *Ballu Amma's* 'people's press' had told the people that elections were unnecessary, but now, with him, they could be sure that there would be no end to their voting. He

would even give them local elections, last heard of in 19. . . God knew when. For Tamils too, so that they could get justice the democratic way. And he was going to bring down the voting age to 18, to give young people a voice in government, he said, show them that there was no need for revolution. What's more, he was going to release the leaders of the PLF from prison, where *Ballu Amma* had left them to rot, Gehan too, and allow them to contest the elections, if that was indeed what the people wanted. 'Ah, the people,' sighed Democracy Dick. 'Where would we be without the people?'

Things were beginning to look bad for the patriots and the socialists. Even their happy union in a United Front of patriotic socialism had begun to collapse with the onset of the elections, with each party vying with the other to promote the same policies, only better, so that while the socialists offered to nationalize yet more things for the people, the patriots promised to do the same but for the Sinhala people, and, this time, without putting money into their own pockets. But they had already used their combined forces to take over the press for the people and the trade unions for the people and the co-ops and the petrol stations and the textile factory for the people, and there was little left to take over that was worth the candle, and even that had been taken over during the power cuts. And just when they thought they were getting their act together, the stock of baby food, that had gone missing from the government stores the previous year, was discovered in a cabinet minister's garage. His chauffeur was duly arraigned.

'*O tempora, O mores,*' cried out *Dharmista* Dick – in the Sinhala translation – and called on the workers to defect to his union, which at least had found work for the reserve army of the unemployed, beating the other unions into shape. 'Reserve army, that's good,' he had laughed when Merrill Sithu, his employment minister, offered up the phrase. (He was a man for phrases.) 'Yes, yes, that's good. Reserve army, private army; private army, reserve army. If you can't join them, beat them, into joining you! Ha, ha, that's good.'

Soon the unions were changing sides. Government servants followed suit: the lesser ranks visibly and loquaciously, the middle orders more circumspectly. There was no movement, still, among the judges and magistrates, army officers and police chiefs, but their sudden neutrality was itself eloquent of impending change. On the campuses, the dons and lecturers slid gently along the line of the booze, leaving it to their students to proclaim more raucously that *volte-face*, according to a French philosopher, was the necessary strategy of the times. Even signposts and bollards, if they could not be said to have changed direction, were certainly changing colour, to a victorious green.

'Every vote in Lanka,' commented *The Citizen*, an underground Sinhala newspaper, 'is a floating vote, and the party that wins is simply the winning party.'

'Contrary to popular belief,' it went on to berate the electorate, 'we are not a political people. We talk a lot of politics because we like talking, and we like voting because it is the only time we get noticed, or have something to sell. The vote is our meal ticket, our food coupon, the minimum wage. Our convictions are based on gossip, our actions on greed, and we swing from one party to another like monkeys, as a matter of survival.'

It then went on to excoriate the patriots and the super-patriots for turning the vote into an instrument of racial hatred and debasing majority rule to the rule of the Sinhalese, by the Sinhalese, for the Sinhalese. And the socialists, it thundered, had sold out their principles for a mess of power.

'Parliamentary socialism,' concluded *The Citizen*, 'may bring down the old, but cannot build the new, and so creates a culture of dissatisfaction but never of hope, a politics of confrontation but never of unity. Sadly, the only unity that the parties have been able to engender has been the unity of the races, on either side, and that is the ultimate confrontation.'

Vijay picked up the paper on the bus on his way home from work and read it desultorily. Though it was late evening, the bus was crowded, and his thoughts were occupied, as always at the end of a day's work, with how he was going to face another. He hated his job at the *Chronicle's* bookshop and he hated the capital city. Selling books to collectors who did not want to read, and driving away readers who could not afford to buy, seemed to him a poor way of dispensing knowledge, and he had set about remedying it in his own way by allowing students to 'browse' through the same book day after day. But that morning Mr Dias the manager had caught him leafing through *The Development of Underdevelopment* with an impoverished bank clerk, and would have dismissed him on the spot (the books in Vijay's section had become a virtual reference library for paupers, he charged) had not a wealthy customer who was once an avid reader himself – before he became a QC – interceded on the young man's behalf. Vijay was thankful for the intervention, but could not help muttering to himself that the incident could have added a valuable footnote to dependency theory.

Mr Dias must have overheard the remark, because he peered threateningly over his glasses at Vijay, snorted a couple of times and stomped off to his office on his short stumpy legs. And Vijay knew he had blown any chances he had of being promoted upstairs to the press section. He

had hoped that, by starting at the bottom, in the *Chronicle's* books and archives department, he could work his way up to the newspaper offices proper, become a reporter even, or so Lal's friend, the senior editor had indicated when he took Vijay on to the *Chronicle* staff. But Mr Dias was on the board of directors, and without his recommendation . . . Oh well, thought Vijay, as the bus rumbled over a culvert, there was no point crying over spilt milk. Who wanted to be a reporter, anyway?

And the city itself was not to his liking. It did not appear to have a sense of history like Anuradhapura or Kandy, or a sense of people like Jaffna, where he had been to as a boy. It bristled instead with trade and gain and lowly ambition. Its roads converged on the docks, its buildings huddled around commerce; you did not meander through one or stay to gaze at the other. Even the Governor-General's mansion stood discreetly aside, behind bushes and shrubs and a high grey wall, to let the road rush past it to the harbour. Colombo had been dropped off somewhere on the road to capitalism and abandoned to the belief that greed alone made for riches.

Magama was different. Less than an hour's bus-ride from the city, it was still very rural. Vijay liked it there, and the young couple with whom he lodged treated him as a member of the family. He still missed Meena, though. Perhaps he should have stayed on in Hatton that time and pushed the matter to a conclusion . . . not to a conclusion perhaps . . .

'I cannot see you again,' she had protested at their third or fourth meeting. 'It will kill my father, if he knows, and my aunt. They are trying to marry me off to Gopal,' and when Vijay had looked quizzically at her, she had added, 'that boy in the union office? Your uncle knows him.'

It came out in their conversation, however, that although she had been out with Gopal to meetings 'and things', she was not really fond of him 'that way'. But he, Gopal, had made her feel, even more than her father had, that her place was with her people, trying to lift their lives a little.

That convinced Vijay more than anything else that his love for Meena was doomed. He was sure it was love and not just a physical attraction. Certainly, the love was still there, he thought wryly, even after he had had some sort of physical relief with her. That was another thing; she made no great fuss about sex. It was a part of their love for each other, but she would not sleep with him for practical reasons. Besides, she would not want to tell her aunt a lie if she was asked.

The memory of it caught him in his loins, and the ache to be with her again passed over him like a swoon.

'Magama,' the conductor called out and Vijay, gathering his bag of

fruit and the newspaper, hastily tumbled out of the bus. He had still a bit of a way to walk to get home, and he stopped off at a kiosk for tea.

The radio was broadcasting news of the election campaigns between songs. The government, it announced, was showing signs of being re-elected; but that, thought Vijay, was what you'd expect from a government radio, and the opposite was probably true.

He sipped his tea slowly, falling gratefully back into the slower rhythm of the countryside and letting the mellifluous voice of Manda Shalini embrace him like sleep. Suddenly he became aware of the silence around him and, like the others, became more attentive to the words. It was a nursery song that a mother was singing to her infant son as she put him to sleep, enjoining him to honour the Aryan blood that ran in his veins and drive the Dravidians from the holy Sinhala land. The listeners were enrapt to a man and, when the song was over, literally hitched up their sarongs as though for battle. What, wondered Vijay, would happen if Meena walked in now with her nose-ring and her *pottu*. They would kill her, probably, and then as quickly mourn her death.

He went back to *The Citizen* and read it more carefully this time. There was a sanity there that lifted him, and truth. It was the sort of paper he would like to work for, thought Vijay, but it had neither the printer's name nor address and the writers wrote under pseudonyms. It was now into its fourth (irregular) issue, Vijay discovered, but was unlikely to survive the polls; it could only have lasted this long in the chaos of an election. Vijay sighed wistfully.

Manda Shalini was singing that song again.

In July the Super-Patriots roared to power, wiping out the Patriots and annihilating the Socialists. Madison Avenue had paid off. Tinsel and stars had overcome rations and rhetoric. Victory Dick bestrode the country like a Colossus. He owned it now, except for the North and bits of the East where the Tamils, kept out as Tamils, had voted en bloc as Tamils, and now formed the Parliamentary Opposition, demanding a separate state for themselves.

'We have now pushed Parliamentary politics to frontiers unknown to man,' mocked *The Citizen* in its last fugitive issue. 'Once we had an Opposition that sought to push working-class revolution through Parliament. We now have an Opposition seeking to push a whole liberation movement through Parliament. The ludicrous sight of Marxists persuading capitalists to part with their ill-gotten wealth has been overtaken by the more ludicrous prospect of Tamils asking the Sinhalese to part with their race-begotten power. It was not inconceivable that in Sri Lanka a Marxist Opposition could readily turn into its dialectical opposite, a

bourgeois government, but only the Tamil bourgeoisie could ever imagine that a Tamil Opposition could become an alternative government in order to seek a Tamil state through a Sinhalese Parliament.'

Vijay had managed by now to get all the back issues of the paper through his old PLF contacts, but neither he nor anyone else was any the wiser as to where it came from. The printing was different in each issue, and the news reports were uneven and came in dollops from various parts of the country, including the Tamil areas. It usually ran to eight closely printed pages, but the size of the pages differed from issue to issue. Only the political commentary seemed to be written by the same person or group and was in all three languages. The paper had 'readers' groups' in several areas, it was rumoured, and it was only in Colombo that no one had heard of them.

Vijay had a curious sense of being caught in a void. He was going nowhere, he did nothing, he had lost interest in the world around him. He lived out of a memory, almost, of being connected to that world in some remote time.

He read, avidly, but his reading had no direction; he met with his friends from university but their conversation was about careers; he dropped in on his aunt, Leela, Rajan's sister, and her husband, but all they could talk about was making money from their import/export business, now that the market was free – if only the damn Tamil Rights people didn't rock the boat. And the couple Vijay lodged with just went on, like him, living their lives (he was a permanent temp in the Customs, she a housewife waiting for a baby) without enthusiasm or verve.

He went home to his grandparents, as he always did when he wanted a hole to hide in, but the old man would give him no peace. What was Vijay doing with his life, he wanted to know. It was all very well getting a degree and trying to earn a living, but had Vijay thought beyond that? What happened to all those grand ideas Vijay had had about becoming an agricultural officer or some such thing and helping us farmers?

Vijay was taken aback by the outburst and was about to retort angrily himself when his grandmother called to him from the kitchen.

'Come and take this cup of tea to your grandfather, son,' and, lest Vijay should dally, she added, 'Now, before it gets cold.'

As Vijay entered the kitchen, the old lady grabbed him and took him to the furthest corner of the room.

'Don't upset him,' she whispered. 'His heart condition is getting worse, and now that he can't work or go out like before – he missed all those election meetings – he gets angry more easily.'

Vijay gave in to her. She herself was crippled with arthritis and could hardly move about. He needed to be more thoughtful and considerate,

he realized, but the old man's remarks rankled.

'What does he expect me to do?' he asked of his grandmother, as she handed him the tea.

'What he has always expected of you,' she replied unhelpfully.

Vijay took the tea into his grandfather. The old man took a sip and looked inquiringly at his grandson.

'Well?' he pressed.

'What? An agricultural development officer? Under this government?' snorted Vijay. 'Oh come on, grandfather, I couldn't get a labourer's job with them and, even if I did, you think I could be of any use? They are not doing all those irrigation schemes and opening up the dry zone for people like you, you know. They are doing it for the big American fruit companies . . . Del Monte and Dole and . . . "Let them eat pineapple", that is their slogan,' Vijay quoted *The Citizen*.

His grandfather was silent for a minute, weighing up what Vijay had said. He had never believed that any government was going to do anything for people like him, he had lived too long for that, but he did not like Vijay's cynicism either.

'What are you going to do about it? Nothing? Become a journalist? Under this government?' the old man mocked.

'How about revolution, grandfather?' Vijay teased him.

'That's not such a bad idea,' was his grandfather's surprising reply. 'But it's not going to come in a hurry, and it's never going to come unless educated youngsters like you return your education to the people who gave it to you.'

Vijay looked at his grandfather in astonishment; not all the education in the world was going to give him wisdom like that. And he was about to say as much when his grandmother walked in from the kitchen.

'That will do for one day,' she said shortly. 'Your grandfather is tired.' She picked up the teacup. 'You are here for a few more days, aren't you, son?'

Vijay nodded.

'Go on, then, off to bed.'

Vijay went to his room and sat at his old desk by the window, mulling over what his grandfather had said. A *Poya* moon lit up the trees and the shrubs and the dry, parched land before him. The memories came flooding back. 'A spectre was haunting . . .' He reached out automatically for the book on the shelf beside him. Everything was as he had left it. He took out his father's letters from a drawer in the desk and thumbed through them.

Rajan was always promising to come back, but he never did, he never would, not for good. Vijay knew that now, and he was not bitter any

more. He took out the first letter that Rajan had ever written to him. It was a letter of farewell. Strange, that the first letter a father should write to his son was to say goodbye. Vijay shook himself; he shouldn't think like that, not any more. But he was 7 at the time, for God's sake, and he couldn't read English, and Uncle Lal had to translate it for him. 'My beloved son,' the letter began, and he had liked that, and remembered his father then, at that moment, so clearly, recalled his face, his smile, always shy, wry sometimes, unlike his laughter, which was stentorian, remembered him to the touch, as he held his hand, kissed him on the forehead and said goodnight. 'My beloved son, forgive me . . .' Big word, forgive. Uncle Lal had to explain it to him: he was saying sorry, but Vijay knew that it went beyond that. 'Forgive me for leaving you . . .' So he wasn't coming back, that's what he meant, that's why he was writing. Go on, Uncle Lal, isn't that what he's saying, go on, tell me the worst.

Uncle Lal had taken him on his lap then and gone on reading, 'but I had to go away to get well again'. His father had been very ill, Uncle Lal explained, after his mother died, very very ill, in his mind, for a very long time; he couldn't remember anything or anybody, he could not even recognize Vijay when he went to see him in hospital – and, as Uncle Lal was speaking, Vijay knew that his father must have already gone from him even before he'd left. 'And the doctors here can help me. I am already feeling much better and can at least begin to write to you. Be a good boy, my son . . .' the rest of the letter was taken up with advice and admonition.

Vijay had not cried that first time the letter was read to him. He had tried to remember, instead, the things his father wanted him to do, and do them, that way his father would come back sooner. But when other letters followed and he did not, Vijay kept going back to that first letter and a great emptiness began to fill his soul, and every night for days on end he cried himself to sleep.

And then he came back, his father, for his father's funeral, with that wry smile of his, when Vijay was 12, and he took Vijay along with him to Sandilipay, his village in Jaffna. Vijay could not quite remember grandfather Sahadevan, but from the way they spoke of him at the funeral he must have helped a whole lot of people, and it was he, they said, who had brought the post office to the village, and the bus service. His mantle now fell on his brother, Para, but Rajan, his eldest son, the villagers were sure, would return one day to take his father's place. Vijay felt proud, then, felt that he belonged, there, in the village, beside his father and grand-uncle Para.

It was the happiest week of his life. Everybody made a fuss of him, his father most of all. He took him walking through the palmyrah

groves and swimming in the hot springs of Keerimalai and kissed him goodnight on the forehead. What Vijay loved most, though, were the well-water baths, when he stood beside his father in his little sarong and had the water poured over him, bucket after bucket, to the tune of some silly song his father had made up, and got him to join in, as he went along.

But, suddenly, he left. He had gone back one day to Minneriya, where he and Lali and Vijay had had their last picnic, to see again the quiet beauty of the place and remember her the way she had been. He had thought he was strong enough. The doctors in England had told him that he was, that he would never get completely well until he had confronted the way of her going. It was a month after he had come. Uncle Lal had wanted him to give it more time, but he was impatient to be well again, to look after his son, make a home for him, make his country his again. But standing there on the water's edge, in the drowsy haze of the afternoon, watching the egrets and spoonbills parade the lake, he thought he heard a man behind him ask him for a cigarette – and he flipped.

He was in and out of hospital for months after that, and Vijay, sensing that his father was slipping away from him again, had prepared himself to accept it. But he left without saying goodbye, and that Vijay could not understand. He needed Uncle Lal and his grandparents to explain to him, over and over again, that his father was not in a fit condition to answer for his actions. The doctors, and Lal himself, had advised him to go back to England for a while, and taking leave of Vijay would have set him back again: he had wanted so much to make a life for himself and his son, and was so full of guilt at leaving him. He had left a note, instead, loving and grieving and promising to return.

Vijay rummaged through the drawer for the note, but could not find it; and came up with a letter his father had written a couple of years later. That was when Vijay knew that he was never coming back. He put the letter down and looked out of the window. The moon had gone and the land was shrouded in the weird and frightening shapes of his boyhood.

He picked up the letter again. 'My beloved son,' his father began, as before, only this time he did not ask forgiveness. Instead, he refused to forgive the country that had separated him from his finer feelings, kept him from his duties and sent him off to a country which had history, but no beauty, not the beauty of ordinary people in their daily relationships. 'And we have lost our beauty in trying to find a history.' It was an angry letter and Vijay liked him the better for it. But another part of Vijay could not help thinking that his father had found someone else to blame for his own weaknesses.

'I cannot bear the people who murdered my wife. I cannot bear the politicians and the priests who solicited it, I cannot bear the intellectuals who connived at it with their silence.

'I thought I lived in a world where there was no communal hatred or conflict, where we didn't kill each other just because we spoke different languages. It is not even that we had so much in common, Sinhalese and Tamils, Buddhists and Hindus, or that we derived from the same racial branch of the tree of man. We were one people. We sang each other's songs as our own, ate each other's food, talked each other's talk, worshipped each other's Gods. Even when we lived our particular lives, they always touched on those around us, and theirs on ours.

'But now this, this rewriting of history, for the sake of power, greed . . . all this falsification . . . I can't understand it, son, and I can't stand it. I can't stand being away from you either. There's an emptiness inside me where you have been, but, alas, it calls to a larger emptiness where your mother was. And every time I get up to come back to you, those emptinesses overwhelm me, and there is no me any more that can get up and come. Do you know what I mean, I don't know how else to say it. Perhaps, when you are older, you will read this letter again, and understand.

'There's an emptiness, too, where once the mountains of my country, the rivers and streams, the trees and birds, have been. And often, it is that emptiness that connects you to me.

'But what sort of a thing is that – that I should be connected to you only through my emptinesses?'

Vijay put the letter down and wiped away a tear. Ironically enough, it was that same emptiness that had called to him and made him one with his father, and he had been angry that that should have been his only legacy. Uncle Lal and his grandmother had helped him over it. But it was only when he had met Padma and come to know her and knew what she was fighting for and why, and had himself slowly become a part of it, that his emptinesses were filled and the bitterness about his father ended. He rose from his desk and moved about the room disconsolately, picking up old mementos, and memories, by the light of the moon: the catapult his grandfather had made for him, the first issue of *The People*, the PLF newspaper which Padma had given him and, from under his mattress, the wooden rifle with which he had practised. He looked under the bed; the battered old tin trunk that he had first left home with was still there. He rummaged through it and came across his mother's diary. He put on the light and, lying down on the bed, began to read it. If only Meena could read it with him. He fell asleep.

He woke up the following morning determined to make his peace

with his grandfather. The old man was seated in his favourite rattan chair on the verandah, peering through an ancient pair of glasses at the previous day's newspaper, looking for some bit of news he had missed.

He looked up from the paper as Vijay came and sat himself down on the step beside his grandmother, who was elaborately preparing her first chew of betel and arecanut for the day.

'There's trouble in Jaffna,' the old man announced gravely.

'What do you mean? Let's see.'

'No, it's not in this. It's in the Tamil papers. Raman told me.'

'He came early with the milk this morning,' his grandmother informed him.

Vijay waited for his grandfather to go on.

'The police. They are burning and looting the shops and terrorizing the people.'

'Why, for God's sake?'

'Because the police are Sinhalese and the people are Tamils,' exploded his grandfather. 'And the Tamils want to take bits of our country,' contributed his grandmother.

The old man ignored her. 'Because the police were refused free entry into the town carnival.'

'They want to be masters in their own land,' interjected the old lady, chewing on her betel.

'What on earth are you going on about, woman?' her husband retorted angrily. 'Where did you get all that rubbish from?'

'No, what I am saying is . . .' She spat out a stream of red juice. 'I am not saying they are not right, the Tamils, but why do they want to be separate? They are the same as us, and I like them.'

'Because they think that is the only way they can get justice.' He turned to Vijay. 'You remember what Gehan said all those years ago? "If those who have do not give, those who haven't must take."'

'The President is sure to do something,' said his wife hopefully.

'He's not President yet. And he probably put them up to it,' the old man observed cynically. 'To show what he can do when he becomes President.' He looked at his grandson for confirmation, but Vijay's mind seemed to be elsewhere, and the old man was afraid that the lad's thoughts had returned to that other time . . . 'There's nothing in the English papers, is there, son? You heard nothing in Colombo?'

Vijay shook his head dejectedly.

'You see,' the old man spread out his hands despairingly, 'no one tells us what is going on any more, and we are just a hundred miles from Jaffna. We are already two countries.'

All of that day Vijay was in turmoil. He did not know what to do.

One minute he wanted to escape it all and take up his father's offer to further his education in England, the next he was going to rush off to Jaffna to see what he could do for his father's people. His grandfather, his mother, his whole history hung like a conscience over him. He wondered again at the old man. Where did he get all that commitment from?

'I am chucking up my job,' he announced to his grandparents the next day.

'To do what?' It was his grandmother's turn to ask him the question.

'Social work,' Vijay replied, looking challengingly at his grandfather, 'in Hatton, perhaps in that Mr Aloysius' Centre for estate workers? I'll ask Uncle Lal.'

His grandfather smiled his approval. 'That would be a start anyway,' he said.

'Why not write to Lal first?' his grandmother asked, anxious to keep him at home for a few more days. Vijay hesitated; he wanted to see Meena. 'You have only just come.'

'Yes, all right, grandmother,' Vijay gave in. Meena might not be in Hatton.

Lal's reply came back promptly. He was pleased that Vijay wanted to be 'socially useful'. And Aloysius would certainly welcome Vijay's assistance, especially after the trouble on the estates. Did not Vijay know about it? People were still not clear after all these weeks what had happened, but the story was that lorry loads of masked men had suddenly appeared in the middle of the night and attacked the line-rooms, terrorizing the sleeping families and destroying their pitiful belongings.

Perumal's block, though, had been unaffected. He and Sellamma were away in Nawalapitiya at the time, anyway, and Meena had gone to stay with her father at the *Peria-Dorai's*. Things were slowly getting back to normal, but Aloysius had his hands full and could do with all the help he could get, though there was no money in it for Vijay.

Vijay needed no second bidding. Everything seemed to be falling into place at last. He was going to work with people and he liked that, and he would be close to Uncle Lal, and, who knows, he might even be able to persuade Meena to marry him? The next morning, he was packed and ready to go, and this time his grandmother did not try to stop him. All she said was, 'what about your job in Colombo?' and Vijay replied, laughingly, that when he didn't turn up, they would know he had gone.

But when he arrived in Hatton, Vijay found Uncle Lal withdrawn and moody. Vijay put it down to his uncle's periodic disaffections with his wife, who had once again done a bolt to Colombo, to be 'near the

children'. But Auntie Hema was always doing that; she hated Hatton and longed for the city lights and, now that her daughter was married to the Education Minister's son, she had entry into society as well, and she could look out for her son, who was just finishing at law college. Uncle Lal, one would have expected, had got used to her ways by now.

No, it was something else that was troubling the old fellow and, judging from the way he reacted to Vijay's questions, it must be something to do with him, Vijay.

'Have I done something, Uncle Lal?' Vijay blurted out at dinner that night.

'Done something?' Lal looked puzzled. 'Ah, you mean . . . No, no, it's nothing to do with you. Or at least, not directly anyway. I mean . . .'
He broke off and, rising from the table, walked to the window and peered into the night.

He is putting on weight, thought Vijay. Lal came back from the window and sat down.

'I'd better tell you straight out,' he said determinedly. 'There was trouble on the estates. Right?'

'Yes, yes.'

'Not just here, but everywhere. Nawalapitiya also.'

'So?'

'So? What do you mean so? That is where Sellamma's sister lives and they were visiting her.'

'I know all that. You wrote to me.' Why was Uncle Lal so short with him?

'Well, Perumal was beaten up . . . He won't work any more . . . and Sellamma is ill, very ill. She was raped.'

'Oh no,' Vijay cried out. 'I thought . . . you said . . .'
he looked at his uncle accusingly.

'I didn't know. Sanji told me only yesterday.'

They fell silent. The cook came and took their plates away. The crickets chirped outside and a bumblebee flitted around the electric light before it finally fell to the floor. The telephone rang. Lal went to pick it up. It stopped ringing.

'How's Meena?' asked Vijay.

'All right.'

The crickets chirped some more. A gecko ran across the table.

'How do you mean very ill?' Vijay reached out for a hope.

'Who? Sellamma? She is not right in the head, and will not allow anyone to go near her, not even the doctors in the hospital where she was. Sanji wants me to try.'

'When?'

'Tomorrow.'

'Can I come with you? I won't be in the way.'

Lal nodded.

Sanji came to fetch Lal early the next morning. He was pleased to see Vijay but was not sure at first that he should accompany them. But, remembering Sellamma's great affection for Vijay, he changed his mind. Vijay's presence might even help to bring her out of herself.

Perumal was waiting for them on the steps of the line-room, looking very old and broken, and holding himself up on a stick. He gestured to Lal to go inside with Sanji while he kept Vijay company on the verandah. But they said very little to each other, giving ear instead to Sellamma and Meena talking and laughing within. Suddenly a cry broke out and Vijay ran in to see Sellamma cowering in the corner of the room.

'Get him out, get him out,' she shouted in a mixture of Sinhala and Tamil, pushing herself further and further back into the wall as though to get into it. 'Get that Sinhalese out of here, he's going to rape me.'

Meena and Sanji tried to calm her down and allay her fears by pointing out that Lal was a doctor, a doctor, not a Sinhalese, come to look after her, a doctor, and a friend, family friend. Remember?

'Friend?' Sellamma giggled. 'Ah, friend,' and she began to slide down the wall on to her haunches. And then she saw Lal's stethoscope glinting on his chest and began to shout again, 'get him out, get him out, he's a doctor, he wants to put his hand in there, they all want to put their hands in there, put everything in there, at my age, when my husband couldn't, they've put a child in my dried-up womb. *Aiyo Muruga*.' She collapsed on the floor.

Meena gestured for everyone to leave the room. But before anyone could move, Sellamma got up and rushed at Lal, pushing her stomach out at him with both her hands.

'There, doctor, there,' she yelled angrily, spitting in his face, 'take that out if you can, take out your Sinhalese seed.'

As Lal turned to go home, Vijay tried to say a comforting word to Meena, but she dismissed him peremptorily.

'It's your people who are sick,' she said. 'Go and treat them.'

'Meena,' her father roared at her in disapproval. She had spoken in English but the force of what she had said had escaped no one in the room, least of all Sanji. He turned to apologize to his guests but, seeing the stricken look on Vijay's face, became suddenly aware that he had strayed into a dialogue in which he had no part. He ushered Lal out of the room to join his brother-in-law on the verandah. Perumal was crying softly.

'I am sorry, doctor,' he wept. 'There is nothing you can do, there is nothing anyone can do.'

Lal, shaken already by Sellamma's breakdown, could not bear to see the fight going out of Perumal. He tried to comfort the man but his own emotions were spent. Vijay came out on to the verandah.

'I'll see you at home, Uncle Lal,' he said quietly and walked out into the pouring rain.

'Wait, you'll catch your death,' Lal called after him but his voice was already drowned in the downpour.

7

'**H**OLD ON TO ME, hold on to me,' Vijay heard himself screaming as his mother slid slowly from his grasp. He could barely see her now. The rain beat at his face and his hold on the outcrop at the cliff's edge was slowly loosening. Swiftly he changed hands, but even as he reached down she was gone, and above the rain and the thunder he could hear the rumble of her fall. He slid and stumbled, sobbing, after her down the mountainside and found her caught among the tea-bushes, laid out face-down in white, but breathing. He turned her over. It was Sellamma, his knife was in her side. The pain of it seared him. He woke with a start.

'It's only an injection,' said the nurse, withdrawing the needle. 'You'll sleep easier now.'

Lal and Sanji were at his bedside. Sanji smiled reassuringly and Lal put a hand on his shoulder. 'You'll be all right now,' he said.

Vijay raised himself from his bed. How had he got there, he wanted to know. He remembered wandering off into the hills . . . And it was there, Lal told him, atop a mountain, naked to the rain and wet to the bone, that they had found him at dusk. He had run a high fever that night and his breathing had become more and more laboured, and Lal, fearing that his lungs had been affected, had him admitted to hospital in the morning.

Vijay smiled and fell asleep.

It was several days before the fever broke and Vijay emerged, exhausted, from a labyrinth of nightmares, into day. But the memory of his journey lingered like a bitter after-taste on his tongue. Meena, Padma, his mother – all the women who had meant anything in his life – had been taken violently from him, only his grandmother . . . And the men too. There was Lal, of course, and his grandfather. But his father

was gone, and his friends, taken by events not of his doing or theirs. Everything that happened in the country appeared to touch and mould and wound him. There seemed to be no escape from it; he carried his country's history like a running sore. How did others escape? By yielding? And should he? Like Gamini? Or should he, like Mendis, his teacher, draw a drunken veil of oblivion over everything that went on around him? Capitulation or corruption, were those the choices?

How had Lal escaped them, Vijay wondered, and drifted into a deep sleep. When he woke the following morning, Lal had come and gone. He had left some fruit and some novels on the bedside table with a note saying that he'd be back that evening.

Vijay flicked through *The Return of the Native* absently and fell to thinking about Lal again, recalling his countless deeds of thoughtfulness and affection, and making up others as he went along. He had nothing else to do anyway, and the fever had left him weak and clean and pure, and given to wonderment like a newborn babe. Lal had been the great influence in his life, he had been there at all the stations of his journey, like a signalman, but sometimes also a porter, carrying the weight of his conscience. Vijay smiled to himself and, snuggling in closer to the warmth of his recollections, reached out for another book.

Again he looked at it desultorily. The author was not known to him, but the story, that of a country doctor in England, seemed more familiar. These others, Hardy and Forster and them, he reflected, familiarized us with their cities and villages and the people in them through their tales, but the tales themselves had nothing to say to us. And when they wrote about our countries and our people, though the tales were familiar, the characters were strangers. They had a language perhaps and a history that were spread so wide that they could talk of Northanger Abbey or Howards End or Hyde Park and the whole world would understand. It was common currency. We had no history, or we had several, mostly not of our doing, or we had forgotten that part of it which was, or it was a part too late to remember: it could only unmake the present.

Vijay began to read *A Fortunate Man*. And he was still engrossed in the book and the reveries it summoned up when Lal came by and dropped into the chair by the bed. He looked old and tired and his body seemed puckered with wear.

'Tired?' asked Vijay unnecessarily, taking his uncle's hand.

Lal nodded and reached over to the book Vijay was reading.

'Your father sent me that,' he said, cheering up. 'That, and that other book there, by Cabral, *Return to the Source*.' He nodded a greeting to the patient in the next bed.

'He never sends me any serious books,' Vijay complained.

'That's because you don't write to him,' Lal laughed, 'or tell him about yourself when you do. Everything he knows about you is from me, and you know damn well that's never enough for him.'

'Why doesn't he come then,' Vijay argued for the hell of it. 'Why doesn't he return to the source?' he laughed.

At that moment the matron passed by and stopped to talk to Lal. She was a big, grim woman who ran her wards like a military camp, which perhaps accounted for their cleanliness and efficiency but also for a formality and a lack of warmth. Her patients got well soon enough and vacated their beds even sooner. But here she was frolicking around with 'Dr Lal', her face all lit up and beautiful, her body uncorseted.

Vijay watched them a while and observed how Lal brought out the best in others. Like that Dr Sassall in *A Fortunate Man*, he spent himself on people, and was replenished by them. Even as Vijay watched, Lal's weariness had gone from him; he had unpuddered, come erect again.

Vijay observed the detachment of his own observations, his detachment even from himself and knew that, somewhere beyond the fever that so released him, he had closed a life.

'How is Meena?' he asked Lal abruptly when the matron had left.

'Gone,' replied Lal without surprise. He had waited for the question all evening. 'They have all gone. Sellamma couldn't bear the line-room, and Sanji went with them. North, I think, Jaffna or Vavuniya, somewhere just Tamil, for Sellamma to get whole again.'

'Yes,' said Vijay.

Over the next few days Vijay went rapidly through the assortment of books – fiction, philosophy, politics – that Lal brought him. He gobbled them up as though his life depended on them and was halted only by *Four Essays on Philosophy*. He had passed it by easily enough before, pausing only to peck at an epigram or pick up a phrase, but now it required him to stop and reflect; every sentence was weighted in its simplicity and each seemed to say something to him personally.

He had thrown himself into things without thinking or, rather, his thinking had not helped to inform and direct what he did, and he had ended up either in purposeless activism or in total abstention from it. Activity, he told himself weightily, was itself a process stretched out between thought and practice.

He reached out for his notebook to put his thoughts down; he kept one now, as his mother had; it helped him to talk to himself, to all those other selves of his. 'He who sees himself in others and others in himself is no longer alone.' Was that the *Gita* or the *Upanishads*? He prided

himself on his reading. Perhaps he should be a writer, a historian maybe, recover for his people the history they had lost? Put them back on course, help them change the history inflicted on them? It was not as though he had not given a lot of thought to his country, its formation, its predicament. But for whom would he write? He did not want to write for intellectuals, they made playthings of knowledge. For ordinary people? But he did not know people the way Lal knew people, he did not have the feel of them, he was still young and immature. He understood contradiction out there in society, but he did not grasp it in himself, in people. He had not till now seen conflict as necessary to one's personal growth, as an essential part of life, its motor, as natural as breathing. He had not seen that the dialectic was also a felt sensibility and, unless he grasped that, he would not be able to change anything. 'To know the taste of a pear you must change its reality by eating it.'

The revelation shook him, lit him up, like unending lightning, and he promptly struck Lal with it. Had Lal known it too? Since when? And how had it come to him? What had he done with the knowledge? How had he put it into practice?

Lal threw up his hands in mock surrender. He was used to Vijay's 'highs', but what had hit him now? No, of course, he did not know, consciously, that he'd felt all that, nor had he given it much thought, but yes, it was there somewhere in him. What had he done with it? Not much, really, except perhaps to try and take a hand in events, not great big ones, certainly not since his Party days, but in the little things to do with his work and his patients.

'That's it,' burst out Vijay excitedly. 'I am going to take a hand in events. I am going to teach, in Kurunegala, in my old school, in Padma's old school. I shall return to the source. I'll write to Mrs Bandara, straightaway, she might have something for me. You are right, Uncle Lal, I'm going to teach and take a hand in events, small ones, like you,' he laughed joyously.

A week later, he had his reply from Mrs Bandara: she would love to have Vijay come and teach in her school. She had in fact been on the look-out for a maths teacher who was bilingual and could also take English at a pinch, but had not been able to find a suitable person. Vijay would fit the bill perfectly. And she had her own reasons, she hinted, for wanting somebody on the staff whom she could personally trust. But, though she was head, the appointment was not really up to her; the politicians made all the decisions now. Could Uncle Lal perhaps get his wife to use her influence with the Education Minister?

Vijay balked at the idea, but Lal saw no harm in writing to his wife

and, the following term, he was installed at the school. Vijay's grandfather was pleased; it was what his father would want too, he told the boy. His grandmother could not agree more. England could wait, she said. (Vijay had only toyed with the idea during his periods of indecision, but the old lady still remembered; she had been afraid he'd go, and Vijay had not seen how deeply that apprehension had bitten into her.) They could now die in peace, she sighed, and Vijay could sell their useless bit of land or do whatever he liked with it, now that he had a proper job. He would have made a lousy farmer, anyway. (Vijay had no idea that his grandmother had laid out all these plans for him, she had never spoken them aloud – and he remembered again, from his boyhood days, how she would always give him his head and wait for him to rein himself in.)

The school took getting used to. It was nothing like what it had been in his time; there was not the same bustle and excitement of learning. True, even then, the mere fact of having to learn in the Sinhala medium, to the virtual exclusion of English, had tended to narrow down students' options, but they still had an interest in the world outside and a will to change their own. Central School may not have been a hotbed of PLF rebels like some of the schools in the South, but it had been quite progressive in its ideas and outlook.

That quality was now gone, and with it had gone the desire to know, the urge to find out. All the students' efforts seemed to be directed to passing exams and getting jobs, and these were not so much to be achieved as fixed, by getting to know the correct MP who had got to know the correct minister. It was as though the use of the national language which had, in those first few years, opened up a sense of self-achievement, of getting somewhere on one's own terms, of nationhood even, had, by leaving a part of the nation out of its remit, contracted ambition to the size of its own venality. And now venality itself was held up as the highest good.

Vijay slumped under the weight of his discovery. Such thoughts, he thought, how did they come to him? He was not ready to receive them, he could not carry their burden. There was no one around to carry them with. Mrs Bandara, yes, in a way. She understood, and she had fought the waves of reaction that swept over the school from the world outside, but she was wearied of the task now and hoped that Vijay would take it on.

But Vijay was busy rummaging in his own thoughts. Ever since Meena had broken with him, he had become more and more introspective. He had too often in the past leapt from cause to cause without reflection, going wherever the issue took him, and achieving little in the

process. It was time to stand still and gather himself. All the roaming would have had some purpose if it brought him to 'the still point of the turning world'. He smiled with remembered affection; it was one of Uncle Lal's favourite quotes, from a poem he said an Englishman had written on the dance of Shiva.

How did the rest of it go, he tried to recall. He had a copy of the book somewhere, or was it in that anthology that his father was said to carry with him all the time? It was time he rounded up his books, anyway, from his grandparents' home and Lal's, and there were some even in Mrs Bandara's house which Padma had given him.

'At the still point of the turning world' – the dance of Shiva, of Nataraja, the king of the dance, Arumugam, he of the six faces, Skanda . . . Narayan . . . Shiva-Parvati – how many names the Hindus gave their gods and how many gods they made of one, incarnating everything in his name, making him both man and woman, multiplying and dividing him/her and bringing them together again in that ecstatic dance of the world in which creation and preservation and destruction are all at once one, and Brahma and Vishnu and Shiva are united in contradiction, 'a white light still and moving'.

He saw it all now, and understood at last the great stone figure in the temple of Shiva at Kotahena, the meaning of those manifold hands, the almost separate dance of the flailing locks, and the fluidity of the left leg flung in such abandon over the right that not even the stone in which it was cast or the amateurishness of its caster could stop its everlasting motion – and the steadfastness with which the right leg, even as it wheeled and whirled, held itself solidly to the ground.

How was it he had not seen it like that, before? There was a little bronze statue of Nataraja somewhere in his father's belongings which he had played with often enough, and he seemed to remember seeing such a dance that time he had gone with his father and mother to the temple festival in Jaffna, and yet . . . Perhaps his eyes had too long got used to seeing the stark, spare asceticism of the solitary Buddha, the empty temples of meditation, and were not accustomed to the richness and plentitude and celebration of the Hindu pantheon.

He looked out of the window of the staffroom and saw the children playing in the field beyond. Just below him, two seniors were sneaking a smoke. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Mrs Bandara walking briskly across the disused netball court to her rooms in the opposite wing.

School was over, everybody had gone home, he had lingered with his thoughts in the staffroom, provoked by a remark of the deputy head's that everybody in Sri Lanka should be forced to be Buddhist.

Everybody in England, after all, was forced to be Christian, he had said, one way or another, and that's what had made England great.

Vijay had said nothing. He had, after his initial outbursts, tried to school himself to say nothing, certainly not to Alwis, the vice-principal, and certainly not in the staffroom. It was not just that the man himself was a bigot, but that most of the staff in the upper school, Vijay had learnt early to his cost, held the same sort of views and needed little occasion to display them. That lunch-time had been no exception, and would have been buried like all such lunch-hours except that two of the older teachers had dared to demur with the vice-principal, and he was about to turn his bile on them when Vijay's patience broke.

'God, what a bigot you are,' he had begun. 'It's people like you—'

'Yes, go on,' the deputy head had urged him. 'You are doing very well for yourself. One more insult and not even Mrs Bandara could save you from the sack.'

'Please . . .' the other two appealed to Vijay simultaneously, and their apprehension, he knew, was for Mrs Bandara; the man had enough political clout to have her removed any time he wished. And Vijay had calmed down.

Watching Mrs Bandara now walking across the netball court, he realized how subdued he too had become for her sake. Subdued, but also unyielding. It had confused him, at first, that she should want to hold him back from a fight he'd taken on for her. But gradually he began to understand that what she wanted of him was not to give up the fight, but to craft it with guile and sagacity, while still standing guard over himself. It was as though she required him to become two people, almost, while still remaining one, and whole. His devotion to the greater cause should not keep him embattled in the more immediate ones, but his engagement in them should not go unregistered. He had to fight every fight and fight it wherever and whenever it occurred, not with the same fervour or mission, but only so as to keep his hand in, so to speak, and his conscience keened.

It was a hard lesson to learn, and one which Vijay managed sedulously to avoid at first, by staying out of school politics altogether and confining his attention to classroom work. He was a good teacher and maths served to insulate him from other teachers, and the occasional English or civics classes he took in the lower school posed no challenge, outside the classroom anyway. Then, one day, he was asked to stand in for the sixth form history teacher who had been taken ill.

It was a drowsy afternoon and Vijay was content to let the class get on with its reading. But the students had other ideas. The new master, it had been rumoured, had had quite a stormy past; he had even fought

with the PLF when he was not much older than they. And if he appeared to be quiet and placid now, it was because he was just recovering from a disastrous love affair with some coolie girl. But judging from the stories, he had not learnt his lesson; he was still a Tamil-lover and a red.

'Sir, sir,' one of the boys put up his hand, calling Vijay's attention to him.

'Yes, what is it?' asked Vijay, looking up from the book he was reading.

'Sir, is it true, sir, that the Tamils are taking over our country?'

'Don't be silly,' replied Vijay and went back to his book.

There was a hushed silence for a minute or two, broken only by the whispered urgings of the class to get Jagath to ask his question again.

'Why is it silly, sir?' asked one of the girls and, getting no reply, 'is it because you like Tamils?'

Vijay ignored the question and went on reading his book.

'Well, sir,' Jagath stood up and repeated his question, more deliberately this time, 'Are the Tamils taking over our country or not?'

'What, all two of them?' laughed Vijay and looked around for approval, only to be met with a stony silence.

Perhaps his witticism was lost on them.

'They are only a fifth of the population, aren't they?' he explained.

'How fifth, sir?' asked Jagath's neighbour.

'A tenth he means,' said a girl.

'What does that matter? They got all our jobs anyway,' Jagath growled.

'He is counting the coolie Tamils as well,' went on the girl.

'But they don't belong here, he's mad,' her companion observed.

Everyone was talking at the same time now and Vijay could hardly hear himself speak.

'It doesn't matter how many, they've got our jobs, our land, our everything,' Jagath's voice rose stridently over the din. 'Why don't they go back to where they came from?'

The class went silent; the unspeakable had been spoken.

'If we all did that, Sinhalese and Tamils, we'd all be back together in the same place,' Vijay laughed uneasily, 'in India, because we all came from there.'

'But we were here first,' a number of voices shouted in unison.

'If anybody was here first, it was the Tamils,' Vijay got back at them desperately. 'Let me show you,' and he went up to the blackboard and drew a map of the Indian sub-continent incorporating Sri Lanka at its southernmost tip.

'Now, that is how it must have been thousands and thousands of years

ago, before Sri Lanka broke off from the great land mass and became a separate island.' Vijay was emboldened by the silence; common sense was getting through. 'And who do you think lived there in the south but the Dravidians, the people of the south, the Tamils?'

'The Aryans came later from the north,' Vijay went on confidently. 'The Dravidians were there first.'

'But they were savages and cannibals, and we conquered them and civilized them.' It was Jagath who spoke up, but it was clear that he spoke for all of them. Others joined in.

'Conquered, yes, but civilized, no.' Vijay made a last brave stand. 'They had a civilization long before ours. We merely carried it on.'

'No, they are different, they are different,' cried a chorus of angry voices. 'Even the President says they are different.'

'The President?'

'Here,' said Jagath, holding up a well-worn pamphlet and stabbing at its pages. 'It says so here.'

"They have a strange language, strange religion, strange culture", he started to read, when Vijay interrupted him.

'Bring it here,' he instructed.

'Not *the* President, sir,' explained Sumitha, the girl who had spoken up earlier, as Jagath brought the pamphlet to Vijay, 'but the other president, his friend, the trade union president, Meril Sithu, that's who wrote the book.'

Vijay leafed quickly through the pamphlet. Its title, *The Unseen Enemy of the Sinhalese*, was familiar and its message commonplace: the Tamils were India's fifth column, a gun pointed at the heart of the Sinhala race and the Buddhist religion. But the book also outlined a programme on how to eliminate the danger once and for all. And it came from the pen of the Minister for Employment, who was also President of the TUC and the head of the Federation of Buddhist Societies – and the President's closest adviser.

'Satisfied, sir?' asked Jagath, standing over Vijay.

'But this is nonsense,' muttered Vijay, shaking his head in abject disbelief.

'What about this then?' asked Sumitha, pushing another pamphlet at him entitled *Buddhists Beware*. 'By the High Priest of the Asgiriya Chapter.'

'Where do you get this rubbish from?' inquired Vijay angrily.

'You can get them anywhere,' Sumitha threw her hair back as though to say it was common knowledge. 'In the bookshops, in the temple. Our history teacher gave them to us.'

'They can't all be wrong,' said another girl.

'Read this, then,' a fat, pimply-faced boy put a news-sheet on top of Vijay's desk.

'And this.'

'And this.'

'And . . .'

The bell rang. Vijay fled the classroom.

It was four o'clock, but the skies were black and heavy with impending rain. Everyone was hurrying home. Vijay wandered around in a nightmare of his own thoughts and, when he finally reached the staff-room, there was no one there. He had hoped to see Dhanapala or Sarath, the teachers who had stood up to the deputy head that day, but they too had left. He would have liked so much to have been able to talk things over with them, but he didn't know where they lived. Mrs Bandara was in Colombo. The weekend stretched out unendingly before him.

He began to realize how reclusive he had become. He had had no time for his colleagues; he had dismissed them as worthless, and he had not bothered to renew old friendships. And now, when he needed someone to talk to, to be with, some human comfort in his flight from humanity, there was no one he could turn to.

There was Manel, of course, Mrs Bandara's friend, a teacher in the lower school, but he hardly knew her and she was probably no great talker. She was plump and comfortable, though, and seemed easy to be with, the sort of person you could sink into and leave the world behind. She lived round the corner, in a little annexe, with her mother and younger brother.

But by the time Vijay finally got round to visiting the girl, on the Sunday morning, she had gone to the *polla*. Her mother insisted that he should wait for her, Manel would be sorry to have missed him, and released him only on the understanding that he would return later that day.

The mere act of going to see Manel, however, had taken Vijay out of himself and it was in a much more settled frame of mind that he went around to see Manel again that evening. Now he remembered her not for her comforting quietness but the vivacity that seemed to spill out of her eyes, and her mischievous nose.

The boy answered the door.

'Come in, sir,' he said matter-of-factly, 'and take a seat. I'll tell my sister you are here.'

Vijay sat down and looked around him. The furniture was strictly functional, a couple of GOH chairs that had seen better days, a small side table with a vase of artificial flowers and a divan assembled from packing-cases and covered over with cushions and a colourful old sari. The

walls were distempered in a fading yellow and adorned with yellowing family photographs in gilded frames. The room was long and narrow, divided by a folding half-screen into a sitting-room and a room for the boy, and led through a curtained door to the 'master bedroom' beyond and presumably to the kitchen and bathroom beyond that, all strung out like beads. Whoever had built the annexe had meant only to put a roof over someone's head, no more.

Vijay was studying the photographs by the fading light of the evening when Manel came into the room and greeted him.

'That's my father,' she said, referring to the photograph which Vijay was looking at. 'Would you like a cool drink or tea?'

'Nothing, thank you. I don't want to keep you from -'

'No, no, that's all right. I was just finishing the cooking. *Amma* is not feeling too well. Sit down, anyway.'

Vijay sat on one of the chairs and Manel on the other. She was a few years older than him, but her age did not show, and today she was wearing a short dark-blue dress that brought out her fair Kandyian complexion and betrayed the lush round of her thighs.

'He was killed when the mills collapsed.'

'Who?' Vijay began absently and then, recovering himself, went on, 'Ah yes, your father. What mills? You mean Nagoda?'

'Yes, about five, six years ago. You must have left Kurunegala by then. Anyway,' she broke off brightly, 'what brings you here? *Amma* said -'

'Yes, I wanted to find out where Mr Dhanapala lived. You know, the -'

'Yes, Dhana, the civics teacher. Why? You want to join his union?' She giggled and chattered on without waiting for a reply. 'In fact I saw him at the *polla* this morning. His house is down by the main road, about four or five turnings on the left from the Tamil hardware shop, Sripa Lane, number five, that's it, No 5 Sripa Lane.'

She was so surprisingly chirpy and garrulous that Vijay was reluctant to leave. He moved uncomfortably in his chair, as though to get up, when she rescued him.

'So it was not me you were coming to see?' she said teasingly.

'No, no, yes . . . What I mean is . . . there is no urgency . . . I don't have to see Dhana just this minute.'

'Have a cup of tea, then.'

'Yes, thank you.'

Three hours later Vijay was sitting down to a simple and tasty meal of *string-hoppers*, *pol-sambol* and fish curry, cracking jokes with Manel's mother. He went home that night a happy man.

Six months later, he was married.

‘**T**HINGS ARE GOING TO GET MUCH WORSE,’ Dhanapala was saying when his wife came in with the drinks. She was a tall, elegant woman in her late thirties and carried herself even taller.

‘Don’t listen to a word he says,’ she admonished Vijay laughingly. ‘He is such a pessimist.’ She handed the men their glasses and sat herself down to a cup of tea.

Dhanapala put yet another match to his pipe and then got up to empty the ashtray. He was even taller than his wife and thinner, with an equally agreeable manner and a pleasant, friendly face. But this evening he looked tired and careworn. He had gone to the May Day rally in Colombo and come back a disappointed man.

‘Useless bloody matches,’ he spluttered between coughs. ‘This damn government imports every blessed thing under the sun, but not matches.’ He put down his pipe in disgust and reached for a cigarette.

‘I thought you were against imports,’ Damayanthi rebuked her husband mildly. She would have preferred him not to smoke at all. Dhana took a long look at his wife and put away the cigarette.

‘No, the outlook is not good at all,’ he said to Vijay. ‘You should have come with us.’

‘Next time.’

‘I doubt that there will be a next time. Or if it is like this one, there’ll be no point. Do you know what the May Day rallies in Colombo were like, Vijay? Ah, there was nothing like it anywhere in the world, except in the communist countries. And I don’t mean just the processions and marches and slogans and the singing and the chanting – that is all there still – but the militancy, the unity, the . . . the . . .’ he put his finger to his forehead, searching for the word, ‘the sense of community, is gone. For one day in the year we bury our differences and come together as a united force against the bosses, against the government, against the system.’ He took out a cigarette from the pack and put it back again. ‘For one day, we get a glimpse of what it could be like, of what “workers united can never be defeated” really means.’ There was a gleam in Dhana’s eyes that not even his spectacles could hide. ‘Just one day in the year, Vijay – and even that is gone.’ He had risen, in the middle of his declamation, to drive his point home to Vijay, now he sat heavily down again.

‘How do you mean, gone?’

‘They were fighting with each other, Vijay, the unions, with each other! Over who had betrayed their workers more and who had played along with the government – and, of course, the government union came out of it all as the workers’ friend; they at least could deliver.’

'Colombo is finished, anyway,' commented Damayanthi. 'You won't recognize the place now. And to think that that was where our struggles started.'

Dhana got his pipe going, at last, and puffed at his happily.

'Maybe things are better in the provinces. Let's see what Sarath has to say.'

'If he comes, that is,' Damayanthi interjected.

'Why shouldn't he?'

'The little one's ill and Sumana cannot manage all the children.'

'Why, where's her mother?'

'She's had a disagreement with Sarath on how to bring up the children and went to live with her other daughter.' Damayanthi turned to Vijay.

'Manel is not coming either, is she?' she inquired unnecessarily. 'And I have cooked all this food.'

Vijay shrugged his shoulders and made a face as though to say he was sorry, but there was little he could do about it.

He and Manel had been frequent visitors to Dhana's house even before they were married; in fact, they had done most of their courting there. Manel was very fond of Damayanthi. She looked on her as an older sister and loved her company, except when Damayanthi began to 'talk politics'. Manel felt left out, then, of Damayanthi's ken – Damayanthi had become one of the men, and Manel was uneasy. Her world came apart, the order of things was put in question, the relationships between men and women lost their focus. And it was not just Damayanthi she lost at those moments, but Vijay too, to Damayanthi. She might have found an ally in Sumana, who too had little interest in 'men's talk', but then Sumana had little interest in anything except in being wife and mother.

Manel wanted to get on in life. She had worked for others ever since her father died – for her mother, her brother, in the home, at school (she had even done her teacher's exams for their sake), but now she wanted something for herself. She wanted the headship of the lower school. Of course she had wanted a husband first, a kind, intelligent man with prospects, and Vijay was all of that, and good-looking too. But Vijay had no ambition, no drive, or his drive was misplaced, and, worse, he had no understanding of hers.

'You are a teacher first,' he had said when she had spoken to him of her ambitions, a few weeks before their wedding. 'You should be bringing out the best in the children in your care, not work yourself up to the top.'

'On their backs,' he might have added, so vehement was his rejection.

The shock of it had bruised her; she remembered it still. It was he, after all, who had wanted to talk about their future plans in the first place. Perhaps she had caught him in a bad mood, she had not known him to be so brutal and so pompous. Or perhaps she had been tactless in suggesting that she should secure the headship before they began to raise a family. But when she took up the matter again, soon after their marriage, more circumspectly this time, Vijay had been even more adamant. By then, of course, he had joined 'Dhana's union' and become more organized in his opinions.

The subject had cropped up again that morning, only this time Manel had boldly expressed the hope that Vijay might speed things up a bit by getting his aunt to use her influence with the Minister.

'What's the hurry?' Vijay had asked coldly, trying to control his anger. 'The headship won't be for a couple of years yet. Let it come out of your own work.' And even as he said it, he regretted it; it sounded so self-important.

'Let it come? Let it come?' she had fumed. 'You think they're going to give me the job because of merit? What is this world you are living in?'

'A world I want to change,' he had shouted back, blowing himself up again and, ashamed, stormed out of the house.

Damayanthi was not surprised to see Vijay come alone; it had happened before, but he usually made a joke about it. Today he looked beaten. 'I am sorry, Damayanthi, but it's the same old quarrel.' Damayanthi nodded understandingly. 'But I'll eat her share,' he added with forced good humour and, seeing Sarath come in through the open door, he went on, 'and Sarath can help me.'

'I am hungry enough,' Sarath said, catching the tail end of Vijay's conversation. 'Sorry I'm late.' He placed his furled black umbrella carefully in a corner of the verandah. 'I thought it might rain,' he remarked by way of explanation.

The men burst out laughing and Damayanthi hid a smile. Sarath never went anywhere without his umbrella, whatever the weather, and his friends had learnt to accept the eccentricity, but Sarath felt he had to explain himself every time, and in the same words too.

'Never mind them, Sarath,' Damayanthi said soothingly. 'I thought it was going to rain, too.'

And they all roared with laughter, Sarath louder than the rest, at the absurdity of Damayanthi's remark; the day could not have been finer.

Sarath was a short, thick-set man going slightly to fat, with a round, jovial face. He taught Buddhism and wore national dress (the umbrella was probably meant to go with it). He could not be a day less than forty

but looked much younger, and was reputed to be as strong as an elephant, and as gentle, though on the occasions when he had lost his temper his enemies had been known to take precipitate flight.

He and Dhana were old friends and comrades in arms, having fought beside each other to get the Teachers' Union to accept a non-communal curriculum and non-communal teaching. And, when they had failed, they had left it to form their own pressure group, campaigning for a child's right to non-racial education. In the course of which they had attracted people from all over the country concerned with similar issues, and had come to be known as the Rights and Justice Movement. Sarath was the co-ordinator, and had just returned from visiting 'the cadres', as Dhana liked to call them.

'What's the news then, Sarath?' Dhana inquired after they had finished dinner. Damayanthi had ruled that there would be 'no talking politics' over food.

'Who wants coffee?' she asked now.

They all put up their hands.

'Not so good,' said Sarath replying to Dhana's query. 'It looks like Vijay was our last recruit.' Vijay smirked and Sarath smiled. 'No, that's not true. I was just playing the fool.'

Damayanthi brought in the coffee and sat down at the table.

'We've had a few more teachers and journalists joining us,' Sarath went on, 'in the Kandy area and in Galle—'

'That's not bad,' interrupted Dhana.

'And there's all that business about lifting the emergency started by the Civil Rights group, and the lawyers are protesting against the government's interference with the judiciary.'

'There you are then,' commented Damayanthi.

'Yes, but . . .' Sarath stopped, reluctant to dampen Damayanthi's hopes.

'But what?'

'Well, they are not getting anywhere with all that petitioning and lobbying stuff, are they? The government just goes along with all that and sets up an inquiry or commission or something and the whole thing gets . . . gets—'

'Bureaucratized,' Dhana helped him out. 'How about Negombo then?'

'You mean the co-op the fishermen have set up to fight the trawler men?'

Dhana nodded.

'Well, that's different. But Simon wants us to get them a good company lawyer who could take up their case against International Fisheries.'

And if that fails, they'll start taking militant action.'

'There you are then,' reiterated Damayanthi.

'But they are all bits and pieces, Damayanthi. And my going round doesn't put them together, does it? It's almost two years since . . .' his voice trailed off into silence.

'What we need is a paper,' piped up Vijay brightly.

'To connect up the issues, co-ordinate the struggles and that sort of thing, you mean?' Dhana asked drily.

Vijay nodded his head vigorously.

'Like *The Citizen* you mean?' Dhana stared owlshly over his glasses.

'Yes, yes, like *The Citizen*.'

'Now he tells us,' Sarath put out his hands in mock dismay.

'Oh, don't be so mean, you two,' Damayanthi reproached the men. 'Tell him.'

'Tell me what?'

Sarath feigned alarm. 'You think we can trust him?'

'Tell me what?' shrieked Vijay.

Dhana took off his glasses and polished them. 'That it was us who started *The Citizen*, for instance?'

'You bas—' Vijay leapt at Sarath.

'Ah, ha,' Sarath dodged him. 'Ladies present.'

'And to think that all this time . . .' Vijay began, and they all started laughing.

'But it didn't go out from here all the time,' explained Dhana when they had finished teasing Vijay. 'Various campaigns took it over at various times. And Kirthi, our roving editor, you met him here once I think, Kirthi went around helping people to write them up.'

'So what went wrong?'

'Your friend Mr Alwis, the vice-principal, got wise to us, you know he's a government placement, don't you? And, so as not to endanger the movement, we had to close down the paper. But Kirthi has gone off with it somewhere.'

'The rumour is that he is in Jaffna,' remarked Sarath, 'but I heard no talk of him there.'

'Oh yes, what about Jaffna?' inquired Damayanthi.

'That's what I really wanted to talk to you about,' Sarath replied excitedly. 'But one moment, I got something for you all.' He pushed himself back from the table and went in search of the canvas satchel that invariably accompanied his umbrella. 'Here,' he said, returning with a handful of packages, 'this is for you, Dhana, the real stuff, Jaffna cigars. And some elementary Tamil books for you, Damayanthi. Ha, ha, you thought I'd forgotten,' he added when Damayanthi looked surprised.

'Let's see,' said Vijay and went over to Damayanthi to look at the books.

'It's quite easy for children to learn from,' Sarath remarked, 'with all those pictures.'

'It has Sinhala alongside too,' Damayanthi pointed out, 'it's bilingual. Isn't that amazing? This is what we should be producing for our schools. I must show them to Manel.'

'Don't bother, I brought her a set too,' said Sarath, offering them to Vijay. 'And for you, Vijay, here's something special from your grand-uncle Para,' and he handed the younger man a small brown parcel.

'So you went to Sandilipay, you rascal,' Vijay burst out happily, hugging Sarath, 'and kept it quiet all this time. How is he?'

'Still going strong. What is he? 75, 80? Says he doesn't intend to die till he sees you again. I couldn't stay very long though, I spent half a day finding the place.'

But Vijay was not listening. He had broken open the little parcel and taken out a bundle of closely written yellowing notepaper. He opened one out and a look of astonishment spread over his face.

'Good God, these are my mother's letters,' he exclaimed. 'To him, Uncle Para. He had kept them all this time. For me, I suppose?' His voice trailed off into a whisper.

Damayanthi busied herself clearing the table of the coffee cups and Dhana ceremoniously licked his cigar into shape before lighting it. They were giving Vijay time to get over his memories, but Sarath was more down to earth.

'That's enough of that,' he said, 'now to business,' and then seeing that Vijay was not fully himself yet, he trotted off to the kitchen on the pretext of getting a glass of water.

'Go on, Sarath, I am fine,' Vijay reassured his friend when he returned to the table. 'Tell us about Jaffna.'

'I don't know where to begin,' replied Sarath. 'You won't believe what is going on there, it's like another country. Nobody tells us anything here. The papers merely parrot the government stories, or concoct rumours.'

'Or write up all that anti-Tamil propoganda that passes for debate in parliament,' interrupted Dhana.

'But why do the Tamil MPs lend themselves to it?' Damayanthi inquired dejectedly.

'They are out of touch, anyway,' replied Sarath. 'The people in Jaffna are finished with talking, finished with parliament. They have started fighting.'

"The Boys", you mean?' Vijay asked.

'Yes, all the young people, the Boys as they are called, all they talk of is armed struggle.'

'It will pass, we were the same at that age,' remarked Vijay, recalling his own involvement with the PLF.

'Not this lot, my friend,' rejoined Sarath. 'They are not fighting out of theory, but of necessity.' He looked pointedly at Dhana. 'They have nothing and they have grown up having nothing, a whole generation of them. And they see even the little they have to make something of their lives with, like education, being taken away from them.' Sarath's face was black with anger and contorted with the effort to get his words out. 'They go to college to find their language taken away from them, they sit exams to find the pass mark's higher for them, they go for jobs and finally get the message: sorry, no Tamils. That is when they pick up the gun.'

He clenched his mighty fists and thrust out his jaw as though he wanted to fight everybody around the table, but it was on Dhana his anger spilt over.

'What is your answer to that, then?' he challenged Dhana. Dhana was the thinker, the planner, among them and, though Sarath trusted Dhana implicitly and knew that it was Dhana who held the movement together, Sarath could not help feeling sometimes that he had put his own passion in hock for his friend.

Dhana looked hurt; he had heard Sarath beyond his words. Sarath unclenched his fists.

'We help them,' answered Dhana softly.

'*Whaat?* With arms?' Damayanthi was aghast.

'No, not that.'

'How, then?' asked Sarath.

'I don't know. We've got to ask them.'

'How?' insisted Sarath. 'They are not going to talk to me. I don't know whether they'd even talk to Nadesan.'

'However that may be, our sort of work is finished there,' summed up Damayanthi. 'Isn't that what you are saying, Sarath?'

'Absolutely. And another thing. The Rights and Justice office in Jaffna has been raided time and again by the police, to see whether we had any connection with the Boys I suppose, and Nadesan himself was held for questioning. He has since moved the office to his home.'

Vijay, who had been caught up in the wash of Sarath's anger and not said a word during the discussion, now came out with the warning that the Boys might not wish to speak to them at all. It might be an idea to get Nadesan to check that out first, after all he was the man on the spot, before sending anyone from here to meet them. Sarath and

Damayanthi nodded their heads approvingly, and Dhana declared that it was certainly the first step.

'And when the time comes, we have the right man for the job,' announced Damayanthi, and they all looked at Vijay.

'Oh no -' Vijay began, when Sarath cut him off.

'Come on, Vijay,' he said, 'you know you are the best man for it. You speak Tamil like a native, you have people in Jaffna and, bloody hell, you are virtually a Tamil yourself,' he guffawed. 'And the Boys refuse to speak Sinhala or English even when they can.'

'Besides it will be good to talk to them directly and not through Nadesan, if they will see you,' Dhana added his exhortations. 'Do you want to think about it?'

'No, no, it's just that it was so sudden,' Vijay smiled self-consciously, 'but if you all think that I can do it -'

'That's settled then,' Dhana broke in, 'we'll put it up to the committee before the AGM in September.' He rose from the table indicating the discussion was over. Damayanthi offered the men more coffee, but Sarath and Vijay decided that it was time they went home.

There was something, though, they had meant to ask Sarath, Vijay recalled, as they were taking their leave of the Dhanapalas, but no one could remember what it was. And it was only after Sarath parted company with him at the main road that Vijay remembered that they had not asked Sarath how the May Day marches had gone in the provinces. Oh well, he thought, it could not have been very significant or Sarath would have told them.

A drop of rain fell on his head and Vijay looked surprisedly at the moon above; Sarath was not too far wrong, after all. He hurried along hoping to catch Manel before she went to bed and make his peace with her. He had the books to give her now, and the news of his Jaffna 'appointment'; perhaps she would go with him, it would help to change her outlook. Maybe she'd take to Uncle Para, like his mother had, and begin to see things differently. It was not that she was communal minded, but that she tended to lump all Tamils with the shopkeepers and bank clerks and bureaucrats that she had had to deal with most of her life. It did not help that the Nagoda Mills, which had collapsed on her father's head, were owned by a Borah merchant. She still spoke warmly, though, of her best friend Savitri and some of the other Tamil girls who had gone to school with her, but, with the separation of the schools into Tamil and Sinhala streams, they had drifted away from her life and from Kurunegala. Perhaps she could be persuaded to go to Jaffna on the offchance of finding her friend.

The rain had ceased as abruptly as it had begun, and the moon was

out, full-bellied, again. The night was fresh after the downpour and the drone of beetles and the shrill plaint of the cicadas filled the air. A smell of washed grass and dung wafted across from a field far away and, for a moment, Vijay was caught between the evening and Manel. But passing his mother-in-law's house – he and Manel lived only a street away – he quickened his step and left the evening behind.

Manel was asleep when Vijay got in and, by the time he woke up the next morning, she was leaving for work. She seemed to have forgotten all about the row the previous day, and called out that she was taking some provisions for her mother that evening and would be having her dinner there. It was not till they were in bed that night that Vijay finally got round to giving Manel the books Sarath had brought her. He had, in the meantime, looked through them himself, comparing them with some of the Sinhala primers that were in use in Manel's school, and was sure she too would appreciate the difference in approach.

'Aren't they great?' he asked enthusiastically when Manel had finished studying the books.

'Hmm, useful,' she replied drily, putting them on the floor beside her.

'Useful?'

'Yes, for them, to learn Sinhala.'

'Why not for us, to learn Tamil?' Vijay was disappointed. 'We are too superior are we?'

But Manel would not rise to his sarcasm. She had wanted all day to make up their previous quarrel and was not about to start another.

'Stop it, please,' she said soothingly, 'we can't have two quarrels in two days.'

Vijay nodded and Manel took his hand in hers. 'Why don't you put out the light?' she suggested.

Vijay rose and went up to the switch on the opposite wall.

'But you can at least consider it, can't you?' he pleaded. 'Introducing books like that? At the primary level?'

'We can talk about it later. Come to bed.'

'You are, after all, the one in charge of choosing the textbooks for the lower school,' Vijay pointed out.

Manel did not reply.

'Well, can't you?' He stood obstinately by the switch, waiting for an answer.

'No I can't,' Manel cried out in exasperation. 'The head won't have it, the parents won't have it, no one will have it. And it's against government policy,' she added, as though that concluded the matter for her.

'But look at the muck you teach them.' Vijay went up to Manel's

work-table with its array of 'recommended books' and picked up a primer. 'Look at these images and pictures of the "People of Lanka" – all Sinhalese. Why? No one else lives in this country?'

He flung the book down with a derisory snort and picked up another, slightly advanced reader. "The Tamils occupied Lanka for a time", he read out, "but were driven out by Prince Duttu Gemunu who fought the cruel king Elara in single-handed combat and killed him." But Duttu Gemunu himself honoured Elara as a great and just king and put up a memorial to him.' Vijay was launched into his charge now and could not be stopped. He was surprised, besides, at what he was uncovering, and angry with himself for being surprised. He rummaged further among the set texts and came up with a history.

'Ah, a junior school history,' he exclaimed. 'Let's see what this says.' He opened it out on the first page and regarded it unbelievably. "The history of Lanka", he began to read aloud in slow amazement, "is the history of the Sinhala race. The Land nourishes the Race, the Race civilizes the Land. Buddhism is the golden thread running through the history of the Race and the Land. Learn to honour the Land, the Race and the Faith." And you are happy to teach that rubbish?

He put the book down and, going over to Manel, sat disconsolately by her on the bed. 'Can't you see what we are doing to our children?' he asked sadly. 'Telling them lies, teaching them hate?'

'How do you know they are lies?' Manel defended herself.

'Oh, come on, Manel,' Vijay exploded, 'don't give me that line. You know as well as I do . . .' He broke off, trying to calm down: Manel swung him from emotion to emotion. 'At least you and I have had a chance to know the truth,' he reasoned. 'These children won't know any different. We are preparing them for a race war and we are not even different races.'

'But the Tamils are doing the same,' retorted Manel indifferently. She did not want an argument.

'No they are not, and you know it, look at the books that Sarath brought.'

'They are fighting us, aren't they?' Manel retreated weakly, pleadingly. She wanted him in bed.

Vijay pulled her to him and kissed her.

'Not us, you silly woman,' he smiled, cradling her in his arms, 'but the government, and what they are fighting for is their rights, to live as dignified human beings, like you and me. What's wrong with that? Hmm?' There was no response from Manel: she accepted his embraces but not his ideas, she was her own person. And Vijay, sensing her truculence, got up from the bed.

'We have gone over this so many times,' he gave up wearily, 'but you make no attempt to understand. There is no give in you.'

He went out and sat on the porch and listened to the eerie silence of the dead, moonless night. He realized that he was never going to be able to get through to his wife on the things that mattered most to him, and yet it was in her arms that he found refuge from their burden. But the burden of her un-understanding he had to carry alone. Only in her could he lose himself and only in her was he lost. And the more he thought about it, the more he wanted to immolate himself in her, and the thought rose in him like a desire and caught him like a sob. He rose from the porch and went in to her.

She took him in, avidly, generously, with no thought for the quarrel of a moment ago, with no thought for herself, not enclosed any more, but opening out, constantly, like the sunflower to the waking sun, to take him in, enlarge him, and enlarging herself to take him in. And he, desperate to be given up to her, drove himself into oblivion, to find himself again, with her within him now. But she was already gone from him, had contracted him out of her, closed in on herself. Her giving was over, his had begun. He was on his own once more.

When the message came to Vijay that Chief Inspector Victor Pulle had been shot dead, he was already making preparations to go to Jaffna. His 'clearance' to go and meet some of the Tamil militants 'at a suitable time' had come the previous week. But the news of Pulle's death had stopped him in his tracks. He had known the man from the days of the students' strike at Peradeniya, when Pulle was the sub-inspector in charge of the police deployed against the students and Vijay was Union president. Vijay had found him easy to deal with, had become friends with him even, knew his wife, played with his children . . . and the Boys had gone and shot him for a collaborator!

There was no question that he was a spy; the government's success in picking up the 'trouble-makers' in Jaffna town, as and when it chose, attested to the success of Pulle's work. But he was successful only because he was accepted by everyone and could go anywhere. He was Uncle Victor to the boys, had known them all their lives and had walked and talked and slept and eaten with their parents – and they in turn had known him as a boy from a poor family in 4th Cross Street, had taken an interest in his career, had wanted him to make good . . . Vijay was sick with the betrayal of it all.

But to kill someone, someone you knew, deliberately? To take a human life on principle? Or was it disgust – that any human life should sink so low? Self-disgust perhaps, the recognition that each one carried that

possibility within him, and to kill it was a matter of principle . . . ?

It was not a game any more, not some 'politics' out there for the talking. It was like that time when he was recruited into the PLF and was taught to shoot: the smell of cordite, as he fired at a dummy policeman, had tightened like a vice around his throat. He had felt, then, that he was about to cross a threshold from which there was no return; to kill was to leave a part of you behind, the part that connected you to the world.

But it was a world that had to be changed . . . and he had to choose . . . the roads had forked . . . either he went back to the talking, or he did . . . and the doing led to killing . . . he had to cross that threshold and still take himself with him. No, he'd leave it all behind.

Colombo changed his mind. He had gone there for the Rights and Justice AGM in September, and what he saw affected him deeply. He had never liked the city very much, but he had loved its people. He hardly recognized them now. They were different from what he had known them to be – in a hurry now, going somewhere, couldn't stop to talk to you, dally over a tea, sit a while in the sun, share their umbrella in the rain – there was a fast buck to be made round the corner. He remembered, wryly, how an English traveller had once characterized the Sinhalese as a nation of self-employed casual workers like Singho who, when asked whether he wanted to make a rupee, had replied, 'It's all right, sir, I've got 50 cents.' No more. Everybody was a businessman now, or 'into commerce', opened up by World Bank loans, IMF imports, tourism – a tout at least or a pimp or a procurer, self-employed, all right, but also self-seeking, parasitic, greedy.

And he saw, like a camera eye, that the give was gone from people, the friendliness, the camaraderie, that peculiar hospitableness to other people's existence which allowed them to live in milling multitudes and still find space for themselves, quiet even, and privacy for the soul. They were no longer interested in each other, no longer 'dropped in' casually on each other's homes or, having dropped in, stayed a week, no longer interfered in each other's lives, deaths, love affairs, misplaced themselves in each other's causes, indulged in gossip – or if they did, it was the gossip of malice, town gossip, not of curiosity or caring.

The young all wore bell-bottomed trousers or mini-skirts and carried transistors that blared forth the Sinhala pop and froth of Jathika Jeeva and Ariya Vamsa and Sinhalayo. (Communalism, declared Dhana in his presidential address to the meeting, had become a commercial proposition.)

From what Vijay could gather from other delegates, the villages were copying the culture of the towns, and the towns hankered after big city

life, with the money that flowed in, not from the World Bank this time (even World Bank monies couldn't trickle down that far, commented Dhana) but from Dubai and Oman and Kuwait, where the unemployed had gone to seek their fortunes as nannies and servants and labourers. The get and spend culture was spreading like an oil slick to every little town and village. Colombo itself was no different from Cairo or Calcutta or New York or Lagos or London or Tokyo (all variations, pointed out Dhana, on a theme of international venality).

But beneath that venality, warned Dhana in his scintillating closing speech to the assembly, or even perhaps in opposition to it, was stirring a religious fundamentalism which was frightening, precisely because Buddhism was not a religion, had no God, was secular and, because of that, had made *jathiya*, the race, the nation (notice, he said, how the Sinhala language had only the one word for both) its surrogate for God. Language, race and religion were becoming so intricately woven into each other that in touching one you set off the others. Each in its own right, it was true, connected man to himself, to his fellows and to the hereafter, but in symbiosis they locked him up again in a righteousness of the self and the arrogance of nation, and collapsed the hereafter into the now. And it was from such closed circuits of passion that fascism drew its power. The Tamils were merely the first to be caught up in its force-field. Their turn would come.

9

MANEL LOOKED AT HERSELF in the mirror. She wanted to look her best for the Minister. He was visiting their school that morning. The chiffon sari looked good on her: the colours were right, they went with her fair skin. But it did nothing for her figure. She would try the white khaddar; it didn't drape as well but it clung in the right places, and it was homely. A bit too homely, perhaps, but her dark blue blouse should brighten it up and set off her colour at the same time. She could wear the sari Kandyan style, with a small frill around the waist. That should proportion her nicely – and ah, yes, the Minister's wife was from Kandy.

No point in asking Vijay: he would go for the Manipuri silk every time. He liked the feel of it, the texture, the muted colours, and that is what he would end up choosing, whatever the occasion, whatever the time of day. And it would only remind him of the Minister's visit, and start another row.

The thought spurred her on to get dressed more quickly and leave the house before Vijay. The lower school started half an hour earlier, anyway, and finished at one o'clock. There was a time when they had left for work together, but lately they had begun to go their separate ways. It suited Manel better that way, and slowly she extended it to other aspects of their lives till she had carved out a niche of independence for herself.

'I am off, Vijay,' she shouted out to him in the bathroom, 'I'm late.'

The first bell had gone by the time Manel reached the school gate, and children were rushing past her to get to the morning assembly in time.

'Manel,' she heard someone call and, turning round, saw Mrs Bandara lumbering up behind her. The old lady was sprightly no more, the spirit had gone out of her ever since the government took the lower school out of her jurisdiction and gave it to Miss Piyaseeli – and with it, her physical exuberance. But it was her own fault: she had been warned, time and again, to bring the school into line with government policy. Manel felt sorry for her, she was so out-of-date.

'Coming for assembly?' Manel inquired. Mrs Bandara rarely visited the lower school these days and her appearance today, Manel was certain, had something to do with the Minister's visit.

'Yes, child,' the old lady replied, laughing mischievously, 'must keep up with the times, no?'

The assembly that morning was a dress rehearsal for the Minister's arrival. Miss Piyaseeli was going to put the children and the teachers through their paces for the last time before lining them up on the playground to greet the Minister and sing his praises (a song had been composed for the occasion). In her time, reflected Mrs Bandara ruefully, visiting dignitaries merely passed through the classrooms talking to the pupils and teachers. Nowadays it was a ceremony of adoration. Oh, well . . .

'How's Vijay?' puffed Mrs Bandara. 'Don't see much of him.' (Defeat had put her to fat, thought Manel.) 'I suppose you don't either.' (And soured mischief with malice – or, she was remembering that it was she who had introduced Manel to Vijay and regretted it.)

'Oh I do, I do,' laughed Manel (the silly cow hadn't even bothered to change her sari), 'when I feel like it.' (That should put her in her place.)

The second bell had been rung and prayers said by the time they entered the assembly hall. Miss Piyaseeli was just announcing that the Minister was not coming that morning; he had been called back to Colombo on urgent government business. A great sigh of disappoint-

ment broke from the assembly, but it had more to do with their having dressed up for the occasion, gathered Mrs Bandara from the muffled conversation, than with any longing to see the Minister.

'But I have some good news for you,' went on Miss Piyaseeli, standing tall and thin on the platform and holding up a bony hand for silence. 'The Minister's wife has graciously consented to take her husband's place.' At which her audience burst into relieved applause. Miss Piyaseeli took the applause personally, a smile creasing her gaunt black face (eaten with ambition, muttered Mrs Bandara under her breath). 'She should be here by 11 o'clock' (if she comes at all, Mrs Bandara continued her soliloquy). 'When she gets out of the car, I will go up and garland her' (fat lot of good that will do you) 'and Sita from Standard 1 will present her with a bouquet of flowers. I will then conduct her to the playground' (conduct her? conduct? that upstart Kandyan bitch? who was she, royalty?) 'Otherwise the plans will be the same: you'll take your places at 10 o'clock' (in that hot bloody sun, poor kids, they'll be there for hours, these people never come on time).

Miss Piyaseeli dismissed the assembly, and the teachers and children returned to their classrooms. Mrs Bandara wandered into the staffroom and fell into an easy chair. Times had changed and she, she realized, had not changed with them. She had gone sour instead. If only her daughter had lived, or her son not gone over to 'them'. Perhaps it was time to retire. And live alone? In her wilderness? Here at least she had her students. But what could she do for them?

The door flew open and Miss Piyaseeli swept in, making for the cupboard in the corner.

'Ah, Mrs Bandara,' she registered. 'Good. See you on the playground at 10 o'clock.' She swept out again, not bothering to shut the door.

The old lady was mortified, the humiliation bit deep into her; it was not even as though Piyaseeli could bother to honour her grey hairs, respect her age. 'Bitch,' she muttered, 'bitch, bitch.' She walked around the room muttering, cursing; she shut the door. 'BITCH', she exploded.

It was time to retire. No one gave her a damn any more. It was worse in the upper school; the deputy head had all the pull and the power, she was just a figure-head. Figure head, yes, that was what she was, she smiled crookedly, except that she had no figure either.

Manel came in, threw her bag and books on the table and sat down. 'I've got a free period,' she announced. 'What are you smiling about?'

'Oh, a private joke,' Mrs Bandara replied affably going back to her chair. Manel took out a thermos flask from her bag.

'A cup of tea?' she offered Mrs Bandara.

'No, it's too hot.'

'How was Colombo?'

'Oh, so you knew I went to see my son?'

'Yes, Vijay told me. We do speak sometimes, you know.'

'I am sorry, that was —'

'No, it's all right, Auntie. We all . . .'

Auntie, Manel had called her, Auntie. When had she last heard anyone call her that? Vijay usually did, but she hardly saw him now, except in school, and then it was 'Mrs Bandara'. Hmm, Auntie, the girl had some regard for her still.

'Sorry, what did you say?'

'How many children I asked.'

'Who?'

'Your son. Gamini. How many —'

'Ah, Gamini. Two, a boy and a girl. He doesn't want to have any more.'

'But he can afford it, surely? What is he? Head of the Tea Board, Rubber Board?'

'Yes, yes, one of those government corporations,' Mrs Bandara dismissed them with a wave of the hand. 'But he won't have any more children because it's bad for the country. Or so his wife says, and he agrees of course. She is president of that American family thing. Planned . . . Planned something . . . Planned Parenthood Association, that's it. She went to America with him, no, on that scholarship of his.'

'She is rich, isn't she?' Manel asked approvingly, 'and well connected?'

'Some politician's daughter, I think. They all are, these days.'

'Why? Don't you like her?'

'I don't know her,' rejoined Mrs Bandara with some vehemence. 'I don't know anyone. No one talks to me in that house, not even the servants.'

'I don't know her,' she repeated more quietly, deliberately. 'I don't know my son, I don't know their children, I don't even know the dog. They are never there and, when they are, they are watching television.'

'I wouldn't mind a TV,' Manel muttered.

'They even eat around the television, have visitors around the television, they probably come to visit the television anyway.' She paused, weighing up the notion seriously. 'People don't speak to each other any more, children, parents, friends, don't hear each other. Always the sound of television in their ears or that awful pop or something, never the sound of people.'

'Still, it is educational, isn't it, TV?' Manel fought back. 'Learning about other countries, what's going on in the world, the news?'

'Educational? What educational? It's all lies. And propaganda like in our text-books. Oh, all right, all right.' Mrs Bandara broke off as Manel began to bristle. They had fought over this thing too many times, and fallen out too many times, for her to want to go into it again, and not now, when they were both poking around for some lost ember of a dying relationship.

'But I'll tell you this,' Mrs Bandara felt impelled to keep faith with herself. 'The foreign programmes are no better. I saw this English programme once, "Mind the language" or something, and all it did was mock us, insult us, Indians, Arabs, Chinese, Africans, everyone, treat us like idiots because we can't speak English. And the children loved it.'

'Harmless, no?' commented Manel.

'Harmless? No,' corrected Mrs Bandara. 'My grand-daughter, Mary-Lou. Mary-Lou! What sort of a name is that, for God's sake? She is 9, and she is ashamed of me because I can't speak proper English. I tell you, child, that television is like a *kuruminiya*, it bores into your brain and, before you know where you are, you are taken over – all over again.'

'Oh, Auntie,' Manel giggled, 'you are funny.'

'No, no, I am serious. We lost our history once, and we are killing each other off trying to find it, and now we are losing it again.'

Manel did not quite understand that, the old lady had lost her, and the old lady knew it. The ember flickered.

The bell rang; they were both relieved.

'That was a short period,' Mrs Bandara held out amicably.

'The assembly did go on long,' Manel agreed. 'I'll see you later.' She picked up the exercise books she had been trying to mark and left.

Mrs Bandara sank back in her chair and, soothed by the distant murmur of children's voices, fell into a fitful sleep. And she smiled as she slept, dreaming again the dreams she had had for the children who'd passed through her hands – not great big dreams, but simple everyday ones like that they should grow tall and straight and loving and just, as only humans could. There they were now, hundreds of them, dressed all in white, assembled on the playground, row upon row, smiling back at her as though they knew the dreams of her most secret heart. But where was Padma, her daughter, and her son Gamini? Had she lost them for the others again? She shaded her eyes through the glare of the noonday sun, but could not see them – and then, faintly, from behind those serried ranks somewhere, she thought she heard her son's voice, calling out to her. And she broke from the podium and ran towards it, furrowing her way through the children . . . but there were thousands of them now, closing in upon her, wave upon wave, their smiles turning into leers, their white uniforms into khaki . . . she pushed against them . . . harder

and harder . . . till her arms and legs were grown leaden and she could push no more . . . the sky lowered and darkness caught her in its folds . . . she could not go on, could not any more, could not . . . if only she could sleep . . . she lay down . . . but the thunder beat over her head, waking her to her son's cries, growing fainter and fainter . . . and she picked herself up again and began running wildly through the wood, crying, whimpering, trying to pick up the thread of his dying cries . . . and suddenly she came upon a clearing and there, lit up by streams of lightning, was her daughter hanging from a banyan tree . . . 'tall and straight', she heard the children snigger in the bushes as she flung herself down on the cold green grass, choking with the sobs that would not break . . . if only she could sleep, if only . . . but her son stood over her, angered by the shame of it all, and shook her by the shoulder, urging her to get up, get up . . .

'Wake up, Auntie, wake up.'

Mrs Bandara shook herself awake and saw Manel standing over her.

'Were you here all this time?' she asked, to the merriment of the other teachers there.

'Yes, the parade is over. She came and went, earlier than we thought.'

'Who? The Minister's . . .' She was fully awake now. 'Oh God, it's over? Why didn't you -'

'There was no time, we went straight from the classroom.'

The others were leaving now; the Minister's wife had given them a half-holiday in honour of her visit.

Manel poured out a last cup of tea from her flask and offered it to Mrs Bandara.

'Doesn't matter, Auntie. Nobody noticed your absence. Miss Piyaseeli didn't, and it was all over in twenty minutes.'

No, they wouldn't notice her absence, agreed Mrs Bandara silently, they had written her out of their script a long time ago. She sipped the hot tea gratefully; there was that, at least, and Manel for one seemed to want to make it up to her.

'It went well, did it?' she asked.

'Oh yes, like clockwork. And guess what, Auntie, I managed to have a proper chat with her. Her son is married to Vijay's uncle's daughter. Uncle Lal, you know? The doctor?'

'Who is related to whom? The Minister's wife? To you?'

'Yes, Yaso.'

Oh, it's Yaso now is it? the old lady muttered to herself. 'But how did she know who you were?'

'Well, I was standing beside Miss Piyaseeli, as deputy head, and we

were both in Kandyan sari, Yaso and me I mean, and she asked me where I was from —' Manel was flushed and excited by the memory — 'and I said, oh I forget what I said, Auntie. But I think that it was when I told her that I was married to a Pathirana that she realized we were connected.'

'Yes, yes, I got that,' Mrs Bandara interrupted impatiently. 'But I thought you'd be afraid to mention Vijay.'

'Oh, I didn't mention him, as such,' Manel laughed shamelessly, 'only his name. Every bit helps, Auntie, and I don't think she knows about Vijay's activities anyway.' She washed out the thermos flask and put it away in her basket. 'If only she knew.'

'Why, what's he been up to now?'

'As though you don't know. He's been roaming all over the place, hasn't he, he and that Sarath, every spare moment, taking food and things to those strikers' families.'

'That was a terrible thing the government did, sacking all those men. Thousands, can you imagine, thousands. I suppose they got enough unemployed —'

'Oh come on, Auntie,' Manel chided her. 'They were asking for it. What with our troubles in Jaffna and all, this was not the time to . . .' She broke off, not wishing to run foul of Mrs Bandara, and quickly changed the subject. 'Anyway, he's thinking of going to Jaffna soon.'

'Vijay? Yes, I suppose he would. He doesn't give up, does he?' Manel was conscious that Mrs Bandara was chiding her in turn.

'Oh no, he doesn't, not he. When he's got something into his head, he'll do it, he'll bide his time, and do it; just when you think he has given it up, he'll do it.'

Manel finished tidying up the room and looked over it proprietorially before signalling to her companion that she was ready to leave. Mrs Bandara picked up her parasol and bag and followed the younger woman out of the room.

'Well, I suppose things are quietening down there now,' observed Mrs Bandara comfortingly, 'what with the local elections coming up.'

'That's the way it's made to look for us, Vijay says, and of course, he is not satisfied with that, he must go and see for himself. And, ever since that man brought his mother's letters, he's been mooning about going and seeing this Uncle Para or someone.' Manel was dismissive and contemptuous, and Mrs Bandara could not help disliking the woman again. She tried not to show it, though, and asked Manel in a matter-of-fact way when Vijay was hoping to go. But Manel sensed the older woman's disapproval and became defiant.

'Why ask me?' she asked coldly. 'You are the one who gives him leave.'

'Not any more,' protested Mrs Bandara, 'not...' But Manel had flounced off and walked briskly ahead. Mrs Bandara shrugged her shoulders and meandered slowly along through the once familiar corridors and into the sunlit garden.

Manel was waiting for her at the gate. 'I am going the other way,' she explained by way of apology, pointing in the direction of the shops as Mrs Bandara came up to her, and then more helpfully, 'Vijay is hoping to go next March or April, during the holidays.'

10

VIJAY WAS GOING ON 13 when he had last visited Jaffna on the occasion of grandfather Sahadevan's funeral. His father had been with him, then, to take him around and show him places: the Dutch Fort, Nallur temple, the lagoon with its fishing boats and catamarans, even a Portuguese church. But his abiding memory was of a town that, on the slightest pretext, took off into villages. You could not step off a main road without falling into a maze of lanes that spun you past scrubs and bushes and palmyrah trees to land you, without warning, in a hamlet or a cluster of dwellings.

His other memory, too, was not of the sights his father had shown him, but of the sprawling, bustling, noisy bazaar where people came, it appeared, to meet and talk and have fun bargaining, and comparing bargains, and then retire to a *thosai-kaddai* for a 'feed'. It was like a carnival, and it seemed to go on all week.

But once outside the bazaar, the rowdiness suddenly ceased, and you wound your way home past an austere clock tower and across a parched esplanade and the Public Library, the pride of Northern scholarship, to tidy rows of houses arranged in four rows of intersecting streets. This is where people like his grandfather had lived. Beyond that, the town fell off, deliberately it seemed, into lanes and alley-ways where the fisher-folk huddled together in huts. And removed from it all, like an afterthought, bearing no relation to anything else, stood the railway station.

An involuntary shudder passed through Vijay as the train drew up to the platform and he remembered again the vast bleak loneliness of that station. It was a place for departure, not for arrival. The train was something, he now realized, that the village Tamils had never taken to, perhaps because the British had put it there just to take them away to the South as cheap government labour. It had nothing to do with them, the train, it was not integral to village life; it was for those others, the Co-

lombo Tamils, who came and went with their free government passes and their fancy Sinhalese ways. They, the real Tamils, the natives, had their bullock carts and their bicycles, maybe a few buses for those in a hurry, and 'hiring cars' for the elderly.

The cars, of course, were all Austins, they had always been Austins, maybe Austin Somersets now, but Austins all the same. Nothing else would do; Austins had been tested over time and not found wanting. They were staunch, reliable, loyal and, even when crammed to their roofs, carried themselves with dignity if not poise (a bit like the Jaffna man himself, thought Vijay). A Morris, Oxford or Minor, might occasionally stray into the Austin tribe, but it would soon become aware of its intrusion and slowly die of shame. An Austin never died, it was not allowed to die; it might be reincarnated into another Austin with makeshift parts and transplants, but it never died, not really, not for ever.

Vijay chose a green Austin, plumed and caparisoned like Shiva's bull at the Vel Festival, for his journey into town. The driver was chatty and opened out to Vijay even as Vijay opened out to his car. Yes of course, the upholstery was real leather. What did he think it was, rexine? The driver cast a contemptuous glance at his passenger: couldn't he tell from the smell? (Vijay nodded vigorously, though all he could smell was dubbin.) And look at the dashboard, all of wood . . . But when Vijay tried to steer the conversation round to the recent happenings in Jaffna, the driver became more reticent and circumspect. He had gathered from Vijay's accent and speech that his passenger was not a proper Tamil, certainly not from these parts, a Colombo Tamil maybe, and you never knew where you were with those people, better not to commit himself. Yes, of course, the army had done terrible things, one could see that for oneself, but armies do that, don't they? No, he did not know who the Boys were or where they hung out, nobody knew, but they were 'our boys' all right, he admitted with pride. The Rights and Justice office? He did not know about its existence, but he would certainly take Vijay to the address.

When Vijay finally got to Nadesan's house, he discovered that all signs of an office had been removed. The man himself was out, but a dark, strapping woman let him cautiously in and, having satisfied herself that he was indeed Sarath's friend, showed him into the front room and offered him refreshments. Her husband would be back soon, she said, holding him out a battered copy of *Newsweek* to while away the time, and left.

She returned a few minutes later with tea and home-made *vadais* still hot to the touch and, observing that the room was dark and musty, pulled down a shutter and let the sun come in.

Vijay looked at her covertly. She was big and black and stately. A cold woman, he thought, not given to small talk.

'We don't get visitors any more,' she explained matter-of-factly and went back to the kitchen.

Vijay ate the *vadais* slowly, deliberately, lingering over every morsel, so hot and voluptuous in his mouth they were, as he watched a shaft of sunlight play around with the dust that had been stirred up in the room. He washed the *vadais* down with a cup of tea and, getting up, stretched himself with the satisfaction of a man who felt he could unfurl a bit, now that his guide had been found, and his voyage begun.

He looked around the room but, except for a few old chairs, a desk and a bookshelf emptied of books, there was nothing to claim his attention. He sat down again, and was looking desultorily through *Newsweek*, when his eyes fell on a framed photograph on the further wall of the room. Unable to make out the figures, he got up and went to take a closer look at it. It was a group photo of a family, Mrs Nadesan's family presumably, because she was the focus of the camera's attention or, rather, the school certificate, which she held before her, was. On either side of her stood her parents, her mother dressed up in sari and blouse and rings and necklaces and an ill-fitting pair of embroidered slippers, and her father in a national *banian* and *verti* and shawl. Around them, variously seated and standing, was a host of younger brothers and sisters. The name of the studio, where the photograph was taken, was embossed on the bottom right corner, but Vijay could not quite make it out.

Mrs Nadesan was clearly from a poor family. Her father was probably a tenant farmer or small-holder who had invested everything he had in his eldest daughter's education so that she could marry well and help out with her brothers and sisters. He would have had little else to offer by way of dowry. Nadesan was the catch!

Vijay could hardly identify the slim, simpering little girl in the picture with the tall, stately woman he had just met. He was even more surprised when the elderly man, who had just walked in, introduced himself as Nadesan. There was at least twenty years between husband and wife, he estimated quickly, while his host was busy taking down another shutter.

'A bit dark in here,' he was saying, 'we don't get visitors any more.' Vijay smiled to himself; did he echo his wife or his wife him?

'Sarath's letter came only this morning,' Nadesan informed Vijay, taking out a handkerchief and meticulously dusting the chair he was going to sit on. He was a thin, dark man of average height and nondescript looks, wearing nondescript trousers and shirt, and would have passed for a nondescript (though fussy) bank clerk, which he was. 'But never mind, you can stay here, there's plenty of room now.'

Why 'now', Vijay wondered, but did not press his host for an answer. Instead, he thanked him profusely, saying pointedly that he didn't expect to stay very long in one place.

Nadesan shook his head from side to side and made a wry face. This was not a good time for Vijay to have come, he said. Of course, he could look around and meet a few people and that, but it was not like the time when Sarath was here. Then there was a whole lot of youngsters who wanted to meet Sarath and talk to him and find out what was going on in the South. Was there any opposition to the government? Wasn't the FTZ a failure? What about the Mahaweli river scheme? Was it going to reach out to their drought-stricken part of the world? Or was it meant to open out land for Del Monte and Brooke Bond? Was that why the government got so much foreign aid?

'Oh, we had a whole series of discussions, we took the world apart and put it back to rights.'

Suddenly Nadesan had come alive, his eyes sparkled with a bright intelligence, the lines that sat like resignation on his face had vanished, and he joyed in his own coming out. He was showing off, too, strutting – in tune to Vijay's growing surprise. Did Vijay know that he, Nadesan, had led a whole 'seminar' on the IMF and the World Bank at one of the sessions? Vijay should ask Sarath about it.

'But all that's finished now,' he ended with a sigh for his other persona, the intellectual, now vanished beyond recall and, as abruptly, changed back to bank clerk.

'Come, I'll show you your room,' he said, picking up Vijay's bag and leading the way to the back of the house. 'The kitchen's next to you and you can help yourself to food. Chitra is out all day doing things for people.'

The bedroom was small and tidy, with a few toys stacked up beside a large cupboard in a corner, and boys' story books in English and Tamil arranged neatly on a table, and a string bed with a mat thrown over it.

'We live very simply,' Nadesan explained. Vijay nodded in approval: he could not get a word in, anyway.

'Maybe I'll take you to the university tomorrow,' Nadesan suggested. 'I know a few lecturers there, and you can have an interesting discussion with them.'

Vijay tried to point out that what he really wanted to do was to meet grass-roots people, people involved in the struggle, the Boys maybe – but Nadesan waved his suggestions aside.

'You'll like these chaps, take my word for it, they are very interesting,' and with that Nadesan left him or, rather, faded from him, the man had such an odd way of appearing and disappearing.

Over dinner that night, Vijay had a chance to find out more about Nadesan's family. Nadesan himself had just returned from a chore 'in town' and was quiet, but Chitra, his wife, was quite garrulous. Perhaps they took it in turns to talk, or maybe she was on the night-shift, Vijay chuckled inwardly.

The Nadesans had four children, three of their own, two girls and a boy, and a son by Nadesan's previous marriage. (Chitra's dowry, it would seem, could only run to a widower.) The children were all doing well at school, but when the army began to raid their homes looking for 'Boys', Chitra decided to pack off her kids to the village. They were quite happy and safe there, with her sister, she had no worries about them. But Yogi, Nadesan's boy, was becoming a problem. He was a bright, cheerful lad, confided Chitra, who had got through seven or eight O levels (Chitra was not sure how many) and was hoping to get into university, if not here, in India, when all this army business happened. They could not send him off to the village with his brother and sisters because his education would have suffered. But without them to look after and play elder brother to, Yogi began to find less and less reason to stay at home. (God knew where he was at this moment.) He even lost interest in his studies and, in a stand-up row with his father one day (Nadesan looked at his wife reprovingly at this point), had declared that he could not study until the Sinhalese army was driven out of Jaffna. (Vijay smiled to himself in recollection of the Sinhalese king who, eleven centuries earlier, had made a similar declaration about the Indians occupying his land.) And now Yogi was seldom home and even more rarely at his books. What was worse, lamented Chitra, was that the boy had lost his cheerful disposition and his considerate ways and become sulky and unhelpful.

'Could you find him a job in Colombo or somewhere safe?' she asked Vijay despairingly. 'He is not going to study now, and he's getting into bad company here.'

Vijay replied that he would certainly try, but perhaps he should talk to the lad first.

'He was such a good boy, you know. I don't know what's come over him,' Chitra remarked sadly, clearing the table. 'He was so good with the little ones, they miss him more than they miss us,' and a sob broke her cultivated calm.

Vijay did not sleep too well that night. He did not know what he could do for Yogi. Just before he went to bed, he had opened the huge old *almirah* hoping to find some small space to put his clothes in, and found it emptied of everything except a brand new cricket bat and an unopened chess set in a forlorn corner, and a note which said, 'To our

beloved son, Ram, on his 13th birthday'. Something had gone out of Vijay then. And in the hollow sleep that followed, all he could dream of was a vast, vacant esplanade, with him standing there, for ever, with his bat and ball and no one to play with, as the day passed into night, and his mother kept calling, calling, from further and further away, to come back home.

When he woke, the morning was gone. The sun was half-way to noon and hot. There was no one in the house. By the time he had washed and dressed, however, Chitra had returned.

'Ah-ha, you are up,' she chirped. 'I'll get you some tea.'

'You went to the shops?' Vijay asked, following Chitra to the kitchen.

'Yes, that too,' she answered with a hint of mischief.

'I am going to cook something really Tamil for after dinner,' she went on. '*Payasam*. You like it?'

'Yes, of course. I am partly Tamil, you know. My father . . .'

'I know, I know. I am sorry. Tamil, Sinhalese, what does it matter? It is your Sinhalese army we don't want, and your Sinhala Only government, which treats us differently from you.'

Vijay sat down at the table and pecked at the *iddlee* Chitra had placed before him.

'And if you go on treating us differently,' Chitra continued, joining Vijay at the table in a cup of tea, 'we will become different.'

Vijay smiled in agreement, but Chitra must have taken it for smugness because she came back impatiently at him. 'No you don't understand. It is already happening. Just look at our children. Look at Yogi. He wants to become a doctor, he wants to serve people, and you won't give him a place in your Medical College because he is a Tamil, and now he wants to . . .'

She broke off abruptly, on the brink of a confidence, and Vijay felt left out again. However hard Chitra tried to avoid it, she could not help identifying him with 'them'. She trusted him as a comrade, he knew, but there was a human confidence beyond that which had got damaged somewhere in the course of their racialized histories.

Chitra must have sensed it, too, because she quickly left the table and, muttering that all this talk wouldn't get her cooking done, began to stir the food on the fire.

'Some woman,' thought Vijay, looking at her broad behind contemplatively, but up to now he had missed the real size of her. She was probably the thinker in the family, and the doer too, and a provider for all those other families that Nadesan said she visited. Her girth was the measure of the world she girded, romanticized Vijay.

'Ah, I forgot,' Chitra turned round, waving the ladle in her hand. 'You are to be ready by six o'clock. He's fixed that meeting for you. And he'll come to take you.'

'Who?' Vijay began to ask and stopped, realizing that she was speaking of her husband but would not, in typical Hindu fashion, refer to him by name. Suddenly she was the orthodox Hindu wife again, and the transition took him aback, just as her husband's had done the day before. He shook his head in bewilderment. What a curious couple, he began to think, but realizing how chastened his judgements had become in the last couple of days, put aside his opinion; perhaps there was something here that was not ready to his understanding.

The meeting at the university was a disaster. The discussion never got off the ground. There must have been ten or twelve of them, mostly lecturers and mostly men, but they all had the same views and displayed the same leaden quality of righteousness as his Sinhala colleagues 'back home' – the same stereotypes, the same myths, the same determination to reshape history to their prejudices, only in reverse. It was as though they had never known Sinhalese people, lived among them, married into their families, stood beside each other worshipping the same gods. All they would say over and over again, and in nightmarish unison, was that they were a separate people who had, for five centuries, been mixed up like an *achcharu* (they laughed bleakly at their use of the Sinhala word for pickle) by European colonialists and now wanted to be returned to their pristine separateness in their pristine homelands. And their historical and archaeological findings led them, like their counterparts in the Sinhalese universities, to the conclusion that they had worked for.

They now had the history they wanted and nothing that Vijay could say – and he tried argument, analysis, fact, common experience, common sense – would move them. A collective psychological need had congealed in their minds like a truth and nothing less than their self-deliverance from Sinhalese subjugation could free their thinking again.

Nadesan felt Vijay's disappointment more keenly perhaps than any of the others. He said as much on the way home and Vijay was grateful for it; there was more humanity in the little bank clerk than in all those intellectuals put together, and yet he wanted to be one of them.

Vijay spent the next few days lazing about the house, and getting Chitra to help him polish up his Tamil, or loafing around and getting the feel of the place. His Tamil improved and Chitra became a firm friend, but the town told him nothing except that a marauding army had been there. People went about their business as usual, they displayed no particular bitterness, showed him no particular animosity. Nadesan's family friends behaved towards him the same way as Nadesan did. It

was time to move on to Sandilipay and meet his grand-uncle Para. There was nothing left to do here and little to learn, and no connections to make. The trip had been a waste.

And then Yogi turned up. The Nadesans were out for the evening, and Vijay was in bed writing up his diary, when there was a knock on the window and a dark, gangling fellow of about 17, all bones and skin and hair (and a wisp of a moustache) dressed in baggy blue shorts and a vest, came in.

'I'm Yogi,' he grinned and thrust out his hand.

'Oh hello, I'm Vijay,' replied Vijay unnecessarily, getting up from the bed.

'I suspected as much,' rejoined Yogi mischievously, and burst out laughing.

He might have his father's dark, dour features, thought Vijay, but his temperament was most certainly his step-mother's. 'Where have you been then?' he inquired, entering into the intimacy of the younger man.

'Oh, here and there,' grinned Yogi. 'I see you keep a diary,' he went on, taking a chair. 'What does it say about us?'

'Us?'

'Yes, us, Tamils.'

'Nothing really. What is there to say? You are no different from anybody else.'

'But what about the troubles?'

'Ah, that is another matter, and of course I am on your side, but—'

'Why?' interrupted Yogi.

And from there the conversation turned into an interrogation of Vijay's background, views, convictions and how he had come by them, and how, too, he was putting them into practice. How, above all, had he come to identify himself with the Tamil cause?

Vijay was amused at first, remembering his own relentless curiosity at that age . . . he was in the PLF then, himself questioning new recruits sometimes, and something in Yogi . . . Suddenly it struck him that Yogi had joined up with the Boys . . . and hadn't there been something that Chitra had not quite said . . .

Vijay warmed to his companion and happily charted for him his political journey to Jaffna, and remembered in the telling that, curiously enough, it was his Sinhalese forebears and friends, his grandfather and grandmother, Uncle Lal and Padma, who had conducted him there, not his father's relatives, who had dropped in and out of his life as a matter of form. Now, with Yogi, he had another sense of arrival.

Vijay got up from the bed and, walking up to the window, looked out into the night. There was still Manel.

Yogi got up to go; he had heard the creak of the front door.

'I'll see you tomorrow,' he said abruptly and left as he came, by the window. He clearly did not want to upset his parents with his sudden presence and Vijay, not wishing to tell them about his visit, got quickly into bed.

When Yogi returned the following morning, Nadesan had gone to work and Chitra was out 'visiting'.

'Can you ride a bike?' Yogi asked Vijay precipitately.

'Yes, of course.'

'Come along then. I'll take you to see some friends.'

The bicycle that Yogi had brought for Vijay appeared, as did his own, to be a ramshackle, put-together thing, but in the running was sound and fast and efficient, and surprisingly smooth to the ride. And he was glad of it, because the journey through the *olungais*, a tangle of sandy and bumpy lanes and by-lanes, had him sore and exhausted before it was done. They finally stopped at what looked like an abandoned old toddy tavern, tucked illicitly away in a palmyrah grove, and a whole lot of youngsters emerged from within. Vijay's suspicions were now confirmed: these were the Boys all right.

The oldest could hardly have been over 20, but their spokesman, a serious-looking, stockily built lad whom they addressed as Veeran, looked even younger. Most of them wore sarongs tucked up to the waist and little else; two wore shorts; Veeran had a shirt thrown over his shoulder.

One of the lads took the bikes and secreted them away, while the others led Vijay through more trees and bushes to a sudden clearing. The vegetation was sparse and skimpy and see-through, unlike anything in the lush and overgrown South – hopeless guerrilla country – and the Boys, Vijay was convinced, had made no special effort to cover their tracks. Everything was done as a matter of course, as of necessity, and not out of a sense of the clandestine or the sensational. And yet Vijay was completely lost, disorientated.

Veeran offered Vijay a comfortable tree stump to sit on, while the others arranged themselves on the ground around him, and then they began to ply him with questions. They spoke in a Tamil Vijay could easily understand, and Yogi helped out with the more complex arguments in English, though Vijay suspected that they were all quite capable of speaking English themselves. But, unlike the meeting at the university, the discussion was not about the rival historical claims of the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Instead, they wanted to know why socialism had failed in the South, why it had collapsed so cravenly before the advance of Sinhala nationalism. It was not as though Ceylonese socialism had been ta-

ken out of the side of the Comintern, they observed; instead it had sprung, like Ganga, straight out of the head of Trotsky (Vijay could not help noticing the religious self-mockery) – but where, they asked, was all that idealism now?

Vijay was taken aback by the weight and direction of their questions and beat an uneasy retreat into abstractions about the national question. But the youngsters were equally derisive of theory. Never mind the talk, they said, what was the practical help socialists like Vijay could give them? How could they help the Tamil cause?

Vijay answered weakly that there was growing opposition to the government in the South, there was talk even of a general strike, but accepted that that was not of immediate use to the Tamils. He agreed, though, that his group, Rights and Justice, could be of some practical use to Veeran and the Boys, and they arranged to meet the following day to discuss ways and means.

‘But whatever arrangements we come to, *sahodaraya*,’ ended Veeran in fluent Sinhala, ‘we want you to be our go-between. We trust you.’

When Vijay left for Sandilipay a couple of days later, he was pleased that he had made contact with the Boys (or some of them at least) and heartened by their acceptance of him: Veeran had even called him brother. He felt he had a purpose now and a role, his journey had not been in vain. What he could not understand, though, and it made him uneasy, was why they had taken him to their bosoms so readily. It was not till he was half-way to the bus station that Vijay learnt from Yogi, who had insisted on accompanying him, that he had been ‘monitored and studied’ long before he was finally ‘checked out’ that night by Yogi in his father’s home. Vijay now began to suspect that Chitra, if not Nadesan, might have had a hand in the ‘monitoring’ too, but Yogi would not let on. Or perhaps he did not know about their involvement with the Boys, any more than his parents knew about his. Vijay was comforted by their efficiency.

‘You don’t have to come with me, Yogi,’ Vijay said to his companion, as Yogi followed him into the bus. ‘Really. I can find my way to Sandilipay.’

‘It’s two or three miles walk from where the bus stops, and I know a short cut,’ Yogi rejoined. ‘Besides, I can go and see my brother and sisters, they are only in the next village.’

‘Uncle Para might be dead for all I know,’ muttered Vijay to himself.

‘In that case you can come and stay with us,’ chortled Yogi callously.

UNCLE PARA WOKE UP these days in a temper. Almost in his eighties now, he was still the first to get up of a morning, at the crack of dawn. But the days when he would reach out for the torchlight under his pillow and light his way into the kitchen, where he lit a fire and waited for his daughter to come and make that first eye-opening cup of tea, were gone. There was no fire to light now, only an electric ring, and the torch that he had carried over from his railway days was turning a relic in his hands, ever since they brought electricity into his house some eighteen months ago. And his daughter no longer woke up and sat on her haunches beside him, talking the kettle into boiling, as they waited for the first light of dawn to break through the kitchen door – when she would give him his tea and go and milk the cows.

No more; even the shrine-room was lit with an electric bulb. True, an oil lamp lit up the framed pictures of Shiva and Ganesh, but it hardly compared to the magnificent four-foot-high brass lamps that once stood on either side of the gods and lit the night with their flickering wicks like a thousand fireflies.

Electricity, pah. Well, it had to come, I suppose, he thought, putting his torchlight back under his pillow and lying back on his bed. He might as well wait for the dawn to break and his daughter to get up and switch on that ridiculous fire. Who ever heard of switching on a fire? Blasted electricity – he'd thought he'd left it all behind, but it had followed him even to Sandilipay, probably the last place that wanted it, and certainly the last place to get it.

'Wake up, father. Here's your tea,' Devi was shaking him by the shoulder. The old man grunted and took the cup from her hand. He must have fallen asleep again, for the sun was up and half the morning was gone. In the distance he could hear his grandson, Ravi, revving up his infernal water pump to irrigate, that's the word he used, his 'land'. Suddenly he heard raised voices in the compound outside and followed them with his ears till they were drowned in the drone of the machine which had, as suddenly, ceased. By the time he had finished his tea and come out on the verandah, there was only silence. He picked up his stick and went up to Ravi's vegetable garden, but the pump had been abandoned in mid-furrow and the lad was gone. He came back into the house, shouting for his daughter.

'Devi,' he called, 'where's Ravi? What's happened? Is anything the matter? Who was it –'

'No, no, father, it wasn't them, it was nothing like that,' Devi came rushing out of the kitchen, drying her hands on her sari, and reassured

the old man. 'Some friends of his turned up, and they went off together. There's nothing to worry about, really.'

She hated to see him like this, anxious and unsure, even for a moment. It was unlike him. Herself a worrier, like her mother, she had learnt, through her long years with her father, to become more assertive. As a girl, she had thought her father headstrong and wild. Some said he had worn her mother down – a weak, frail woman – by his sheer vitality. But Devi had seen him nurse her through her last fatal illness and knew the gentleness that abided in his strength and the doubt that tempered his rebellion and made him just. And it was those qualities of his which had held her up when she had collapsed under the weight of a broken marriage and the prospect of bringing up her son alone – till now, she was strong in her own right and as wilful as he.

'Sit down, father. That tea is cold. I'll make you another cup.'

'Don't palaver me girl,' rebuked the old man, recovering from his shock. 'What is going on?'

'I don't know, father. And you'd better not know. And what we don't know is good for us both.'

The old man roared with laughter, slapping his thigh. 'You never stop surprising me,' he applauded. 'Where did you get all that wisdom from?'

Devi smiled tall into her years and went off to make the tea, full of herself.

It was late morning before Uncle Para had finished his ablutions and his prayers and sat down with yet another cup of tea and a biscuit to 'talk' to his Exercise Book. It was the hour he looked forward to when, having mulled over what he had read the previous day in the newspapers and the clippings that his librarian friend sent him twice a week from Colombo, he entered into deep conversation with himself about the world out there, but in writing. Writing reflected and refracted that world through his numerous selves, brought those selves together, cohered them, and connected him with events he could no longer enter into. It gave him a hold on reality and allowed him to go along with those who wanted to change it. It kept him involved and active. And in the evenings, when he had woken from his afternoon slumber, he would talk to the authors of the books which his friend sent him from time to time – philosophers, novelists, essayists, he talked to them all – and meditated gravely on what they had to say. Meditation lifted him above the world and allowed him to see how it had to be changed; reflection engaged him in the changing.

But, this morning, as he sat at his table in his study (a converted cowshed, long and narrow with a thatched roof and cruelly open on all

sides to the weather) Uncle Para's mind began to wander and, try as he might, he could not bring it to book. Something tugged at it from outside the periphery of his consciousness, some vague unease, a foreboding even. He got up and started pacing the floor, stopping from time to time to stare vacantly at a puddle of water in the corner. After a while he sat down on the stoop and looked across to Ravi's 'land', wondering what the boy was up to. Something was going on out there that he didn't as yet know about.

It was a hot, dry, brittle day, broken by fresh brief thunderstorms, crackling one minute and bearing down the next, the kind of day that exposed an old man to his physical frailties while offering no solace to his mind. Somewhere in the distance and stillness a cock crowed. At noon? Uncle Para stopped pacing and sat on the cool of the cement stoop, leaning back against a pillar. It was the spot where his brother Sahadevan used to sit and look across at the main house, planning the extension for his parents or, turning his gaze to the vacant land on the other side where Ravi now cultivated his chillies and onions, dream of the house he was going to build for his sister's dowry. The extension never got finished (Sahadevan's money ran out paying off his, Para's, gambling debts) and Saraswathi ran away with her cousin, to die in childbirth. And Kanni had long ago followed her daughters out of the village.

The old man shook off his memories and watched old Rover shake off his fleas. Like Rover he had lived too long; it was time to go.

A gate creaked and Rover, summoning up a growl, loped off to inquire. Uncle Para could not see the gate, from where he was, but he thought he heard voices. Ravi perhaps. But Rover's growl had burst into a tremulous barking and Rover himself hove into view, sidling backwards round the corner with two young men in front of him. They were about to go up the steps into the main house when Uncle Para hailed them.

'There's no one there,' he called out. 'My grandson's gone out; don't know when he'll be back.'

'Ah, right,' called back the taller of the two and, turning round to locate the voice, walked up to the old man, a look of pleasant curiosity on his face. 'But it is you we came to see.' Para looked from one to the other, trying to place them.

'It's lovely to see you, grandfather,' Vijay grinned. 'Don't you recognize me?' He would have embraced the old man, but the other was still sorting out his memory.

'Not Thurai's son, are you?' he hazarded. 'No, can't be. I know, you are Siddha, Gowri's—'

'I am Vijay, grandfather, Rajan's—'

'Vijay?' He paused for a moment. 'Ah, Vijay.' He fingered his memory again. 'Rajan's? Yes of course, Vijay, now I can see it, how you have grown, but the same innocent face, like your mother's. I should have known, I should have known. Vijay, how are you son?' and the old man pulled the youngster down to him and locked him in his arms.

'And this young man?' he inquired releasing Vijay after a while.

'That's my friend Yogi. I was staying with his parents in town. Mr Nadesan? He works in the bank.'

'No, I don't think I know him,' Uncle Para answered briefly, anxious to get back to Vijay. 'So what brought you to Jaffna after all these years?' he asked and, without waiting for an answer, 'You got your mother's eyes all right, that's what you got, her eyes – she was a great see-er, you know, a great see-er,' and he shook his head from side to side in sad recollection.

'I sent you her letters?'

Vijay nodded.

'We used to have such vigorous discussions. There was so much she was going to do.' He shook his head again from side to side at the sheer waste of it all. 'Your father just followed her, you know, trusted her instincts, her judgement, everything. Do you hear from him?'

Vijay shook his head, the habit was catching.

'Not much,' he replied drily.

'Well, don't judge him too hard. She was his centre, you know; without her . . . Ah, here's Devi.'

But Devi was returning from her bath at the well, and rushed shyly past the visitors without waiting to be introduced.

'Come,' said the old man, 'I'll find you some towels and you can have a refreshing well-bath. Devi would have finished cooking by the time you are done.'

The meal was tasty but spare: rice, *rasam*, *dhal* tempered in ghee with hot red chillies and onion, and a piece of fish meant for two now stretched to four, and the conversation kept trailing off into stories from the past. Devi, intent on feeding the men, said little.

'We have been talking all this time and I still haven't found out anything about you, and what you are doing here,' laughed Uncle Para at the end of the meal. 'Oh well, have a nap first, there are mats and pillows in there,' he pointed to the outhouse, 'and we'll talk later. I'll feel more up to it than myself.'

When Vijay woke from his short nap, Yogi was gently snoring and the main house was as still as sleep. The sun was still hot, but a dense, dark cloud hung over the side of the house like an omen. Vijay sat on the stoop and looked around him. Nothing had changed since his last boyish

visit here, except that the walls of the kitchen had gone from mud to brick, and bits of electric wiring had crept in here and there. The buildings were still unconnected, though – with the kitchen standing at right angles to the ‘main house’ on the one side and the outhouse on the other and the three of them forming an unfinished rectangle; and you still needed an umbrella to walk from one part to the other on a rainy day. The earth was brown, dry, parched; the rains were drained dry even as they hit the ground. But further up, beyond the well, Vijay thought he saw shades of green against the brown and, going up to investigate, discovered row upon row of chilli and onion plants interspersed with aubergine and pumpkin. A desert had bloomed and, coming to think of it, he was sure he had seen a couple of other plots like that between the main road and Uncle Para’s house.

‘You see, even if your government cuts us off, we can grow our own food,’ Yogi remarked, coming up behind him.

Vijay smiled in agreement and pointed to the machine. ‘What’s that?’ he asked.

‘Water pump,’ replied Yogi. ‘Electric,’ he added proudly. ‘That’s what does the job.’

‘Bah,’ said a voice behind them, and turning round, they saw that Uncle Para had joined them. ‘Electric, electric, that’s all I hear these days.’

‘But it’s progress, grandfather,’ protested Vijay.

‘By itself, no,’ retorted the old man, but would not elaborate.

‘It helps to feed us,’ suggested Yogi tentatively.

‘By itself, no,’ the old man repeated stubbornly and then, relenting, went on to explain. ‘You can’t live on onions and chillies and a bit of pumpkin, son, can you? But that is all we can grow on small bits of land even with your electricity.’

‘Small is beautiful,’ muttered Vijay under his breath.

‘Yeah, yeah. I heard about all that. That is all right when you are large, but when you are small, small is small. We can never feed ourselves till we have large-scale farming and regular labour, but all our land is broken up and scattered and –’

‘Why’s that?’ interrupted Yogi.

‘Because of your damn dowry system; everything is divided, sub-divided, sub-sub . . . bits of your land here, bits of his land there.’

‘But what’s the problem with labour?’ Vijay asked.

‘What labour? Nobody works here. We are high caste *vellalas*, you know,’ the old man said with bitter sarcasm, ‘manual work is beneath us. We are government servants, pen-pushers, we do clean neat paper-work. Manual work is for low-caste people. And they work,’ he went

on more gravely, 'to keep alive, for now, not to produce, for the future. Why should they? We give them no future.'

'It's a mess,' he snorted and turned to go back to the house. Vijay and Yogi followed him, each lost in his own thoughts and in the way of thinking, of seeing, that the old man had opened out for them.

'Must you go tomorrow?' Uncle Para inquired of Vijay when they had sat down to the tea and *murukku* that Devi had set before them.

'Yes, grandfather. I've got to get back to work on Monday. I am sorry, but the next time I come—'

'Hmm, yes, next time. In that case, you had better bring me up to date on what's happening in your part of the world before you go to bed. And you, Yogi, had better tell me about what you young fellows are up to in town.'

'There's not much to say, really,' Vijay began, but at the end of two hours he had barely assuaged his grandfather's curiosity, and Yogi was yet to be questioned.

It was getting dark by now and the air was heavy with pent-up thunder.

'It's going to rain,' observed Uncle Para, 'this time for real. I wonder where that boy has got to.'

'What boy?' asked Vijay.

'Ravi, my grandson, Devi's boy. That's his plot up there.'

'Oh yes, I remember him. He was a baby—'

'No longer, I'm afraid. He is his own man now, does what he wants, goes where he likes, tells no one where he goes.'

'And the plot? I mean—'

'Does it when he pleases,' Uncle Para continued his catalogue of woe.

Devi, who had remained silent up to then because she had not spoken in English for a long time, now remonstrated with her father, in Tamil.

Yogi nodded vehemently at what she said and Vijay got the drift of it, but the old man insisted that she spelt it out for Vijay.

'Tell him, go on, tell him. You've got a tongue in your head. You tell him.'

And she did. In halting English and Tamil, she told Vijay slowly, but feelingly, how the green of the chillies and the onions he saw over there was only the green of hope, not of expectation: 'his' government had flooded the South with cheap imports of foodstuffs from India and they had no market to sell their produce in. What good was a market garden without a market?

The government was doing this to them, she went on more passionately, just because they were Tamils, and now she spoke in Tamil only,

but nothing was going to change that. That, 'they' could not take from them. 'They' had taken their land, their markets, their jobs, their children's education, but they were still Tamils and would die Tamils, and that, 'they' could not take from them – and with that she picked up the cups and plates and walked out of the room.

Uncle Para smiled bleakly. It was not like Devi to be so voluble in public. Something was up, something to do with her son, some suspicion perhaps of what he was getting up to, and she was preparing herself for it.

'You must have seen lots of little plots like this,' observed the old man, waving in the direction of Ravi's 'land', 'on your way here.'

Vijay nodded.

'Yes, Yogi pointed them out to me. I don't remember seeing that much green before.'

'You didn't, because there weren't any, not like this. And it is not just a matter of water, and the electric pump making it easier, cheaper.' The old man paused to light his cigar. Yogi pricked up his ears.

'It is also that a whole new generation has been pushed back on the land because there's no other outlet for them. Your government has closed down all the options. No jobs, no higher education' (Yogi nodded vigorously) 'no nothing.'

'The Colombo Tamils can go abroad, the town Tamils can go to the Middle East, but the village boys can only go back to their little bits of land and see what they can get out of it.'

His cigar had gone out as he spoke. He chewed out the wet end and spat it out and tried lighting it up again while speaking, and gave up.

'Have you seen so many young people in the villages, eh Yogi? How about Sudumalai? Isn't it the same there?'

'Yes, you are right grandfather,' Yogi said sheepishly. 'I had never seen it like that before.'

'Not since your father was a boy, Vijay, have there been so many youngsters around. And they are trying very hard to make a living, some have tried to grow things never heard of in Jaffna before. In Sudumalai I'm told they've managed to grow apples. Apples! Isn't that right Yogi?'

'But what's the use? As Devi says, there's no market. Your government has taken that too. And the will has gone out of the youngsters.'

'See,' and he pointed towards Ravi's plot again, 'his friends come for him and he chucks up his work and pushes off. What's the point of working? The village is full of youngsters like Ravi, waiting for something to happen.' He removed his glasses and said more gravely, 'the British took away their past, the Sinhalese took away their future. All

they have is the present. And that makes them dangerous.'

There was a clap of thunder and the rain began to pour down.

'You had better get off the stoop and come and sit over here,' Uncle Para admonished the younger men, pointing to the chairs on either side of him. 'It's going to come down for real now.'

He muttered something about the rain being unseasonal as he tried to light up his cigar again, and succeeded. He gathered his shawl closer around him against the damp and, leaning back in his easy chair, dragged slowly on the cheroot, lost now in his own thoughts.

His mood must have carried to Vijay and Yogi, because they too fell silent. Or perhaps it was the heavy, insistent beat of the rain that lent itself to contemplation, to remembrance of things past. Vijay wished he had come to Sandilipay more often. Some of his roots were here . . . and of course his mother had felt like him . . . it was there in her letters to Uncle Para, her wanting to belong here . . . so it was not just one's birth-roots, it was something else, a way of life perhaps, basic, fundamental, feudal even . . . something lost to his town memory, his merchant commerce memory . . .

'When memory dies, a people die,' Uncle Para broke into his reverie, and Vijay had the eerie feeling that the old man was privy to his thoughts before he was. But, remembering his experiences of the past few days, he asked: 'What if we make up false memories?'

'That is worse,' replied the old man, 'that is murder.'

The rain had stopped beating and had turned into a steady drone. Devi switched on the lights in the main house and shouted across to Yogi to light up the lantern above her father's desk. When were they going to eat, she called, but the old man merely grunted and mumbled something about waiting for Ravi.

'Why didn't you bring your wife?' he blurted out suddenly turning to Vijay. 'What's wrong?'

'What sort of a question is that?' laughed Vijay, and noticed how quickly he had fallen prey to the easy familiarity that his grandfather held out to him; people around the old man seemed to accept each other more readily.

'Just because she hasn't come with me doesn't mean —'

'OK, OK, but why haven't you talked about her? I heard about your runaway marriage and all that, but . . .' He broke off, chuckling.

Why 'runaway marriage', wondered Vijay, and what was so funny about it anyway?

'No, no, it's not about you. It's the "runaway marriage" bit.' Uncle Para couldn't control his mirth now. 'It reminded me of the time I was a railway guard and this chap . . . What was his name, now? Nanda? Ah

yes, Nandasena, he was, he was, ha ha ha,' and he started chuckling again, slapping his thigh, unable to go on with his story.

Nandasena, it appeared, when Vijay and Yogi finally dragged the story out of the old man, was an engine driver who was constantly falling in love. When the affliction was at its height, every two months or so, the train to Gampola was invariably late, and the station-masters down the line would nod in (unseen) unison: Nanda is serious. But after a series of disappointments – and they took it personally, for Nanda had a way of making them all shareholders in his passion – his friends and colleagues finally decided that Nanda could never be seriously serious, and that to cover up for him any longer would put their own jobs in jeopardy. And, just then, Nanda went and fell hopelessly and endlessly in love with a rich Burgher girl in high school, and ran away with her on the Gampola train. Her parents gave chase by car but Nanda didn't stop at any of the stations. When they finally found the couple a week later, in a disused railway carriage on a Maradana siding, they were married.

'We covered up for him, of course,' ended Uncle Para, 'but this time it went up to the GM, the girl's parents took it up, they wanted their daughter back and Nanda sacked – if every impoverished Sinhalese clerk was to run away with a well-bred Dutch Burgher girl, where would the white community be? It was up to Mr Mason to defend their rights. But the GM, a bibulous Englishman, was not bothered about the white man's burden. He was only interested in his trains, trains were his only passion, and he kept on asking Nanda what he had done – with the train.' Uncle Para started chuckling again. "What is all this I hear about you, and a runaway carriage", the GM asked Nanda repeatedly, and Nanda kept correcting him over and over again, "Don't you mean me and my runaway marriage?"

Vijay did not think the story very funny, but laughed all the same, while Yogi was more interested in the fact that Uncle Para had been a railway guard and travelled all over Ceylon. And Uncle Para was only too happy to regale him with his adventures.

'If you enjoyed it so much, why did you give it up so early?' asked Yogi.

'It was hard work, in lonely places, and malaria everywhere. The British pushed us around from place to place and we had no family life. We gambled and drank to get over our loneliness and ended up with no money to send our families either. It is adventurous only when you look back, son,' he added. 'At the time it was hardship.'

'But if you liked the hill country so much why did you come back to live here?' pressed Yogi, as though it was treason to have found the South more agreeable.

'Because a place is its people,' answered the old man sharply. But before he could say more on the subject, Devi came out of the kitchen and dragged him and the others off to eat. There was no point in waiting for Ravi any longer, she declared, it was nine o'clock, and Vijay would probably want to make an early start in the morning.

Vijay, however, was beginning to enjoy his visit and it did not take too much effort on Uncle Para's part to persuade him to stay on a couple of days longer.

'Send a sick-note, son,' he urged. 'I have sent thousands in my time.'

Vijay nodded emphatically. 'Yes, it's time to follow in your footsteps,' he laughed.

On the following day, Uncle Para woke up earlier than usual and, summoning Vijay and Yogi from their beds, took them for a morning stroll around the village. The rain had ceased and the *olungais* were muddy and, on Uncle Para's advice, they left their shoes behind and squelched through the mud in bare feet. The sun broke through in twinkles through the tamarind trees or leapt over the margosa to dapple their way. But all they could see was what was ahead of them: the heavily thatched palmyrah fences hid everything else from view. And the lanes themselves twisted and turned without notice and ran randomly into each other, and Vijay felt both lost and closed in at the same time.

'It was much more open near the main road,' he complained.

'Ah yes, and it opens out again further along into palmyrah groves, I'll show you, and fields, and beyond that, the sea, and India. Behind these fences there is open land too – people do not fence themselves off from each other, only from the outside world.' The old man turned to Yogi. 'Good guerrilla country, eh Yogi?' He treated the youngster to one of his mischievous chuckles.

When they returned from their walk, they discovered that Ravi had come (for a change of clothes) and gone. Devi had been at the well and had seen him only when he was riding off on his bicycle.

Vijay expected his grandfather to be disappointed and angry but all he heard the old man mumble was 'thank God he is all right'. And, as though his spirits had been lifted by the sighting of his grandson again, he invited Vijay and Yogi to a pot or two of fresh palmyrah toddy which he had got down specially for them.

'I remember teaching your mother to drink this stuff, off one of these,' he said, handing Vijay a smoothed-out coconut shell, 'probably the same one.'

'You were very fond of her, weren't you?' asked Vijay.

The old man nodded gravely, sipping his toddy.

'And Manel, what is she like?' he inquired, changing tack again, so suddenly that it took Vijay unawares.

For a while he said nothing and then slowly, waking to the warmth that the sweet-sour drink evoked in him, he unburdened himself to his grandfather.

'I don't know what to do, grandfather,' he ended sadly. 'We don't see eye to eye about anything – work, having children, what's going on in the country. How can we stand by and do nothing? I don't want her to join our organization or anything like that . . . just . . . Oh, I don't know . . . Even making love . . .' and he stopped, not sure he wanted to go on, not sure the old man would want him to.

'Yes?'

'Well, it's not a relationship any more, just an act.'

'Hmm,' grunted his grandfather, lighting up a cigar and pouring more toddy into everybody's cup.

'Society is changing, son, too rapidly I think, sometimes, and people are changing. They look for ambition now, not fulfilment. Women, too, and why shouldn't they? It's a different freedom people want these days, individual, more personal, private even, as though they belonged only to themselves. My nieces are like that, you know, your father's sisters, and their children. Did you go to see them when you were in Colombo?'

Vijay made a face.

'Didn't like them, ch? No, you wouldn't. They are typical Colombo Tamils, they never come here any more, they are ashamed . . .' he broke off, looking over Vijay's shoulder.

'Hello, what's going on?' he muttered and stood up from his chair.

Vijay turned round and saw an elderly man in a sarong and a policeman's jacket leaning his bicycle against the *murunga* tree.

'Ha, Arumugam, come, come,' welcomed Uncle Para. 'You are just in time for some toddy.'

Arumugam thanked the old man, but refused the offer. This was not a social visit, he said, he was on business, and pulled out his notebook.

'Where is Ravi?' he began and stopped as Devi emerged from the kitchen. '*Thangachi*,' he said and brought the palms of his hands together in respectful greeting. 'Where is Ravi?' he completed his question, concealing his notebook from Devi.

'Where do you think he is, *annai*?' retorted Devi. 'On a Sunday? Do you see his bicycle around?'

'Oh! Chunnakam market?' offered Arumugam in relief. 'Taken his produce there?'

'Ugh, hmm,' nodded Devi, and came over and sat on the stoop of

the outhouse. 'Sit down, *annai*, you look tired.' Yogi brought him a chair.

'And worried,' added Uncle Para. 'What's the matter?'

PC Arumugam sat down and wiped the sweat off his face with the towel he had wound around his head against the sun.

'The Manipay bank was robbed two days ago by four young men, and from the evidence we have, they all seemed to have come from these parts.' He had started speaking as though from a set police text but, noticing Devi's disapproving frown, ended limply, 'That is what the Police Chief is saying, it was HQ who sent me out to investigate.'

'And you came looking for Ravi?' Devi asked in a pained voice. 'What, *annai*, you have known the boy all his life.'

'Yes, I know, it is just routine, don't you see? I have to . . .' He looked across at Devi who stared expressionlessly back at him. His face puckered up, like a lovelorn boy's, behind his handle-bar moustache, and he slumped into the chair. 'No, I suppose, I don't have to . . .'

Uncle Para held out a cup of toddy to him. Arumugam accepted the drink this time.

'I am sick of this job anyway,' he confessed. 'It's not a matter of law and order any more, it's a game. Sinhalese policemen hunting Tamil boys.' He shook his head from side to side; he simply couldn't understand what the force had come to. 'I must be one of the few Tamils left in the force. It's time I chucked it.'

He looked questioningly at Uncle Para, but the old man said nothing.

'Well?' prodded Arumugam.

'If you are ready to ask the question, you are ready to leave,' observed Uncle Para.

Arumugam smiled; it was just like the old man to winnow out the one grain of sense in that whole chaff of confusion.

'I thought you'd say that,' he exclaimed, his smile growing into a grin. He poured himself another drink. 'Here's to happy retirement, then,' he toasted and, lifting his coconut shell cup to his mouth, peered forlornly over it at Devi.

'You know who this is?' Uncle Para broke into Arumugam's reverie. 'My grandson, Rajan's son, and his friend Yogi.'

'Rajan's son?' inquired Arumugam. 'Vijayan? Vijay?' Vijay nodded. 'How he has grown . . . the last time he was here . . . was it . . . when, Uncle Para? was it . . .?'

They began to compare notes and overhaul memories, filling Vijay's ears with anecdotes about his father. It was past noon by the time Arumugam had yet another drink for the road and, wiping the last drops of toddy off his mighty moustache, rose to go. Devi pressed him to stay

for lunch, but he refused, saying that he was on duty (or had a duty?) and didn't want to be around when Ravi didn't turn up.

Ravi had still not returned when Vijay left the following morning. Uncle Para and Devi saw Vijay tearfully off at the gate and Yogi took him to the station. The train was less crowded than usual and Vijay, settling down into a window seat, looked more closely at the cyclostyled sheets of paper that Yogi had shyly thrust into his hands as they bade farewell. They looked like a collection of poems . . . by Yogi! In Tamil. Vijay smiled and put them aside to be read later; there were still seven hours to go. He looked out of the window as the train, gathering speed, left the whitewashed houses of the town behind it and passed on by the mud huts and *ohungais* of innumerable villages into open country. He looked at the fields starved of rain and the men dredging the wells to squeeze the water out of the ground. He loved this part of the country with all its difficulties and its labours. It seemed to make for a more durable people.

'Come back soon,' Uncle Para had said. 'I don't think I am going to be around much longer.'

'What nonsense, grandfather. You are good for another fifty years.' Vijay had been expansive. 'And I'll be coming more often to Jaffna, anyway, if I am going to be working with Yogi and people.'

Vijay had confided his 'mission' to Uncle Para, but the old man had not been impressed. It was all too heroic for him, all too romantic. And romanticism, he had observed in another of his cryptic remarks, was a prelude to tyranny.

Vijay mulled over the words. What a curious bird his grandfather was - sharp, shrewd, progressive, but refusing to put up with electricity.

'A bloody romantic, that's what he is,' chuckled Vijay turning the tables on the old man. He had begun to miss him already.

'They did it, you know, the Boys. They did it,' the man opposite to him suddenly leant forward and confided to Vijay.

'Eh?'

'The hold-up, at Manipay, one million rupees,' replied the man, tapping at an item in his newspaper, 'the Boys did it.' He flushed with pride, a small man in *verti* and shawl grown suddenly tall.

Manipay? Vijay roused himself. Manipay? Oh, the bank. So that's where Ravi had been. Vijay beamed at the man.

'Ah, Manipay? Yes, of course,' he nodded acknowledgement on Ravi's behalf.

'On bicycles,' the man chuckled, shaking his head from side to side in disbelief. 'On bicycles!'

'And look, here, here,' he brought the paper over to Vijay in his

excitement. 'It says the President is going to ban bicycles in Jaffna. The great big Sinhala army with armoured trucks is afraid of boys on bicycles.' He hooted with derision and went back to his seat.

His companion, who had been asleep all this time, woke up at this and muttered: 'It's not funny.' He unfolded himself and yawned, a fat, chubby man, dressed in trousers and shirt. 'It will only bring the army back.'

'But this time we'll be ready. A few more robberies and we'll have all the arms we need.'

'And make things even worse for us in the South.'

'That's all you Colombo Tamils can think of,' the first man retorted. 'How to suck up to the Sinhalese and make a little money. Where's your dignity and self-respect?'

'Self-respect? On an empty stomach?'

'Well, come back home and help us develop our country.'

'"Our country" now, is it?'

'Yes, our country, Eelam. Why, what do you want? To live as a second-class citizen of Sri bloody Sinhalese Lanka all your life?'

'You are mad. Two countries? In one tiny little island? We've got to learn to live together.'

'Yes, but after we get Eelam. Then we can live as equals.'

The argument began to hot up and Vijay quickly retreated behind his book to mull over his memories of Sandilipay. Could he live there for good, he wondered? Polish up his Tamil and throw himself into the struggle? Instead of cheering it on from the sidelines? No harm trying, what had he to lose? Manel and he were . . . were what? Well, he wasn't sure. And the teaching was getting more difficult; he couldn't teach what he wanted, and he was in constant trouble with the deputy head now that Mrs Bandara had given up. There were his grandparents to look after, though. Well, he could go to Sandilipay for a month or so and see what happens. See what happens, see what happens, see what happens . . . the train took up the refrain and put Vijay to sleep.

12

YOU WERE SUPPOSED to be back two days ago. Where on earth have you been?' Manel was bristling with anger and anxiety.

'Why? When were you interested in my whereabouts?' asked Vijay coldly, putting down his bag. He had only that minute arrived from the station.

'*Aachi* is very ill. She . . .'

'*Waaat? Aachi?*' Vijay was startled out of his coldness. 'Why didn't you send me a telegram?' he shouted.

'Where to?' Manel shouted back. 'Do you tell me where you go?'

'When?'

'Two days now; she is bad.'

'If I hurry I can catch the next bus.'

'I'll get you a sandwich and some clean clothes while you freshen up.'

'I've no time.'

'Yes, you have,' and she pushed him into the bathroom. 'That bus is always late.'

The bus, for once, was early, and Vijay caught it on the run. But when he arrived at Anuradhapura, his grandmother was dead.

'She passed away last night,' his grandfather said, leading him to the bier. 'You must have left before my telegram.'

Vijay stood by the open coffin and gazed at the familiar face. She looked a little paler than usual in the afternoon sunlight and against the white of the sheets, but her mouth was still cast in that faintly chiding smile he knew so well. Her expression had never been in her eyes.

Vijay kissed the cold forehead and smiled.

'Sorry, *aachi*, I didn't make it in time this time either.'

His grandfather led him discreetly away from the crowd of people who had gathered for the funeral – almost everybody from the village seemed to be there – and shunted him towards the kitchen.

'Go in and have something to eat,' he urged Vijay. 'Uncle Lal is at the back somewhere.'

The kitchen was full of people too and Vijay, pausing only to thank Raman and his wife for helping with the food, passed unnoticed on to the backyard. Lal was talking to an elderly man.

'Ah, Vijay,' he said. 'You have come. You know *aachi*'s cousin, don't you?'

'She died well,' observed the old man nodding his head reflectively. 'She died well. Didn't suffer. Ah, doctor? Did she?'

'No, no, she didn't,' Lal replied quickly and, thus assured, the old man moved on.

'She took ill about a week ago,' Lal explained to Vijay. 'But by the time I got your grandfather's telegram and rushed down, she was in a bad way.'

If only I had not stayed on in Jaffna, Vijay rebuked himself silently, but aloud he said, 'I am glad you were here to see her go; you were like a son to her.'

'Yes, with you not being here also, I felt . . .' Lal broke off, 'but she really didn't mind it, you know. She had seen you before you left for Jaffna, she said, and that was enough for her.'

'She probably thought I had gone to join the Boys and would never come back,' Vijay laughed ruefully.

'No, I don't think so, because her last instructions were that I look after you, not after the old man, but you. For some reason she was not bothered about him.'

'How has he been taking it?'

'Who? The old man? Well, you've seen him. He looks his usual tough self, wouldn't you say?'

Vijay was not sure. That was how his grandfather always appeared on the surface. If his grandmother was around, Vijay would not worry. But now that she was gone . . .

'She was his strength, you mean?' suggested Lal.

'No, she was his reason.'

'Hmm.'

Just then a slim, graceful young woman, dressed in a faded cotton sari, came up to Lal with a cup of tea.

'I am sorry it took so long, doctor,' she addressed Lal in Sinhalese with the trace of a Tamil accent. 'Hello Vijay.'

'Kamala? My God, how grown up you are.'

'And you are not looking too bad yourself,' Kamala rejoined with a cheeky smile. 'Marriage must suit you.'

'What is it? Two years, three? Since I last saw you?'

'I was not here when you —' Kamala began when her father called out to her that she was needed in the kitchen.

Vijay looked admiringly after her and, turning to his uncle, said, 'I never thought she'd be so . . . so . . . I don't know what, she used to be such a tomboy.'

'Hmm,' was Lal's guarded response over his tea-cup.

'What's she been doing?'

'Looking after your grandparents, young man, while you were —'

'I know that, but what I mean is, is she married?'

'No, but you are, you randy bugger,' laughed Lal. He put his cup down and continued. 'That's one thing we don't have to worry about. Raman and Kamala will look after the old man. Kamala was doing most of the housework anyway, after her mother had that stroke. But you know about that.'

Vijay nodded. He had no fears on that score. Raman had always had a special affection for his grandfather. They had broken the back of the land together and broken their backs doing it. But with the old lady

gone, the old man would not know why he was hanging around, and his wife was not there to tell him.

'He is so damn pig-headed, Uncle Lal, that he could quite easily decide that it was time to go, and will himself to die, as a matter of course.'

'Yes, there is that,' Lal agreed.

'Grandmother probably knew that too, the rascal,' Vijay went on fondly. 'Did you see that smile on her face?'

Six months later his grandfather died. But this time Vijay was at hand. The old man had summoned him for a *Poya* weekend in August, taken him to temple and treated him to a drink or two from a bottle of Mendis Special. Later that evening, they had sat on the steps of the star-lit verandah and listened to the night. After a while the old man had risen and, patting Vijay on the head, had gone to bed. In the morning he was dead. His wife's picture lay beside him on the pillow.

Manel was not at that funeral either. She was busy moving house.

Vijay had been hurt and angry when Manel had not turned up at his grandmother's funeral. But her death was sudden and Manel, as the new head of the lower school, had an appointment with the Deputy Minister that she had to keep. This time, though, there was no excuse. The house-moving could have waited.

'Why couldn't it wait?' he asked for the third time, wanting an answer that would reconcile her to him again. 'For God's sake, why couldn't it wait?'

'It couldn't, that's why,' Manel replied coldly. She was getting tired of being asked the same question over and over again. 'I told you.' She would try once more. 'The contract was . . .'

'Contract, contract,' Vijay banged the table in front of him. 'Is that all you can think about?'

'Otherwise we would have lost the house.' Her voice rose, but she held back her temper and explained again, deliberately, as to a child, why as head of the school she needed to move to a bigger house. 'It goes with the job.'

'Oh, to hell with the job,' shouted Vijay and stormed out of the house.

It was pitch dark outside, but Vijay walked unerringly towards the main road and Dhana's house. He had to talk to someone, to Damayanthi really. She knew Manel better than most. But half-way there he stopped. It was well past midnight, and to bring his quarrel to them at this hour would be to give it a size beyond proportion to Damayanthi's concern or Dhana's understanding. He traced his steps back home again, feeling there was no one to love any more. All the people he had loved had gone, and Manel gave him no occasion for loving.

A baby could have made all the difference, but it was not to be. Manel had not wanted to have a child too soon, eager though Vijay was. She wanted her headship first, and not all the arguments that Mrs Bandara and Damayanthi would advance on Vijay's behalf could shake her resolve. And it was only when Vijay began to absent himself more and more from home on political work that Manel, thinking she might lose him altogether, had agreed to have a baby. She had hated it at first, this thing that was growing in her and gave her morning sickness and puffed up her face – but, slowly, she had come to accept it and love it, and love the man who put it there and went along with her till her sickness was over, and she was herself again, only bigger and prouder.

And then, she miscarried. God knows why, she had been so careful. But she miscarried and could not bear the thought of being pregnant again, would not let the doctors poke around inside her again. She was getting too old to bear children, she said, and had put everything into her career. The headship, that was her baby. And, then, it was the house. Vijay could have a study, instead, and an office, in the new house, as befitted a future MP – for, it was to that end, she had decided, that his political interests should be directed.

Into that sanctum Vijay increasingly retreated, to study what Uncle Para had termed the broken history of his country. At the weekends, he went campaigning with Sarath for the rights of fisherfolk on the west coast or the small farmers in the South, and learnt that his country had not one but several histories. Between times, he kept up a faltering dialogue with Uncle Para and Yogi. At first, their letters had come at fairly regular intervals, but soon they were arriving sporadically, in bunches of three and four, with no dates on them, and no reference to Vijay's letters, and no indication as to the sequence of the events they spoke of. Everything was confused, jumbled up, back to front, as though time had taken a somersault. One moment Yogi was writing to say that Uncle Para had been seriously ill, the next Uncle Para's letter arrived excoriating Vijay and the government for burning down the Jaffna library. 'The barbarians are among us,' he railed. 'Having failed to destroy our people, your army has now taken to destroying our history.' Both letters had reached Vijay towards the end of 1981, but the army had taken over Jaffna at the time of his grandfather's death. And was it not the police who had set fire to the library, anyway? So what on earth was Uncle Para talking about? And how was he now?

At that point all communication from Uncle Para had ceased and Vijay had given him up for dead when, almost a year, later Vijay received a cryptic note from the old man, hinting that Ravi was up to his old tricks again and Yogi had joined him. Vijay had found that hard to

believe. Yogi was much too serious to try short-cuts to revolution, as he had once put it in a letter. But that was when the army had moved into permanent occupation of Jaffna, and he along with the rest of Veeran's group had decided to 'fade into the people'. Since then, Yogi's notes and messages, coming from all over Jaffna, with no addresses on them and no postmark, smuggled in newspapers sometimes or in pamphlets, had become increasingly bitter and vengeful, heady with the excitement of killing. Vijay could not accept that, he could not believe that this was the same youngster, brimful of living, who had bounced in through the window to introduce himself to Vijay that night at Nadesan's barely two years ago. The lad must be playing at clandestinity, at guerrillismo. It was all so unreal. But then everything about Jaffna was becoming unreal, far away, insubstantial. Vijay felt removed.

As Jaffna began to recede from his conscience, Vijay began to settle down into a less uneasy relationship with Manel. And Manel, agog with her newfound ambition for her husband, was eager to encourage his weekend trips to Negombo and Chilaw to help Loku Simon and his fellows set up a fishermen's co-operative; there was, after all, a ready electoral constituency there. She even accompanied him on occasion, to give him image. Now that she was a school head, she had the time to give him a hand, or a push in the right direction, so that he would not fall foul of the government.

She drew the line, therefore, at going to Moneragala. The peasant farmers there were a rough lot and they were hotting up for a land war with the fruit companies. That much she had learnt from Vijay and, though he said nothing of his own involvement, it was enough to tell her that Vijay was once more being drawn into the murkier side of politics – and that would spell the end of the career she was so carefully fashioning for him.

'Do you think you should spread yourself so thin?' she asked Vijay when he had returned from Moneragala one day.

'How do you mean?'

'Running from place to place, instead of concentrating on one thing.'

'Ah, that. Yes, you may be right, but someone has to do the work,' Vijay replied casually, picking up a towel on his way to the bathroom.

'What's for dinner?' he shouted from under the shower.

'Wait and see,' Manel shouted back.

'Well, what is it?' Vijay came out of the bathroom, drying himself.

'Only if you kiss me.'

He pecked her on the cheek.

'*String-hoppers* and crab curry, cooked the Tamil way.'

'Crab?' Vijay was surprised. 'From where?'

'Loku Simon sent a whole lot through some friends of his yesterday.'

'How lovely,' Vijay went up to Manel and pushed her back on to the bed where she was seated and kissed her more tenderly.

'Ah, it's true what they say,' Manel laughed, 'the way to a man's heart—'

'Yes, yes, I know. Let's go and eat and I'll show you the way to a woman's—'

'Ah-hah, naughty,' Manel chided him.

Vijay was surprised that the crabs had so much flesh on them at this time of the month when the moon was up. But Manel pooh-poohed the whole idea as an old wives' tale.

'Fishwives' tales?' joked Vijay.

'Fish-tail?' Manel improved on it.

They laughed at their silliness.

'Superbly cooked, I must say,' observed Vijay, working through his fourth crab-belly. 'The *murunga* leaves make all the difference.'

'And you thought I couldn't do a Tamil curry, ha?'

'You are sure the servant girl didn't help you?' teased Vijay.

'Who? Menika? I've got to teach her everything.'

They finished their dinner and took their coffee out to the verandah. It was still very hot inside.

'How was your trip?' inquired Manel.

'Where do these wicker chairs come from?' asked Vijay settling himself in one and setting down his cup on the table. 'And this table?'

'Oh, I got them cheap,' Manel dismissed the question. 'At that Cane Shop they've just opened.'

'Hmm.'

'So, how was your trip?'

Vijay muttered a reply.

'What's Punchirala up to then?' Manel tried another tack.

Vijay said nothing for a while and then he chuckled.

'Punchirala,' he said. 'Now there's a character for you.'

'Why, what's he like?' Manel was a good listener when she had the time. 'Is he anything like Loku?'

'Oh no, he is an entirely different kettle of fish,' laughed Vijay and went on to describe the two men to Manel. 'Loku' (big) did not refer, as Manel had thought, to Simon's size, but to his ability to command respect, and was a corruption of the word *lokka*, chief. Punchirala was a much older man, in his sixties, now, small and wizened and wise—slow where Loku was quick, measured where Loku was volatile. He would

sit on his haunches in the middle of his field, with the sun burning down on him, sifting the earth absently between his fingers, before he came to a decision. And the others would sit around him, making an occasional contribution to his thinking, but waiting on his counsel – which, when it came, would, they knew, have considered every point of view before coalescing into a plan of action. That action now, and for some three years past, had mostly to do with fighting off Pine-Co from turning their rice fields into pineapple plantations and them from farmers to labourers.

‘He has got things in hand, then,’ observed Manel.

‘Yes, he pretty well has. I am there only as a sort of translator, publicity officer, that sort of thing, to let the world know what is going on.’

‘But you have already had a fight with that company man?’

‘That’s nothing.’

Manel knew better than to argue the point when Vijay was so full of admiration for the farmers. She maintained, instead, that it was too tiring for Vijay to travel from one end of the country to the other every other weekend.

‘Why not send Sarath to Moneragala?’ she suggested.

‘No, he has too much on.’

‘Or that other chap, Sunil, he’s out of a job, isn’t he?’

‘H’m, that’s not a bad idea. He is closer, too, lives in Badulla. And the new year will be a good time to start. I’ll see what Dhana and the others say.’

He rolled the idea over in his mind for a while. ‘At least he can take some of the load off me,’ he agreed.

‘And you have been falling behind in your school-work.’

‘Christ, I just remembered, I got all those papers to correct. I’d better set the alarm. Too tired now.’ He got up and stretched himself. He had not lost that feline grace of his, thought Manel, wanting to stroke him.

Vijay yawned. ‘It’s bed for me,’ he said, dragging his wife from the chair.

13

RAL SAW THE LAST PATIENT OFF and locked up the surgery. He was more tired than usual, but there was still the paperwork to do. Ruben, his assistant, had left early and he couldn’t trust Nurse with the filing.

He flung himself into an armchair; he couldn’t go on like this. Perhaps

he should accept the offer from Colombo Nursing Homes. He went up wearily to his desk and rifled through his papers for the letter. It had come over a fortnight ago and he had still not replied to it. He read the letter through; there was still time.

There was a knock on the door. Lal ignored it and, placing the letter under a paper-weight, got up to put his patients' cards away in the filing cabinet. The knocking became more insistent.

'We are closed,' Lal called out.

The knocking turned to a banging. Lal cursed under his breath and went to the door, but did not open it.

'What is it?' he asked.

There was no answer, the banging continued.

'What do you want?'

Still no answer, the banging got more desperate. Lal opened the door and, in the half-light, saw the figure of a man bent double in pain.

'Oh, all right, come on in,' Lal capitulated and, shutting the door after him, led the man to his room. 'Sit down and tell me what's the matter.' He shut the filing cabinet behind his desk and turned round to see the man pulling out a long murderous looking knife from the folds of his sarong.

Lal jumped back in alarm.

'You killed my daughter,' the man said coldly, 'and I have come to kill you.'

'Who are you? Who's your daughter?' Lal took a hold on himself and tried to appear calm and professional.

'Who am I? Who is my daughter?' The man came round the desk, his eyes mad with grief and fear, poking the knife at Lal. Lal retreated along the length of the table, grateful that it was big enough to keep the man at bay.

'Karuna, that's who she was. Karunawathi.' There was a sob in his throat. 'The light of my life, and you put it out.'

'But I didn't treat—'

'Of course you didn't,' shouted the man, stabbing his knife into the desk. Lal thought of making a grab for it from the other end of the table, the man was older than him and frailer, but realized it was beyond his reach. 'That's the whole point, isn't it? You refused to come because you were attending to some coolie Tamil who'd been shot on Dancing Estate.'

'Ah, that time.' Lal remembered now. 'But I couldn't. How could I? The boy was dying—'

'You could, you could, you could.' The man picked up the knife and started stabbing it into the desk over and over again. 'Because we are

your people, we are your blood, we are . . .' He stopped and, brandishing the knife, he came towards Lal again.

'But you are a coolie-lover aren't you? What do they give you, their daughters?' The man's eyes were blazing with hate.

'What about all the other doctors?' shouted Lal. 'Why me?'

'There's no need to shout, I am not deaf, you know. Of course there are other doctors, three in fact – and I have the money to pay them all, lowly storekeeper though I am. But they are nowhere near you, are they? Not half as good are they? Are they?' His voice rose to a crescendo of anger and, sweeping aside everything on the table, he leapt on to it and flung himself at Lal.

Lal moved aside just in time and, before the man could regain his balance, brought his filing cabinet crashing down between them. Frustrated in his attempts to reach Lal, the man began to throw things at him and, stunning him with a glancing blow from a paper-weight, leapt at Lal's throat. Lal lost consciousness.

When he came to, the man had gone.

Lal bathed the gash on his temple and sat down at his desk holding his throbbing head in his hands – and there before him, like an omen, was the letter from Colombo Nursing Homes. Everything else had been swept off the desk in the scuffle, but the letter remained.

Should he take the job? It would be a much easier life. He wouldn't have to go through all this again and, he smiled wryly, he wouldn't have to do his own filing. Ruben would miss him, probably wouldn't get another job, he was so inefficient and obliging and loyal.

The pay was considerable, too, not that that mattered. Both his children were grown up and married, his wife had her own income, his parents and sister were dead, there was only his nephew, Vijay – and he didn't need money. And as for him, he should learn to subtract from his wants, as his mother used to say, not add to his needs.

It would be nice to be near his grandchildren, though, and his children even, though they didn't approve of him. He could take up his interest in astronomy again, and the cinema. Colombo provided the opportunity, and the routine work at the Nursing Home would give him the time. He would be on call only one night a week and have every other weekend off. The work itself would be less demanding and he wouldn't have to get involved in his patients' lives; they would be rich and reasonable.

'But I hate private medicine,' he shouted and jumped up from his chair. 'I've fought it all my life. What am I doing . . . ?' He sat down again and felt his wound; he had to get away from Hatton.

He got up to tidy the room, but his head began throbbing, and he decided to go home, leaving a note for Ruben so as not to alarm him.

But, early next morning, Ruben turned up at Lal's house. The note had only alarmed him more.

'Are you all right, doctor?' he burst out even before Lal could get the door open. 'Are you? What's the plaster on your head?'

'Don't fuss Ruben. Sit down and I'll get Edwin to make you a cup of tea.'

'No, no, I must go back and clean up. Just tell me what happened.'

When Lal had finished his story, Ruben hopped from one foot to another in anger. He was a tall, thin stick of a man, and his gyrations brought a smile to Lal's face.

'I know that man, doctor, and I'll get him for this, you wait and see,' he shrieked and, picking up his umbrella, left as precipitately as he had come.

When Lal got to the surgery later that morning, he found the elderly lady next door and her daughter helping Ruben to get some order back into the office.

'Oh doctor, we heard what happened,' said the mother, 'and I am sorry we were not at home. My husband had to go to Colombo and we went with him. Otherwise . . . Oh is that where he knifed you?'

'No, no, he didn't knife me. That's—'

'We know all about that man, but it's not him, doctor. It's that new Police Inspector fellow, he is Minister Sithu's man and he has instructions to harass anyone who—'

'Mother, you'll get us into trouble,' her daughter intervened.

'It's the doctor I am telling to, child. You won't tell anybody will you, doctor?'

Lal assured her that he wouldn't (whatever it was she was trying to tell him). But, fearing that she had already said too much, the woman gathered up her daughter and left.

'Your tea is getting cold,' Ruben called out to him from the kitchen, 'and I can see Nurse coming, and some other people.'

'What? So early?' The surgery did not open for another hour and Nurse herself was not due till ten.

'She must have heard.'

'Hmm, I'd better tidy up my desk before she comes,' said Lal picking up his cup of tea.

'It's all done.'

'Not the way I want it, Ruben. I know you.'

'Go and see.'

Ruben followed Lal into the room and waited till the doctor sat at his desk, which had been cleared of everything except the letter from the Nursing Home.

'Are you going?' asked Ruben.

Before Lal could answer, Nurse burst in. She was a big, brash, business-like woman and had been with Lal from the time he opened his practice.

'You all right, doc?' she inquired.

Lal nodded.

'Then let's get on with it. The patients are already here.'

Opening hours meant nothing to Nurse, the patient came first.

'How many?' He got up and looked through the crack in the door.

There was Muni Amma and her brood to start with, and a whole lot of people come to be vaccinated; he had managed to convince them at last.

He went back to his desk. Ruben was waiting for an answer.

'No, Ruben, I am not going.'

'Good,' bellowed Nurse drowning Ruben's response. 'Now that we've got all that nonsense over with, let's get on with the work.'

Lal would have forgotten the incident before long – he was not one to dwell on the seamier side of things – but the remarks of the lady next door lingered like some dark foreboding in the corners of his mind. The more he tried to dismiss them as the loose talk of an elderly gossip, the more they alerted him to people and events around him. And slowly he found himself becoming aware of some terrible change that had come over his town and its people. They were not carefree, friendly, neighbourly, quick to anger and quick to forget, any more. They were circumspect, closed in, un-trusting of each other, as though they were caught up in some giant conspiracy of which they knew nothing, except that they were conspirators. All that united them, made them into a community again, seemed to be a common hatred of 'the Indians'.

Lal could not understand how it had all happened and why he had been so blind to it. Even his colleagues were no longer ashamed of their prejudices, they vaunted them. They even believed their own propaganda that the coolies were an Indian fifth column, an enemy in their midst, and, forgetting their Hippocratic oath, treated them not as patients but as prisoners of war, or treated them not at all.

Among ordinary people the belief had bred fear, and fear had bred violence. And the violence, Lal discovered to his horror, was indeed being sponsored by the police, on instructions from 'higher up'.

Lal was overcome by the foetid smell of a society in decay. He wished now that he had accepted the job with the Nursing Home. But what good would that have done? Colombo, from where it all emanated, could only smell more strongly of the stench. The malaise had gone deep into society and corrupted its every living organism till only violence survived.

And any lingering illusions Lal might have had were completely dispelled when Sanji turned up at his home one night a few months later.

Lal was about to go to bed when he heard someone at the door and sent the cook round the rear of the house to see who it was. But before Edwin could report back, Lal heard his name being called in a familiar voice.

'Dr Lal, Dr Lal, it's me . . .' Lal couldn't make out the name or quite place the voice.

'Doctor, it's me, Sanji – and Meena.'

Lal heard him this time and quickly went to the door and opened it.

'I am sorry I didn't . . . My God, what's happened to you? You look terrible. Come in, come in.'

Meena stumbled into the sitting room and Lal helped her on to the sofa. She was running a high temperature, he noticed, and her clothes were wet and dirty, her hair bedraggled under the scarf. Sanji looked no better, but worn-out rather than ill.

'Six days we've been travelling doctor,' Sanji explained, 'through jungles, in trucks –'

'Never mind that now,' interrupted Lal. 'The first thing is to get a hot drink into you and get you out of those clothes.' He went up to Meena. 'There are some of my daughter's dresses in the *almirah* and they should fit you.'

Meena muttered her thanks and asked whether she could have a bath first.

'No bath,' replied Lal, putting a thermometer in her mouth. 'You've got fever. Not today, Meena. Just wash and go to bed.'

Edwin brought two glasses of brandy. Sanji drank his at a gulp, Meena waved hers aside.

'No, you must drink it,' Lal insisted. 'It's good for you.' He had just put the stethoscope to her chest and did not like the sound of her breathing. He went up to Sanji and whispered that Meena had probably got a touch of pneumonia and would have to be entered into hospital the following day. Sanji should eat something and go to bed. Edwin would fetch him a sarong. He'd see to Meena. They could talk in the morning.

But in the morning, Meena was worse and it took all of Lal's ingenuity and charm, and most of the day, to have her admitted into hospital – as his niece. Sanji insisted on sleeping on the floor beside his daughter's bed, but Lal told him that Meena had been registered under a Sinhalese name and his presence there would only give the show away. Even his visits should be infrequent and be made, if at all, in Lal's company when nobody would question him. In fact, it might be a good idea for Sanji

to stick close to the house (Edwin was the soul of discretion) and not be seen in public too much.

'Anything you say, doctor,' Sanji submitted meekly, as Lal dropped him off at the house before going to work.

'Get some rest,' rejoined Lal. 'I'll see you in the evening.'

Lal was late returning home and Sanji was in a state of anxiety again. But when the doctor told him that he had been to see Meena and that she was responding so well to treatment that she should be up and about in no time at all, Sanji broke down and cried.

'Thank God, I got her to you in time, doctor,' he said. 'You are the only man I trust. In this whole world, you are the only man . . .' He slumped into a chair, a great sigh breaking from his chest, and then he went silent. Lal could not get a word out of him, thereafter, and not all his medical skills could evoke a response. He did not want to take the risk of calling in another doctor, but he needed to know what had happened to Sanji to bring him to this pass. He did not want to tax Meena with his questions, but how else could he break through to Sanji? In desperation, he sent for Vijay; there was a chance that Sanji might respond to him, one way or another.

Vijay arrived late on the Friday evening and was picked up at the bus station by Lal on his way home. Sanji opened the door to them and, as usual, took the doctor's bag from him and placed it neatly in his study. He then came back and sat in his favourite chair, staring in front of him.

'Here's Vijay come to see you,' said Lal.

'Hello, Sanji,' Vijay went up to him and took his hand. 'Remember me?'

Sanji looked at him blankly and then broke into a bleak smile of returning recognition, but lapsed quickly into his blank-faced silence again. And not all Vijay's attempts to revive the conversation could bring Sanji back. He clearly knew what was being said, but some great barrier seemed to keep him from taking it in. Lal was at his wits' end. Every medical gambit he had tried had failed, and he had been hoping that confronting Sanji with Vijay might shake Sanji back to his senses. But that had not worked either.

There was little conversation at breakfast the next morning. Sanji had already taken his meal in the kitchen and was staring starkly out of the dining room window. Lal was about to leave for work a little earlier than usual, Saturday being a half-day, when Vijay inquired about visiting Meena in hospital.

'Yes, why not? She has been asking after you, and the nurses would be less suspicious if she had a proper visitor. Remember, you are

cousins,' he warned, smilingly. But Vijay's thoughts were elsewhere.

'You think she has forgotten?' he asked.

'What, the Sellamma episode? Yes, I would —'

A groan broke out from Sanji. 'Sellamma,' he muttered in a hoarse whisper and, turning back from the window, he came up to Vijay.

'Sellamma, my sister, you remember her?' He put his hands on Vijay's shoulders, tears of his gratitude in his eyes. 'And Perumal her husband?'

Vijay nodded unhappily. 'Dead. All dead,' said Sanji quietly.

'Dead, dead, dead,' he sobbed, beating his head with his hands.

Vijay sprang from his chair to stop him, but Lal held him back with a gesture.

Gradually the sobbing ceased and Sanji, wiping the tears off his face, came and sat at the table. 'Can I have a cup of tea, please?' he asked and, as Vijay poured it out, he began to tell his tale.

'She died in childbirth, my sister, giving birth to her Sinhalese son. He was a lovely boy, but I don't think she wanted to live. She pushed him out with her last breath — just like that, let out both she did, her dying breath and her living son.

'Oh God, the cry she gave, I was there. Meena, Meena ran out and my brother-in-law, my poor, poor . . . such a great trade unionist he was . . . he, he . . .' Sanji became incoherent at that point and babbled on in a mixture of Tamil and English that neither Lal nor Vijay could understand.

He took a sip of tea and controlled himself. 'He was a lovely boy,' he repeated. 'Anandalal, we named him, after you, doctor. A lovely boy, cheerful, no trouble to anyone. Everybody in Shantiyam loved him.'

But how did they get to Shantiyam, inquired Lal: he knew the doctor who had set up the refugee camp, they had been in medical school together. 'The camp came later. There was nothing when we got there — no water, no food, no shelter, nothing. Just us, a score or two of refugees from the tea plantations, on that barren stretch of land. How we got there I don't know. But after the riots last year that is where we found ourselves, in a sort of no-man's-land between the Tamils and the Sinhalese.' He smiled wryly. 'I suppose that is what we coolies are, neither one nor the other.'

At least they would be safe there, Sanji had thought and, with his fellow refugees, had begun to make a life for themselves, in makeshift tents and cardboard shelters on waste land, without water for miles, living off what little they could grow on the ungiving ground or fetch from the jungles some ten miles away.

Who would want that? Sanji paused in his tale in bewilderment.

Who would want that? He challenged Lal to give him a rational answer. Who could want what they had? What was there in that wilderness to take? Shouldn't they have been safe there? Eh? Shouldn't they?

His eyes looked wild; the veins in his neck stood out green against his black skin. Vijay poured him another cup of tea.

And then they came, continued Sanji, the thugs, just when they were beginning to create a proper camp, Shantiyam, a camp of peace, with the help of a passing doctor, a Samaritan you might say who, passing, stayed. Sanji dredged out the last bits of his Christian schooling in a fever of eloquence. And they came and they came, in police uniform and army uniform and in the long flowing saffron robes of peace, and burnt them down and beat them down and took away Dr Raja, their friend, their hope, God knows where.

'That's what happened to your friend, doctor, that's what happened to that good man.'

How he and Meena had managed to escape was a miracle. They had stumbled, beaten and bloody, into the jungle and had wandered through it for days, before coming upon a Muslim village. The people there had given them food and clothing and a little money to help them on their way.

That is when their troubles really began. Because there were Sinhalese thugs still roaming the roads, stopping buses and cars and trains looking for Tamils to kill. But Meena, ill as she was, had played the aristocratic Sinhala school-teacher from Galle and he, Sanji, her old Muslim servant, and they had got by. Once they had got into the tea-country, however, they were too frightened to travel in the open and had hidden away in a dark vegetable truck bringing vegetables to Hatton.

'What happened to the baby?' The question was out of Vijay's mouth before he could take it back, but Sanji appeared to take it in his stride.

'They killed him, didn't they,' he began calmly, 'the sons of whores, they killed him.' His eyes glazed over. 'I wasn't there, I told you . . . or did I . . . Meena and I had . . . if only . . . ' He was becoming incoherent again.

'Perumal hid him . . . in a basket . . . tried to fight them off . . . and they hacked him to death . . . and they took the little fellow, another child saw it all . . . they took . . . he was smiling and gurgling . . . and they picked him up by . . . by . . . *aiyo, amma* . . . ' and between sobs he went on compulsively, 'by his legs and smashed him against the wall. Oh Ganesha,' and he started crying softly.

Vijay was apprehensive about going to see Meena on his own. He was not sure how she would react. It was over what happened to her aunt that she had broken with him in the first place, and now with Sell-

amma's death fresh in her mind . . . and after what she herself had been through . . . She was bound to identify him with 'them' . . . Why would she have asked after him, then? Perhaps she remembered some of the good things that had passed between them, their passionate friendship even, the beginnings of love.

He approached her bed hesitantly, though the ward was empty of visitors, and stammered out a tentative 'hello'. But Meena, half-sedated, stretched out a hand to him and smiled – and went back to sleep.

When Vijay visited her the following day, Meena was wide awake. She greeted him warmly, but spoke to him as she spoke to Lal, as to a respected friend, an older member of the family, warm without being intimate.

The next day was Vijay's last. Meena was sorry he had to leave so soon, but he shouldn't jeopardize his job . . . Yes, she knew about his other activities. Lal had told her . . . she would have known it of him anyway . . . no, no, he should go . . . they would meet again soon enough . . . where could she and her father go? . . . they were plantation Tamils, they belonged here . . . Besides, she added mischievously, his wife would be waiting for him.

Vijay got up to leave, but sat down again. He couldn't just go like that.

'Please Vijay.' Her eyes misted over. 'There is nothing here for us.' Her sadness overwhelmed him. He sank back into his chair and laid his head upon her bed.

'Sit up, Vijay, people are watching us,' she admonished him.

He straightened up without a word and looked at her, closely, for the first time. He had been afraid to before, remembering only the strength of her personality. There was a serenity now that tempered it and made her even more attractive. Her face was still drawn from the fever, but it had lost its fat and become finer and darker, making her eyes stand out like brilliants in the night. And the long hair, its tresses lying black on the pillow, framed her face eloquently. Vijay was lost.

'I can't go,' he said hoarsely and took her hand in his.

'You must.' She released her hand gently.

'Now? This moment? Oh, let me stay a while.'

'Only if you speak of anything else but us.'

Vijay nodded and reached out for her hand again.

'Just let me –'

'No.'

'All right, all right.' He put up his hands in surrender. 'You look so –'

'Ah-hah.'

“Much better”, I was going to say.’ They laughed, and fell into a comfortable silence.

‘So Uncle Lal told you what I was up to,’ Vijay said after a while.

‘Hmm.’

‘But you said you would have known anyway.’

Meena nodded.

‘After all this time? After all that has happened?’

Meena nodded again.

‘If you know me that well —’

‘No Vijay, please, I can’t bear it.’

‘Oh Meena.’

‘Go now, my dear.’

He left.

14

‘DID YOU HEAR THE RADIO?’ Sarath burst into Vijay’s classroom. ‘It looks as if we are going to have an election after all, it was on the 12 o’clock news.’

‘One minute Sarath,’ Vijay held up his hand and turned to dismiss the class. ‘OK, kids, you can leave your exercise books on my desk and go.’ He stepped down from the platform and came up to Sarath.

‘Yes, Dhana told me just a minute ago.’

‘You don’t look very enthusiastic,’ Sarath reproached him.

‘No, I can’t say that I am.’

‘Nor am I,’ said Dhana, coming in through the connecting door. ‘Let’s go and eat. I am famished.’ They took their sandwiches and went out into the school compound. It was a cool day and the benches were empty.

‘Why?’ asked Sarath. ‘Because it’s a presidential and not a parliamentary election?’ He looked from one to the other of his friends for a reply.

‘That too,’ Vijay answered him. ‘But why call an election at this time when he’s still got a year to run?’ he asked and went on to answer his own question. ‘Because he wants to crush the Tamils once and for all, and wants the Sinhalese to OK it.’

‘So, what? We’ll have to see that they don’t,’ answered Sarath defiantly.

‘On a straight vote on communal lines?’ exclaimed Vijay. ‘Not a chance. He’ll win like a shot.’

Sarath looked deflated. His politics came from the heart and it took him an effort to see evil. Once he saw it, he would fight it even more valiantly. But there was a moment between the feeling and the seeing when he was alone and lost.

'Can't you see what he has done, Sarath?' Dhana put his arm around Sarath's shoulder in an uncharacteristic display of affection and leant forward to look into his friend's face. 'Can't you?' He leant back on the bench. 'He has communalized the whole electorate, in four short years, and got himself a permanent majority. That's what he has done. So why wouldn't he have elections? Eh? Hell, he'd have elections every year, like Christmas, if he had the money.'

'He'll probably have them instead of Christmas,' mumbled Vijay, biting into his sandwich.

Sarath looked gravely at his friends in turn. 'So this referendum thing he's going to have, after he becomes President again, is to put his party back in parliament?' He paused, weighing up his thoughts. 'It's a yes or no thing, right? People don't vote for a person, they vote for a whole party, yes or no. Right?' Dhana and Vijay nodded agreement and Sarath's face grew dark with anger. 'But that's like saying if you elect me, you elect my party.'

'Right,' cried Dhana. '*L'état, c'est moi.*'

'What?'

'Never mind. It's some stupid French thing I picked up somewhere,' Dhana said self-deprecatingly. 'But you are absolutely right.'

'So what do we do? Fight the referendum or the election?' Sarath was the practical man again.

'Both, I would think,' replied Dhana, 'but the Working Committee will decide that next month.'

They finished their meal in silence, and Sarath, extracting a large thermos flask from his briefcase, poured out the hot tea into the cup and handed it in turn to his friends.

'It's asking for war, you know,' Vijay burst out suddenly. 'Civil war. Race war. Friends killing each other. Families split apart. Children murdered.' He shook his head in horror. 'It's the end of our country.'

'That bastard doesn't care.' Dhana was roused by Vijay's passion. 'All he wants is to win. And he is threatening to bring the SAS and the Mossad to help him.' He calmed down, muttering 'it's probably his version of the final solution'.

Sarath took the cup from Dhana, cleaned it with a piece of paper and screwed it back on the flask. 'The elections are a con,' he said decisively. 'Fighting him is a waste of time. I'm sure the Working Committee will agree.'

In the event, the Committee voted against Sarath's proposal and decided, instead, to fight the election on behalf of the rag-bag of protest groups describing itself as a Socialist Coalition – partly because they did not know what else to do, and partly because they had done it before. Sarath conceded the point, and Vijay and Dhana, though sceptical, went along with the decision in the hope that the election campaign would provide the momentum for the campaign against the referendum. But when the election was fought and lost, and the Committee met again, Dhana returned to his theme of throwing all their efforts into a mass campaign to defeat the government on the referendum.

'This is our last chance,' he declared. 'If we don't win this one, we are finished.' He got up from behind his desk and came round; they were meeting in his classroom after school that day, like any evening class. 'We know the election was fixed because the electorate was fixed, and the issue was quite simply: should the Sinhalese majority give in to the demands of the Tamil minority for self-determination? But the referendum is not about Tamil rights. It's about Sinhala rights as well, even the right to vote for a person of your choice. The nature of the vote itself has changed.'

'Why should that be?' asked Sunil from the Southern Farmers Collective. 'It's still one person, one vote?'

'Yes, it's still one person, one vote, all right,' replied Dhana, 'but you vote not for a person but for a whole party, for a whole bloc of candidates.'

'Who are chosen – no, nominated – by the President himself,' piped up Mahal, who worked with the women in the Free Trade Zone. 'In his capacity as leader of the party of course.'

'Boy,' exclaimed Ibrahim, Secretary of the Muslim Workers Association. 'That guy knows how to play around with democracy, doesn't he?'

'Oh yes,' Dhana agreed. 'He has got it all worked out. He has only to win this one, and he would have completed his plans for an elected dictatorship.'

'After which, he does what he likes, but in the name of the people,' added Vijay.

'Well, let's tell them that, that's what we should do, tell them exactly that.' Sarath's suggestion seemed to meet with everybody's approval, but the problem was how to get the message across to people.

'Meetings are out, demonstrations are out,' Damayanthi began to list the avenues closed to them, 'our printers won't touch us –'

'We'll have to do it the hard way,' interrupted Vijay, 'going from house to house and village to village and talking to people.'

'We've still got the cyclostyle . . .' Damayanthi went on enumerating. But Vijay was not so sanguine.

'It will still be all leg-work, Damayanthi,' he said. 'There are no short cuts, I'm afraid.'

The others nodded agreement; they rarely questioned Vijay on organizational matters. Dhana might still have the edge on him in sizing up a situation, but what little impact they had made in the presidential election was due entirely to the success of 'Vijay's network'.

'How about our cadres in the provinces, Vijay?' Sarath liked the word 'cadres', it gave weight to their activities.

'They agree with Damayanthi. Old-style organizing won't work, party politics is finished and the government has got the unions sewn up. But we have helped people over local issues, and they will listen to us.'

'OK,' conceded Damayanthi, 'but what is it we say to them?'

'Yes, and how do we say it, directly and simply?' Dhana wanted to know. 'In three languages? And how do we get around? We don't have enough people to go around and explain. We'll need leaflets; all right, cyclostyles. And soon.' There was no mistaking the sense of urgency in his voice.

'We'll tell them that the referendum is not a substitute for an election,' ventured Mahal.

'They know that,' Damayanthi stopped her curtly.

'I haven't finished . . . and that the referendum will disenfranchise them, God knows for how long.'

'In that language?' Damayanthi was scornful. Mahal was a bit of a party hack.

'No, that won't do,' agreed Dhana. 'We've got to put it more simply.'

'What the referendum is asking you to do,' Vijay tried out a form of words, 'is to give up your right to choose your representative, your MP, something like that . . . to the President?' Vijay looked inquiringly at the others.

'Yes, go on,' they answered impatiently.

'That person will be responsible to him, not to you.' He paused, turning the thought over.

'You will have put all your power in the hands of one man.' Vijay weighed up the words. 'You will have voted away your right to vote' (Mahal beamed – that's what she had meant to say all along) 'and have nothing left to protect yourself with.'

'That's it,' roared Sarath. 'That's it, put it down on the blackboard.'

'Yes, we can work on that,' was Dhana's more considered response, and the others went along with him.

'How's your Tamil, Vijay?'

'Better than your Sinhala,' laughed Vijay. 'Don't worry, I'll get Mahal here to work on it.'

They were clear in their own minds now as to what needed to be done. The plan of action itself would have to be worked out on the following day when the delegates from the provinces met. They all knew the danger of working in the open, but accepted that there was no help for it.

Two weeks later, Vijay was arrested in a fishing village off Negombo, with Loku Simon and the fishermen, during a demonstration against government contracts to foreign trawlermen. But he was treated lightly, as an 'outside agitator' and sent back to Kurunegala on Mrs Bandara's guarantee of good behaviour.

'It's a wonder you were not done for incitement or conspiracy or something like that,' Dhana remarked with relief, picking up Vijay at the bus station. 'That would have messed us up completely.'

'Maybe they are just giving us enough rope?' suggested Damayanthi.

'No, I think it's just plain, good old-fashioned inefficiency,' disagreed Vijay. 'The police just saw me as a troublesome outsider and wanted me off their patch, that was all. God help us when they begin to make the connections.'

But Vijay was not so lucky with his vice-principal, who had him on the mat the following Monday, and promptly docked his pay for being absent without leave. Mrs Bandara could do nothing about that. On Friday he was summoned again to Mr Alwis's office and, with Mrs Bandara looking shamefacedly on, was suspended from work, pending a full inquiry into his 'extra-mural' activities. After which, of course, said Mr Alwis, the file would have to be 'made available to the proper authorities'. Mr Alwis, clearly, had had no difficulty in making the connections.

'Don't get into any more trouble,' admonished Manel. 'I'll speak to Yaso and get her husband to call off the inquiry. Why don't you get Uncle Lal to speak to the Minister too?'

'No thank you,' replied Vijay drily. 'This is my problem and I'll handle it my way.'

'It's your problem all right,' Manel came back at him angrily, 'but I am the one who pays for it. Just lie low for a while, will you?'

But, with the referendum now only a few weeks away, Vijay threw himself even more vigorously into the campaign. There was even a chance that the vote could be swung their way. The message appeared to have got through to people that the whole thing was phoney. What

was not apparent at the time, though, was that people had lost faith in the vote itself, it did not work for them any more, they could not make it work for them. On polling day they stayed at home.

Vijay was arrested on his way home that evening. He had just returned the battered old van in which he had been ferrying voters to the polling booths in the neighbouring village, and was walking home when he was stopped by two men. It did not surprise him. The election had gone off too quietly for that, there were no government goondas about and he himself had gone around unmolested and unwatched. But what he had not anticipated was being stopped on a lonely road, at dusk, by plain-clothes policemen, and bundled into a car and carried off to Colombo. It was like something out of a gangster movie. Even the two men who had arrested him, apparently officers from the CID, looked like Edward G and Peter Lorre – and of course they were tight-lipped. They would answer none of Vijay's questions except to say that he was being taken to Colombo for questioning. Vijay was not even sure that they were lawmen; since outright violence was the style of the government, not this subtle gangsterism. It was only when he was ascending the steps to the notorious fourth floor of the Central CID that Vijay began to realize that he was in serious trouble.

The interrogation room was long and bleak and empty of furniture except for a stout mahogany table with a large mahogany chair at its head and a stool at the further end. The two men who had brought him sat him on the stool and left him, still without a word. He called out after them for a glass of water, but they chose not to hear.

Vijay slumped forward on the stool waiting for someone to come through the door, but no one came. He got up and walked to the one window in the room, but it was barred and covered with gunny sack and he could not see out. He took the papers he had in his pocket and tried to read them, but the light from the yellowed bulb set high on the ceiling of that vast room was too dim to read by. He walked around the room for a while, trying to keep his spirits up, but he was sick with hunger and tiredness. He lay down on the floor and slept, only to be woken every time he dozed off by the ringing of a bell just outside his door. He went up to the door and listened, but heard nothing. He came back and lay on the floor under the table, plugging his ears with pieces of paper moistened with spit, and fell asleep between bells.

In the morning, the two men came back and jerked him up, all bleary eyed and groggy with broken sleep, from off the floor and on to the stool, and stood on either side of him without a word. Five minutes later another man walked in and stood menacingly over Vijay. He was huge, enormous, well over six foot tall and almost as broad, or so it seemed

to Vijay from where he was sitting, built like a tank. Only his face, set beneath a completely shaven head and lit up by small piercing eyes, was flabby and bejeweled and sinful. He was fair-skinned, almost white, and wore a white suit, a Burgher perhaps thought Vijay inconsequentially. Hadn't he seen him somewhere before? In the papers? The man moved away and fitted himself into the big mahogany chair – yes, of course it was his chair, meant for him, meant to fit his stature not his station . . . maybe he was a station-master . . . Vijay could play trains . . . he was getting light-headed, he must eat something . . . soon . . . he'll ask the man.

'Shall we interrogate him now, sir?' he heard someone ask.

'No, no, that won't be necessary.' The man's voice rasped and grated as though with a cough that couldn't quite come out. 'I've seen the papers.'

Vijay began to nod off. He was sure he had seen the man somewhere. We know all about you, the man was saying, and your conspiracy against the government. Your vice-principal has been very co-operative . . . your connection with the Boys . . . and your PLF . . .

'Look at me when I speak to you,' the man grated out and his henchmen jerked Vijay's head up with considerable force.

'No, no, don't harm him. We must do this legally. He has connections.' He chuckled and paused and chuckled again, his chins jollying each other along with each chuckle. Vijay knew that chuckle, he had heard it before, he was sure he had, the man chuckled again, of course he had, it was Sidney Greenstreet, that's who it was, Sidney Greenstreet from *The Maltese Falcon*. Vijay should have known it, known that laugh anywhere, the man had been a tea-planter in Ceylon once and had picked it up from beating the coolies.

'Take him away and put him in Welikade. Let them deal with him.'

Vijay tried to protest that he wanted to see a solicitor, phone his wife, a friend then, they had no right to put him in jail, anyway, not without a trial . . . The man chuckled.

'Give him some bread and water before you take him,' he instructed the men and left.

Later that evening the men came back to take Vijay to Welikade jail and hand him over to the warden there. By now, Vijay had begun to realize that he was being treated as a terrorist and would have no recourse to friends or lawyers. The warden looked a kindly man, with a round moon-like face and a round moon-like body, and Vijay tried to start up a conversation with him. But moon-face merely beamed at him and handed him over to a guard who took him down past the noise and clatter of crowded prison cells, down a maze of empty corridors to a solitary

cell in an uninhabited part of the prison. And suddenly Vijay began to be afraid. They were not just going to shut him up, they were going to shut out the world from him, shut him away from other prisoners. He would have access to no one, no one would have access to him, no one would know where he was, he was being made anonymous. Terror mounted in him and broke into a scream. But the scream clove drily to the roof of his mouth. He slid hopelessly to the floor.

In the unending days that followed, Vijay saw no one but his silent jailer, at meal times and slopping out. The food was inedible – rice, mostly uncooked, and a dry *mallung* or a coconut *sambol* that had gone off, and occasionally a piece of fish, iced and tasteless. The room, small and narrow and windowless but for a grille, smelt eternally of his shit. What once he had considered his staple diet was now a staple punishment, what was once a joyful evacuation was a burden he would rather carry. Once a day, his guard took him to an enclosed yard and walked him for half an hour like a dog. He asked for reading material, but got none, he wanted to know what they were going to do to him, but got no answer.

The old sensation of being written out returned more strongly, only now, the fear was gone, only recognition of the fear remained. He tried to think, just for the sake of thinking, tell himself stories, recall the world, but slowly he found his mind turning blank, his memory would not work for him, he was losing his touch with familiarity, the familiar things were not there for him to touch, they had been removed from him: people, time, books, laughter. He could not even feel his isolation any more, just a blankness where he used to be . . . this was how you went mad, he thought with a last thought . . . this was how they disappeared you . . . from yourself and the world. He was not being punished, he was being made absent.

And then, one day as he was sitting on his mat scratching his sores and staring at the wall, trying to make yet another picture of the smudges and scratches and cracks there, his guard came noisily in and led him back down the empty corridor to a cell full of prisoners. The change at first was frightening. The sunlight pouring in through the window tore at his eyes, the babble of incessant chatter reverberated in his skull. Someone took him by the hand and led him to a mat and laid him down. He slept.

He did not wake till the following morning, and then only slowly, vaguely conscious that he was in new surroundings, with other people, with familiar noises. He found a piece of bread under his pillow and, nibbling at it, fell asleep again. He dreamt of his mother, the same horrible dream he had dreamt so many times before: she was falling off the cliff

and he could not hold on to her, only this time his father stood below to break her fall.

Someone was shaking him.

'It will be meal time soon, we've got to go to the mess hall. You must eat something.' The man kept repeating the words over and over again till Vijay was fully awake. He was still not sure where he was, but he vaguely recalled the man.

'I've seen you somewhere...' he began slowly. The man smiled. He was old and dirty with long matted locks.

'I put you on the mat,' he said, chewing on betel leaves and arecanut.

'Mat?'

'Yes, yesterday, when they brought you from the other place.'

'Yesterday?' Memory tore at him like a wound. He looked around and saw the other prisoners and remembered, as from a dream, their staring eyes as he was brought in.

'Hmm, yesterday.' He put his hand under the pillow and came out with the piece of bread.

'You?' he asked.

The old man nodded and sat himself down on Vijay's mat. His name was 'Kattaya', he said, 'the shrewd one'. He could not remember his real name, he had lost it a long time ago. He used to be a thief once and had had a free and easy life, but he was old now and kept getting caught. So he retired and became a vagrant instead. He laughed and Vijay couldn't help smiling. Retired, that's a good one, Kattaya slapped his thigh and laughed uproariously, in short bursts, throwing his head back and opening and shutting his betel-stained mouth over broken, yellowing teeth with every outburst, and Vijay found himself laughing too.

The others there were much like him, Kattaya went on, all seventeen of them, thieves, vagrants, beggars, left-overs of the city (Kattaya looked to see whether Vijay was impressed) – harmless people most of them, except for that fellow over there, by the window, shoving everybody around, he was a pimp. But Vijay was clearly an educated man. What was he doing among them? Or had 'they' turned him into a discard too?

The question echoed in Vijay's brain and brought back his fears again. Yes, what was he doing among them?

'Maybe they didn't have room for you anywhere else,' Kattaya suggested soothingly, noticing Vijay's distress. 'They brought in a whole load of Tamils yesterday, and had nowhere to put them.'

Vijay looked blankly and Kattaya went on to explain.

'You can't put them with our people, can you? Never know what will happen. They are all terrorists, you know, those *dhemmalas*.'

'That's nonsense,' Vijay began, summoning up the strength to correct him, when a bell rang. A guard came and opened the door and the prisoners went out with a rush as though drawn by a vacuum. Only Kattaya stayed back to help Vijay along, he was still unused to his feet.

That night Vijay slept a fitful sleep but, waking in the morning into the sudden company of other men, he began to feel more himself again. His body still ached from the rigours of solitary, and the sores on his feet were bleeding, but in the squabble and chatter of his companions, he quite forgot his pain. Even the food began to taste better in company, and the rancid smell of stale sweat was like scent to his nostrils. He was coming back into the world again, it seemed safe to sleep once more.

But the very next night, in the early hours of the morning, Vijay was woken by the sound of distant screams and shouts that were for ever drawing closer. At first, he thought he was coming out of a dream but, looking around himself drowsily, he saw his cell was empty. He sat up with a start. There were prisoners on the loose everywhere, rushing down the corridors towards the A wing, shouting 'Kill them, kill them' at the top of their voices. Vijay rose and followed as fast as his legs would carry him, thinking a riot had broken out. But as he shuffled along behind the others he saw all the cell doors open and the guards standing furtively by, and he suddenly realized that the screams were coming from the direction of the cell in which the Tamils had been locked up. He ran faster now, shouting to Kattaya and his fellows to stop, please stop, for God's sake stop, and was brought up abruptly against a welling mass of prisoners beating the Tamils with sticks and staves and iron rods that had appeared from nowhere. He tore through the crowd pleading with them to stop and fetched a blow on the head.

When he came to, Vijay found himself being jolted along in the back of a prison van. His head ached from the blow he had received and his body felt as though a herd of buffalo had walked over him. His shirt was stuck to his chest with dried blood and he knew, from the smell of him, that he had shat himself and his piles had begun to bleed.

He was beginning to wonder where he was being taken when the van stopped. The door opened and two men dragged him and dumped him on the side of the road. 'There's the hospital,' one of them said as they drove away.

It was still dark and there was no one about. Vijay had difficulty walking, the sores on his feet were raw again, but he stumbled along the gravelled path and fell senseless on the steps of the hospital.

Two days later, Manel came for him. 'We've been looking for you

everywhere,' she burst out, 'and all the time you've been in hospital, in Colombo for God's sake. How on earth did you get here?'

Vijay tried to explain that he had not come to Colombo of his own volition, that he had been literally abducted by two men in Kurunegala on election day and brought to the Colombo CID for interrogation and then dumped in Welikade prison where he was in solitary for . . .

'Oh, Vijay, stop it,' Manel smiled tolerantly. 'You and your imagination. Get dressed and let's go. Here, I brought you some fresh clothes. They told me only yesterday.'

'But it's true, Manel. I swear it's true. And that's not all, that's not the worst of it, what they did to me—'

'Yes, yes, I know. The doctors told me that you were blithering on about Tamil prisoners being murdered by the guards—'

'But it's true,' expostulated Vijay. 'Isn't it in the papers?'

'Yes, something about a breakout or riot and some prisoners being killed, Tamils and Sinhalese both. Now stop it. It's all a part of your delirium. Didn't the doctors tell you? You got a blow on your head, during one of your election stunts I expect, and lost your memory, and somehow or other ended up in Colombo.'

'OK, OK, let's go home, the doctors don't believe me either.' And as they went out, the other patients winked at Manel knowingly.

The train back home was crowded, but Manel had no trouble getting them seats. Her husband was just out of hospital, she told a man, ejecting him from his seat, and the boy beside him gave up his place for her.

'Now rest,' she instructed Vijay, warding off the questions he kept asking her. 'We'll talk when we get home.'

'I can't, Manel. Every time I close my eyes . . .'

'Yes, yes, the prison, I know,' Manel replied placatingly, 'but try.'

'At least tell me how many were killed . . .'

'Twenty or thirty, I don't know.'

'Terrorists, all of them,' Manel went on, 'like that Kutti somebody or other who used to rob banks, and that Dr Raja . . . they say he was a terrorist, you know, and his camp . . . Shantiyam is it . . .?'

'Oh God, no . . . not him . . . and I was there and I couldn't . . . Oh God . . .' Vijay held his head in his arms and began to cry.

'S'sh, not so loud, people are watching,' admonished Manel. 'No, no, it's all right,' she told an elderly woman who had offered her seat so that Vijay could lie down. 'It's the pills they gave him, it gets you like that sometimes.'

Vijay dried his eyes and sat up. 'He was no terrorist, Manel,' he told her sadly, 'he was a man of peace.'

'Sanji said it would happen,' he muttered to himself.

'What? I didn't hear you.'

Vijay shook his head as though it wasn't important. 'You don't believe me anyway,' he said helplessly.

15

VIJAY WOKE UP at day-break the next morning and, snuggling up to Manel, watched the sun dapple the curtains on his window. Manel shrugged away from him, wanting to sleep a little longer, and Vijay followed the sun out of the bedroom on to the porch. He sat down on the steps and looked at the garden, marvelling at the sudden green of the grass before him. It had rained all week and he had not known it.

A cock crowed in the distance.

He had owned two magnificent roosters once, on his grandfather's farm. He could not have been more than 7 at the time, but the old man had put him in charge of the chickens, and he had responded to the trust with growing self-confidence. By the time he was 12, he had the best chicken run in the village. He had learnt to rear whole varieties of local and Indian fowl and had, through the good offices of an astounded agricultural officer, even lured a few leghorns and Rhode Island Reds into his coop. He had sat up with them when they were poorly, operated on their cysts with his grandfather's cut-throat razor and, on one occasion, sewn up an RIR's belly where it had been ripped open by a polecat. People had come to him from all over the village for his advice and assistance.

But what Vijay remembered most of all was the sight of the chicks bursting through their shells and looking defiantly and fearfully at the world, and the fluff and feel of them as he held them in his hands.

Manel came and sat beside him, and they talked idly for a while. Vijay thought he should go to Anuradhapura soon to settle the matter of his grandfather's farm. He had left it too long. But Manel, though looking forward to the money the sale of the land would bring, felt that Vijay was not fully recovered as yet.

'Besides, there's your case to prepare.'

'Case?'

'What's the matter, you got amnesia still?' laughed Manel. 'For your inquiry, you silly man.'

'Oh that, the school inquiry you mean.'

'Yes, that.'

Vijay didn't say anything.

'Why? What's the matter? Don't you want your job back?' Manel was getting impatient with him. 'All you have to do is put down the facts, I have already spoken to Yaso.'

'Yaso? When?'

'On the vice-principal's phone a couple of times, when you were in hospital.'

'I wasn't in hospital, I was in prison,' Vijay insisted stubbornly, 'and it was the vice-principal who informed on me to the government, and Yaso's husband is a government minister.'

'Oh that again. For the last time Vijay. You were not in a police station, you were not in a prison, you were in hospital. OK? And why would the VP let me use his phone if he was against you?'

Vijay shook his head from side to side, alternating between disbelief and despair, and Manel relented.

'All right, even if what you say about the VP is true, Mrs Bandara would have known about it, right? Why didn't she warn me then?'

'Because she is afraid. This whole country is afraid, and you don't even know. It locks up your husband and you don't even —'

'Afraid? Of what, for God's sake?'

'Of the government.'

'But we just voted them in. And the first thing the President did was to promise amnesty to the political prisoners in Welikade.'

'But he's killed them all,' mumbled Vijay. Manel didn't hear him.

'You don't believe me, do you? Wait till I show you the papers. I kept them for you.' Manel felt she was on more solid ground now. 'You don't have to do anything for a while, anyway. Get better first.'

'Better?'

'Yes. Those doctors said you might take a little time to readjust to the real world.'

'Did they really? And what else did they say?'

Manel was taken in by Vijay's calm and scattered the doctors' confidences like confetti over him. When she had finished, Vijay was satisfied that he had been diagnosed out of existence, too.

'Ah yes,' Manel remembered, 'one other thing. One of the psychologists said that it might be the fear of losing your job that has made you go on like that about the VP.'

'Hmm, they gave me the full treatment then.'

'Oh yes, they couldn't do enough for you.'

When Dhana and Sarath came to see Vijay that evening, he was still brooding over Manel's refusal to believe him. His friends were surprised to see him withdrawn and absent, he had looked so cheerful the previous night.

'Did you sleep all right?' asked Dhana.

'Yes, yes, fine. No, it's Manel, she won't believe anything I say. About what happened to me, I mean.'

'Well, what did happen? Tell us,' Sarath said lightly.

'I'll make some tea,' offered Dhana, and went into the kitchen, thinking that Vijay was still sore from his experiences; they should not push him into going over them again.

But when Dhana returned with the tea, Vijay was only too willing to talk.

'You want to know what happened to me on the day of the referendum, right? That ended up with me being in hospital? In Colombo?'

His friends nodded.

'You remember I was going to pick up the van that day?'

'Yes, to take the people to the booths,' Sarath recalled.

'Well, I finished all that and returned the van and was going home when I was stopped by two plain-clothes men in a car.'

'Ah-hah, I'm beginning to see how you ended up in Colombo,' surmised Dhana.

'Right, but hold on, the worst is yet to come.' And slowly and in great detail Vijay unwound his story, revelling in his friends' astonishment and dismay. For, hardened though they were to what was going on in their country, they could not believe that people could be made to disappear just like that. Vijay could have been killed and no one would have been the wiser. Sarath was beside himself with anger.

'Christ, we bloody are in a police state,' he shouted, as though he had not quite wanted to believe it before.

'If they can do this to educated people, people with access to...'
Dhana left his sentence unfinished.

'Hold on, hold on, there's more. This is nothing.' Vijay was enjoying his friends' discomfiture: they had too long been ensconced in 'civil rights'. 'Where was I? Oh, yes, in solitary.'

He smiled wryly and took up his story again, but without interruption from his friends this time. The silence continued after he had finished. Both Dhana and Sarath, in their own different ways, had lived Vijay's tale as he told it and were now drained of emotion.

Vijay felt removed. He had already felt himself drifting from his friends as he relived his nightmare. Now he surveyed them as from a great distance. They were good men, committed men, and they would slowly work out the meaning of his experience, but they could not have the feel of it, the smell, the acrid taste, the plangent horror of it, the knowledge in the marrow that men crazed with racial hate could not be reasoned with. Dhana would continue to reason with them and slowly

lose his relevance, Sarath would be killed by them without ever knowing why.

But when Vijay spoke, it was of his wife. Manel did not believe a word of what he said. As far as she was concerned, he had suffered a blow to his head on election day, lost his memory and ended up in Colombo. Luckily, some good Samaritan had found him on the road and taken him to hospital. The rest, she had it on good authority, was all Vijay's imagination, arising from a persecution complex.

'But once I get my job back, I should be all right, she assures me,' he ended bitterly, and suddenly realized that he was less upset by his experiences than by his wife's refusal to believe them. It was as though he could not come to terms with them unless his wife gave them veracity, could not bear them unless she bore them.

'It is an incredible story, you must admit,' Dhana broke into his thoughts.

'In her place, I wouldn't believe it either,' endorsed Sarath. He did not like Manel but was quick to defend her.

'Especially that business about the Welikade killings. Who could...?' Dhana shook his head in disbelief.

'The newspapers said it was an attempted break-out,' interrupted Sarath.

The sky was overcast the day Vijay set out for Anuradhapura. Manel thrust an unwilling umbrella into his hand. 'Get everything straightened out this time,' she admonished him, 'and don't forget to ask Raman about his daughter coming to work for us.'

It was Sunday and the bus was more crowded than usual. The passengers were mostly working people and traders going to the *polla* a few miles away, and they were all talking about the cuts to the rice subsidy that the government had announced that morning.

'And they said they were going to make things better for us,' snorted an old woman, and everybody around her assented with a nod or a curse. Her husband was a bit more considered. 'That's what they always say before an election,' he observed weightily.

'I am told the bus fares are going up next month,' remarked a well-dressed man holding on to the rail above them. His gold chain and Rolex watch marked him out from the rest, but he was anxious to be considered one of them.

'It's all right for you shop-keepers, *mudalali*,' the old lady ventured. 'It's us poor people who have to go without.'

'I have got a sick daughter in Kottawa. Who's going to look after her and her children if the fares go up?' a buxom market woman wanted

to know. 'And how am I to take my onions to market at Rs 20/- a trip?'

'I can't pay for your onions even now,' laughed the old lady.

Vijay dozed off to the hum of the conversation till he was woken by the sudden squeal of brakes. They were on the outskirts of Anuradhapura and had been stopped by an army patrol. A soldier came in and poked under the seats with his rifle while a sergeant questioned the few passengers who were left and demanded to see their papers. A cold fear came over Vijay, but soon passed; there was no reason why they should know him.

'What's the trouble, sergeant?' he asked affably, handing over his identity card.

'No trouble, just routine. We are looking for Tamils.'

'Guerrillas?'

'No, any Tamil, coming in or going out of Anuradhapura, we are to take them in for questioning.' The sergeant was expansive; he liked his job.

'But why?'

'Orders. To seal off the North. Starve the buggers to death.' He handed Vijay back his card. 'You from these parts?'

'I went to school here.'

'Ah, you know the problem, then,' said the sergeant cryptically and left.

It was late afternoon by the time Vijay got to the farm. The land was overgrown with weeds and the house was silent. He had expected that Raman would have looked after the place; perhaps he was ill. As he pushed open the front door, the skies that had been overcast all morning broke into thunder. Vijay drifted in and out of the musty rooms picking up the things of his boyhood, fingering the beads of memory. There was another peal of thunder and a burst of rain. Vijay went into the kitchen, lit the kerosene stove and put the kettle on; there was still some tea in the old Horlicks bottle. He took out the sandwiches from his briefcase and sat down on his grandfather's chair to eat them.

The rain had settled down to a steady downpour. The roof began to leak and Vijay put an old tin can on the floor to catch the water. His boyhood caught in his throat. He had been so happy here with his grandparents. Perhaps happiness was something you knew in retrospect.

He took his mother's diary from his briefcase and his father's letters to her. He was not quite sure why he had brought them with him but, reading them now, he wondered again at their relationship, wondered at his father's love for a dead woman which kept him from loving everyone else. So unlike his grandfather's love for his wife: it

opened him out to others, she was the beginning of his loving, not the end.

The rain had ceased. Someone was calling his name. Vijay snapped out of his reverie and went to the door. Raman was standing there, drenched to the skin, a leaking umbrella in one hand and a plastic-covered basket in the other.

Vijay laughed outright. 'You must patent that umbrella,' he said. 'It gets you wet in the right places.'

He ushered Raman in and found him a towel to dry himself with. 'I waited for the damn rain to stop and then gave up, and then it stopped as I got here. The food must be cold by now.'

'Oh, is that what it is? How did you know I was coming?'

'Kamala saw you at the bus stop.'

'Why didn't she come and speak to me?'

'Things are not that easy any more, *thambi*.'

'What do you mean?'

'The usual thing, they don't want us here.'

'What? But you have been here for generations, longer than we have.'

'All that is history, this is now,' Raman replied drily. 'I could not come and clear the land even, or get Kamala to tidy the house. They would have thought us too forward and done something to my girl.'

'Is she married?'

'No. She doesn't want to. So many proposals I had for her, but she doesn't want to bring children into this world, she says.'

They went into the kitchen and sat down to a cup of tea. It was getting dark now and Vijay lit a lantern.

'Would Kamala like to come and live with us and help us in the house?'

Raman said nothing, and Vijay had no wish to push the matter, but Manel had insisted that he bring Kamala back with him. She needed a housekeeper.

'She'll be safe with us, you know,' Vijay was quick to reassure Raman.

Raman shook his head. 'No one is safe any more,' he said sadly. 'We were never safe with your people, were we?' A note of bitterness had entered his voice.

'Was my mother?' Vijay prodded the old man gently.

'Your mother? Oh God, yes, I am sorry, *thambi*. What am I saying?' He took Vijay's hand and kissed it. 'Forgive me. How could I forget your mother? And all you went through? And your grandfather?' He hit his forehead with his hand over and over again in contrition. 'That settles

it. We are going to Jaffna. If I stay here, I'll lose more than my life. I'll lose my self.' Raman paused for a moment, wondering how he managed to say that.

'Jaffna? When did you decide that?'

'Months ago, when Kamala lost her job at the co-op. They put a young Sinhalese girl in her place, and no one will give her a job, though her Sinhala is fluent. I get only bits and pieces of work now, and my wife, as you know, is too sickly.'

'But you have to get a pass and -'

'Our police chief is getting us one.'

'Ah? That's nice of him.'

'Rs 4,000/-.'

'What?'

'Well, we had to sell everything we had for Kamala's dowry, and we've had to borrow -'

'I'll have money when I sell the farm. I am seeing the solicitor tomorrow.'

Raman laughed and, rising from his chair, embraced Vijay warmly. 'You are a good boy *thambi*, but there'll be no money from the farm; your grandfather was in debt.' He finished his tea and picked up his umbrella and torch, muttering that the batteries wouldn't last the distance if it got too dark. He would see Vijay tomorrow.

Early the following morning, Vijay went to see his solicitor, who confirmed Raman's story. Not just the farm but the house too was mortgaged to the Agri-Bank, twice over in fact. Had he not written to Vijay about it some months ago? Oh well, there would be enough money from the sale to pay off the loan. Vijay should not worry his head about it, he'd take care of everything. As he had done in the past, he chided Vijay gently.

Vijay was only too glad to leave everything in the older man's hands and left his office in a happier frame of mind: the responsibility to his grandparents was over. He would go and see Raman on the way home and tell him that, tell him that he too was leaving Anuradhapura for good, now that Raman and his family were leaving. That should please the old fellow.

To his disappointment, Vijay found that Raman had left early that morning to finish off a job he was doing for a neighbouring farmer, but his wife and Kamala welcomed him warmly. They seemed to be happy to be leaving, although this had been their home ever since Vijay knew them. Sithran down the road was leaving too, they said. Sangli had already gone; he had only his mother-in-law to carry, they laughed. They talked a while about old times and, when Vijay left, he forced some

money into the mother's hands. 'Tell Raman it's a bit back from my grandfather,' he said.

The fresh, invigorating morning was turning to sultry noon. Vijay toyed with the idea of visiting some of his old friends, to take his leave of them, but a sudden wave of nostalgia passed over him and he decided to go home. He could see his friends tomorrow or the day after; all he wanted now was his own company in the house he had grown up in.

Once inside the house, he began to feel listless again. Trivial little incidents lapped against his memory – the silly songs his grandmother and he made up as he helped her in the kitchen, his grandfather walking defiantly in out of the rain that had drenched him and his crops, only to be told off by the old lady for getting wet – and gave way to serious ones: the recurring droughts, the discovery of the Manifesto, his grandmother's unspeakable pain when she learnt of his joining the PLF. But most of all he remembered how they had brought him through the sad and puzzled pain of those early years after his mother's death, his father's departure. They had not tried to explain those events away as though they had never happened or were not important, never let him make a heroine of his mother, or turn his father into a villain. Later, dipping into psychology at university, he recalled wryly, he had tried to trace within himself the pathology of the abandoned child, but found that his grandparents had outdone the psychos at their own game. They accepted everything that happened to them, fought them but accepted them, and went on – you don't have to succeed all the time, you can fail at higher levels, was how his grandfather put it – and they did not divide things, events, peoples into what would make them happy and what wouldn't. Everything was life. The important thing was to go with the grain of it.

He had to tell Manel that – hadn't he said it before? Never mind, he'd tell her again. Today. Quickly he got his things together. If he left now he could catch the two o'clock bus and still have time to stop off at Hajjjar's Sweet Mart on the way – get her some real *muscat*, she'd like that, and some English marshmallows. She'd like that even more.

16

MANEL WAS NOT AT HOME when Vijay got in and the house was in darkness. Probably gone to her mother's, he thought, as he turned the lights on. She'll get a shock when she sees the lights – never would have expected him to be back so soon.

What a contrast this house was to his grandparents'. Too big, really, for just him and Manel. Ideal for children, though, all that big back garden with all those fruit trees. Perhaps he should broach the subject to Manel again; soften her up with the *muscat* and marshmallow, haul her to him by her sweet tooth.

His eyes lighted on a letter propped against a vase on the sideboard. It was in Uncle Para's writing but postmarked Colombo, 15.7.83. He tore open the envelope to find two brief notes, written several weeks earlier, but within days of each other. The first spoke of Uncle Para's distress on learning of Vijay's imprisonment (how he had heard of it was a mystery). He prayed that Vijay had not suffered too much and had come through it whole. Unlike Nadesan, he hoped, who had been arrested and tortured and had come out of an army prison camp a broken man.

'All that Yogi wants now is revenge,' wrote Uncle Para, 'to kill those who maimed his father, turned him into a vegetable. All thoughts of socialism are gone from him. You cannot imagine the change that has come over that boy; all that beauty of hope and youth are fled. He is old before his time. He just wants to kill or be killed, as though all there was to life was death.'

Vijay fell back in his chair. So that's why he had not heard from Yogi. Poor Chitra, she had to do everything for her husband now, and worry about Yogi, worry about her other children following him . . .

' . . . And Yogi was the best of them,' Uncle Para went on. 'Everyone looked to him to bring peace between the factions and stop their murderous in-fighting. Without his intervention, my grandson Ravi, Commander Ravi they call him, grows harder. They say he kills on principle. On principle. They have all grown old before their time, our boys, all grown old. They trust only the gun and the cyanide capsule they carry around their necks. Isn't that terrible, that they cannot trust even themselves? What hope for Eelam now?'

Vijay was heavy with foreboding. He had known about the in-fighting and the random killing of politicians and policemen, but had not realized how routine they had become. It was not just the army that the Boys were fighting any more, but everyone who stood in their way. The terror had begun.

Vijay picked up the second letter. It began more cheerfully, but the handwriting was little more than a scrawl. 'That's because I'm in bed,' the old man wrote, as though anticipating Vijay's complaint, 'with a broken leg.' But it was nothing serious and he was going to live through it all to the good times before he died. Unless they all went up in smoke before then.

'The army has turned Jaffna into a tinder-box,' he ended. 'One match

and the whole country will go up. The government must get the army out now before it's too late – they are no match for our boys – and give the Tamils the right to their land, Eelam. Now. It is too late for anything else.'

The front door flew open, the latch must have caught again, he must do something about that latch, and Manel came in looking uncharacteristically unkempt and tired.

'You are back early,' she said flopping into a chair. 'I didn't expect you so soon.'

'Hello,' Vijay greeted her absently, putting the letter down.

'Bad news from Jaffna?' asked Manel.

'Yes, terrible.'

'There's trouble here too.'

'What sort of trouble?'

'Refugees. Everywhere. Waiting for trains that never come.'

'You look tired?'

'I took some food for them, with Damayanthi.'

'You did?' Vijay jumped up from his chair and embraced his wife.

'Don't, I am sweaty,' she said pulling away. 'I've got to have a shower first.'

She went into the bedroom to change, and Vijay, fetching the parcel of sweets from his bag, crept up behind her.

'Here,' he said holding out the parcel.

'What?' she turned round, startled. 'Oh, leave it on the table,' she began but, seeing his disappointment, took the packet from his hand and opened it.

'M'mm, *muscat*, and marshmallows.' She feigned enthusiasm and went back to changing her clothes.

'Try a piece,' urged Vijay trying to put a piece of *muscat* in her mouth. She shook her head, and the sweetmeat flew out of his hands and fell on the sari she had taken off and neatly laid on her bed.

'Now see what you have done,' cried Manel, picking up the sari and rushing it into the bathroom. 'My new sari too, the stain will never come off.'

Vijay mumbled an apology and retreated into the sitting room. He picked up a newspaper and sank his head in it, waiting for Manel to come and make it up to him, but knowing she wouldn't.

He put the paper aside after a while and was about to go after her when she came in, her hair piled high on her head, her round figure rounded yet further into a tight low-cut housecoat.

'Why don't you go and wash up while I heat up your dinner,' she suggested.

'Hmm, lovely,' replied Vijay putting his hands on her breasts.

'Go on,' she said pushing him away. 'Go and shave.'

When Vijay came out of the bath, the dinner was on the table and Manel was waiting to serve him.

'How about you?' he asked.

'I am not hungry. I ate something earlier.'

Vijay sank his teeth into a piece of *thora*.

'Did you see the solicitor, then?' asked Manel.

'Hmm.'

'And is the land sold?'

Vijay did not answer.

'We could do with the money.'

'There's no money.'

'Whaat?'

'Not a cent. It was all mortgaged. And they never told me about it.' He began to resent Manel. 'Or asked me for a cent.' Because of her, he thought, because of his failure with her. Manel leant across the table and passed him a cup of coffee. She smelt of sandalwood and clean bed-sheets.

'How about the girl? Is she coming to work for us?'

'What, with all this trouble?' He couldn't be bothered to explain that Kamala and her family were leaving for Jaffna anyway. 'And she is not a girl. She is a woman.'

'The cook isn't coming back either.'

'We'll manage.'

'Getting mother to do the cooking you mean.'

'Don't start that again.'

'Do something, then. No money, no servants, no job, and the roof is leaking.'

'Sell the bloody house.' His vehemence startled Manel.

'You don't want me to have anything nice, do you?' There was a sense of loss in her voice that called to a sense of loss in him. Why were they always up and down like this? 'We were so much happier in the annexe,' he muttered and rising up from the table, took the dishes into the kitchen. It was just like Manel, he thought, to serve up his dinner in dishes when she could just as well have put it all on a plate and saved the bother of washing up. But these were the things that made her happy, the trappings, and he should go along with them. Win her over, like Damayanthi had done. That really was something, getting Manel to help with the refugees. Tomorrow they could go together, he and Manel. Maybe he should go down there now and survey the situation.

He put away the dishes and went back to the dining room. 'I think I'll

go down to the station and see what we can do tomorrow,' he said, offering Manel a partnership.

'It can wait, can't it?' complained Manel, but seeing Vijay's disappointment, she gave in. 'Oh go on then, I'll wait up for you, in bed.'

'I won't be long,' promised Vijay.

When he returned, Manel was asleep.

On the following morning, Vijay packed up a parcel of old clothes and blankets and mats and left for the station. Manel was to meet up with him after school in the afternoon. But by the time Vijay got there, the station compound was overflowing with people – from a couple of hundred the previous evening, he was told, the numbers had swelled to well over a thousand now. Refugees had been pouring into the town through the night, and were perched like crows on every available spot. Only the railway track had been left free, like a lifeline, for a train that never came. Its very emptiness spoke of despair.

On the other side of the tracks, on land adjoining the station, nuns from the local convent were setting up camps for the women and children, and Vijay, relinquishing his parcel to the station-master, went over to give them a hand.

'There are more coming,' said the nun in charge. 'From the south.'

'From the south?'

'Yes, there's been some trouble in Colombo. The Tamils are leaving and there's no one to man the stations.'

'That's why there are no trains.'

'Right.' The answer was brusque and direct and tinged with a hint of sarcasm. Vijay took a closer look at the Mother Superior. She looked middle-aged and ordinary, her flat body flattened even more by her habit, but there was no mistaking the grim determination around her mouth and the fight in her eye. 'Where do you get all this information from, Mother?'

'Ah, we have our connections.' She laughed, pointing upwards. 'Not really. Sister Alfreda, over there, with the Abyssinian pump, she was in Colombo yesterday.'

For the next two weeks, Vijay virtually lived in the camp, going home only for a change of clothes or a quick shower. Manel and Damayanthi turned up every afternoon and helped with the children. Dhana was in charge of the stores, and Sarath, who revelled in his honorary title of doctor of intermediate technology, was virtually the site engineer.

By the tenth day, things began to ease up. There were hardly any refugees coming in now, and the exodus from the south that Mother Superior had feared had not materialized. A day later, the trains began to run

again and the camps began slowly to empty. The nuns and their voluntary army had time at last to sit around and talk and get a feel of the community that had grown up among them.

Vijay went home for a long sleep that night for the first time in a fortnight, but woke, as of habit, at the first light of day. Manel had got up even earlier, although it was a Sunday, and gone to the trouble of cooking him an elaborate breakfast.

'You deserve it,' she said serving him on the sofa in the back verandah.

'We deserve it,' he corrected her, pulling her down beside him. The garden was dewy before them and the flowers were still wet with the dawn. A magpie and a squirrel were fighting over a fallen mango. Manel leant her head against Vijay's shoulder and took his hand.

'We won't quarrel any more, will we?' she asked.

'No,' answered Vijay kissing her.

There was a knock on the door. Vijay went to open it and came back with Sarath.

'There's been trouble in Colombo,' he told his wife gently.

'And up-country,' added Sarath.

'Trouble, trouble,' cried Manel getting up from the sofa, 'all the time trouble. What's it now?'

'Don't know yet, really,' replied Sarath helplessly.

'I am going back to the camp. There must be more refugees coming in.'

'Oh no, not again,' reacted Manel angrily. 'I can't take any more of this. Why on earth do they have to come here?'

'Because this is on the direct route to the north,' Sarath began impatiently, but Manel just turned her back on him and left the room. Sarath looked at Vijay inquiringly; had he put his foot in it? Should Vijay go and comfort her? Vijay shook his head: there was no point in talking to her now. They should just go.

When they arrived at the camp, Mother Superior greeted them like strays from her lost flock and immediately put them to work.

'What's happened in Colombo then, Mother Know-all?' inquired Vijay.

'I don't quite know. But somebody high-up put out the rumour that Buddhist priests had been killed in Jaffna, and Sinhalese mobs in Colombo went on the rampage, killing Tamils.'

'And was it true, the story about the priests?'

'Oh no. It turns out they were soldiers, young recruits, volunteers probably, some thirteen of them, killed in a guerrilla ambush. But the government is bringing their bodies home for a state funeral.'

‘To make them heroes and patriots—’

‘I didn’t say that,’ interrupted the nun. ‘But Minister Sithu did say on the radio that this cowardly attack would only stir up the blood of the Sinhala race.’

‘And it has, thanks to him. God, what this government won’t do . . .’

‘No point in calling on Him up there till we have done our duty down here,’ observed Mother Superior acidly. ‘Come on, give me a hand with these tents.’

Vijay did not go home that night or the following night or the night after, and Manel did not come to help in the camp. Damayanthi had not seen her either. On the evening of the fourth day when Vijay got home, he found a note from Manel saying that she had gone to stay with her mother.

Vijay turned on the radio. He’d shower and eat something before going to fetch her. He would have to apologize, of course . . . for what though? . . . he’d think of something . . . to make her feel loved and wanted . . . he knew the routine now.

‘After four days of rioting, the capital is returning to a semblance of law and order, and the curfew has been lifted,’ announced Radio Lanka. Vijay heaved a sigh of relief and, turning the volume up, went on shaving. ‘Addressing the nation on TV, the President warned the Tamils . . .’ The radio crackled and went off altogether.

‘The Prime Minister yesterday toured . . .’ It restarted and went off again. Vijay twirled the knobs around to get the station back, and suddenly heard a voice in Sinhala rasp out:

‘Come on you sons and daughters of the Lion Race. Now is our chance to wipe out the *dhemmalas*. We have killed over a thousand *dhemmalas* already and burnt their homes and shops in seven cities, and now it’s your turn out there to do something for the nation. They are on the run. Drive them out or kill them, but get rid of them. Lanka is for the Lankans.’

Vijay froze, the razor fell from his hands. The matter-of-factness of the exhortation horrified him, the realization that ‘they’ now had a pirate station frightened him. There was no doubt in his mind that people in high places were involved in the massacres. This was no riot, this was a pogrom.

Vijay began to shake as with malaria. He got up and went into the dining room and poured himself a large arrack. He seldom took a drink, but he needed one now. He could not get over the hate in that voice, so cold, so casual, as though killing was like taking a walk – he poured himself another drink – as though hate came easily to man, when his whole conception was crucibled in love . . . maybe the passion that went

to make him unmade him too – he tilted the bottle into his mouth, playing his tongue around it –

karrendha iddathelai naduthey karrom – the lines of a Tamil verse came to him . . . ‘the hand dwells where it suckles . . .’ but why the hand and not the mouth? He put his mouth round the bottle again. Was Avvayar deriding men as lustful creatures . . . and was she concealing it in a play on words because she was poet to the king’s court . . . ? How did the couplet go?

Pirandha iddathelai naduthey pay-the mannom
Karrendha iddathelai naduthey karrom.

The idiot mind for ever dwells on the place where it was born
The hand on the place where it suckled.

. . . *naduthey* . . . ‘dwells on’ . . . ‘reaches out’ . . . the mind reaches out to the place where it came from . . . did she mean that was all that men thought about or was she speaking of the exile to which she had been condemned . . . ? Uncle Para’s story was getting muddled in his befogged mind . . . and *pay-the*, idiot-like, simple, but also goatish, lustful . . . beautiful, beautiful. He took another swig from the bottle. One word with so many meanings, what a beautiful language Tamil was . . . Sinhala too, Sinhala too, the same voluptuousness . . . hopeless to try to understand it in translation . . . *karrom*, hand, but *karrai*, suckle . . . He suckled at the bottle, chuckling.

When Vijay woke up the next morning, his stomach was on fire. The arrack had burnt a hole in his belly and covered it with undying embers. He poured water into the cavity, and milk, and strong, black coffee, and finally managed to put the fire out. His head cleared and his eyes began to see. By afternoon he was sufficiently recovered to go back to camp, it was too late to see Manel now.

The camp had changed in the few hours he had been away. A new batch of refugees had come in, and the nuns had made room for them by setting up a camp in the convent and moving the women and children there. The new lot were merely plantation coolies, remarked the Reverend Mother sarcastically, whom the Plantations Minister Mr Sithu was trying to replant. Vijay looked puzzled; he could not quite get the drift of Mother Superior’s bitter humour.

‘Sithu’s men went to the tea estates in the dead of night,’ explained the nun, ‘flung all the Tamil families they could get their hands on into government trucks and dumped them hundreds of miles away in the jungles.’ Tears and anger were in her voice. ‘These are the lucky ones, they fell off the cattle-trucks.’

Vijay cast his eye around wondering whether Sanji was among them. The last he had heard of him and Meena, from Uncle Lal, was that they had gone to stay with relatives on Glendale Estate.

'Are there any here from Hatton, Mother, do you know?' he asked the nun.

'Yes, that bunch there,' and she pointed to a group of men huddled disconsolately in front of a tent. But all they could tell Vijay was that people had been taken from all over the place, families were split up and no one knew who was where. One of them had heard that Trade-Union Perumal's brother-in-law had been in hiding, but no one could say where.

A few more refugees from the hill country straggled into the camp over the next two days, but none of them could tell Vijay about Sanji's or Meena's whereabouts.

'Hopefully, that's the last of them,' said the Mother Superior on the third day. 'We are running out of food.' She had sent Sister Alfreda with Sarath and two student volunteers to market that morning, but they had come back with only one bag of rice and a sack of vegetables between them. 'The shop won't sell us anything; they say the coolies are eating up their food.' She threw her eyes up to heaven. 'Where's this tea you were supposed to be making?'

She and Vijay, now her unofficial ADC, were seated in their makeshift office overlooking the camp, trying to tot up their finances.

'Oh damn, the stove has gone off and there's no kerosene left.' He shook the stove and, satisfied that there was enough fuel in it to boil a kettle, lit it and went back to his accounts.

'I suppose there's no produce coming to the shops from up country,' Mother Superior went on, trying to explain the shopkeepers' animosity.

'It's not just that, Mother.'

'I know, I know, there's a Buddhist priest going round saying that the convent is piling up food to sell on the black market.' She slapped her thigh and laughed uproariously like the peasant woman she was.

'No, seriously, Mother, you should have a night watchman at the convent.'

'Oh don't worry, son, we've got the cook and his four boys, and a gardener too, all armed to the teeth with knives and pitchforks and . . . Hello, what's that?'

There was the sound of a muffled explosion and voices raised in panic. Vijay ran to the door and, looking down, saw a tent at the farther end of the camp on fire. He rushed out with the Mother Superior close on his heels, calling for the men to fetch buckets and form a line to the water pump. But they had already had the sense to isolate the burning tent and stop the fire from spreading.

'Someone threw a petrol bomb, Mother,' said Palani, who had been sharing the burnt-out tent with three other men. 'From over there.' He pointed to a clump of bushes beyond the penumbra of light cast by the hurricane lanterns. 'Luckily no one was hurt.'

Vijay borrowed a torch from one of the men and went over to the bushes. There were burnt matches on the ground and pieces of rag.

'I don't like the look of things, Mother,' he said going back to the camp. 'I think I had better stay the night.'

'But you were going home. Why not get Sarath or Dhana back?'

'One more night won't hurt. If anything happens, it will be tonight, when those bastards – sorry, Mother – have had a few drinks and get their second wind. You know what they are like.'

'So what is it you are going to do?'

'Organize watches through the night, on a shift system. That will give the men something to do beside jabbering. Go home, Mother, you look terrible.'

'Should I ring the police?'

'What for? They probably did it,' guffawed Vijay.

'Hmm, all right. I'll go. Get some rest yourself.'

Vijay slept fitfully that night. He had enough confidence in the alarm system he had set up to retire to his own bed in the office, but he still slept on the edge of sleep, waking to the slightest noise. And then suddenly in the early hours of the morning, just when he had fallen into a deep sleep, he was shaken awake by Palani.

'The convent, the convent, sir, the convent,' he kept repeating. 'They are attacking the convent.'

Vijay leapt out of bed and, tucking up his sarong, ran blearily across the railway lines and up the hill to the convent. Others were running in the same direction, hushed and fearful as towards a disaster, and Vijay's heart pounded with anxiety. He had grown to regard the Reverend Mother as his own and he could not bear to think of what could have happened to her.

By the time he reached the convent gates, the attackers had gone, and a small crowd had begun to gather. Vijay worked his way through them and was allowed in by the cook standing guard at the gate with an ill-concealed machete in his hands.

'Anybody hurt?'

'Only the new gardener fellow, but not too badly. Thank God,' and he made the sign of the cross.

'Reverend Mother?'

'In there, with the children,' and he pointed towards the chapel.

The chapel door was singed and its windows shattered. Vijay picked

his way through the glass, wondering why the children should have been herded into the chapel, to find that it had been turned into a dormitory. The pews had been moved aside and a row of mats stretched from one end of the floor to the other. Sister Alfreda and the women had cleared the place of glass and were trying to get the children to go back to sleep.

'Are they terribly upset?' asked Vijay.

'Who, the children? No, not a tear. They have gone through it all before.' She sighed. 'Mother Superior is in the sacristy, attending to the gardener.'

The Reverend Mother came out just then. 'Thank God, you are here, Vijay,' she said fervently. 'That poor man in there needs attention and rest. He is not going to get that in the servants' quarters and I can't have men staying in the convent.'

'What happened?'

'He got hit on the head, trying to save our lives. He was keeping watch at the gate and when he saw this bunch of men with petrol bombs, he gave the alarm and went at them with a club.'

'It's my fault,' she went on, 'I should never have made him gardener. He had had enough troubles already, but he was so keen to help us. Go and speak to him, son, and see what you can do. His name is Sanji.'

'Sanji? Not Sanji?' He went quickly into the sacristy. Sanji was lying on a camp bed, his head in bandages, and Meena was seated on the floor beside him bathing her father's forehead.

'Meena? Oh Meena.'

Meena leapt up from the floor and fell into Vijay's arms. 'It is you Vijay, it is you,' she cried, touching him, feeling him, looking him over. 'I thought you were in prison.' The relief left her weak. She yielded herself up to him and began to cry.

'Don't cry, my love,' whispered Vijay hoarsely, holding her hard, taking her into him.

Sanji groaned. 'Meena,' he called softly. 'I am soaking wet, *mahal*.'

'Oh good, the fever has broken,' Meena exclaimed, going up to her father. 'Look who's here, *appa*.'

'Our Vijayan?' the old man peered through sleepy eyes. 'How wonderful. There's a God after all.'

Vijay smiled and embraced the man.

'We'll get you a change of clothes and then I am taking you both home. I am going to fetch a car now.'

'Your home? Better not,' Meena began to protest, but Vijay held up his hand sternly.

'Ah-ha, no argument,' he said, and left.

When Vijay returned with the car, Sanji was dressed and ready to leave. He looked better already and was all agog to see Vijay's house. Meena was apprehensive about meeting Manel and became even more apprehensive when Vijay told her that his wife had gone to stay with her mother for a few days.

'Shouldn't you ask her, Vijay, before you . . .' Meena began but Vijay put his hand on her mouth.

'No, she'll be all right. I'll go and fetch her tomorrow,' Vijay reassured her and, having settled them in the house, went back to the camp.

On the following day Sanji began to run a temperature again. There was no visible sign of injury to his head, and the swelling from the blow had gone down, but he had pain in his left leg and difficulty in walking. Alarmed, Vijay went for the nearest doctor, his own was on holiday.

Vijay did not know the man, or how good a physician he was (he smelt of drink and sweat), but his examination seemed to be thorough and his diagnosis reassuring. He gave Sanji a sedative and convinced Vijay that all his friend was suffering from was a slight concussion. He would get over it with rest. He doubted, though, that Abdul or whatever his real name was (he peered mischievously from under his glasses as he said this) had come by the blow by slipping on the bathroom floor and hitting his head against the waste-pipe.

By the evening of the next day, Sanji was beginning to look normal and Vijay decided to go and fetch Manel. He had left it too long already, he usually got her back home within three or four days of a quarrel, and he was not sure how she was going to react to Meena's presence. Of course he had told her about Meena in the past, he told himself virtuously . . . when there was nothing to tell . . . But now? He was not sure. Sanji was another matter; she would not mind him, not for a few days anyway.

He tidied up the house, put temple flowers and *pichcha-mal* in the vases, tucked Meena and Sanji away in their room and was making for the door when Manel walked in.

'I hear you've got some woman in here,' she began icily and then quite lost her temper. 'Whom have you got here?' she shouted, slamming the door behind her. 'Whom -'

'Yes, yes, I heard you. Keep your voice down.'

'Well, who -'

'Calm down, calm down.' He took Manel by the arm, but she shrugged him away angrily.

'No sooner is my back turned than you go and bring in some, some . . .' She flung herself into a chair.

'It's not some, some, Manel. It's Meena and her father.'

'Meena? So, that's who it is, is it? Your coolie girl friend. So she's turned up again, has she?'

Vijay ignored the remark. Manel was right to get angry, he must calm her down.

'The camp was attacked and I had to bring them here for their safety,' he explained.

'Their safety?' Manel flared up again. 'Their safety?' she shrieked. 'What about my safety? Hah? What about my safety? There are thugs going around looking for Sinhalese traitors like you and —'

'But nobody knows they are here,' interrupted Vijay irritably.

'How did I know then?' she asked, stunning Vijay into silence. Not that bloody doctor? thought Vijay. 'Hah? How did I know?' She had Vijay on the run now. 'And if I know . . . No, they've got to go.'

'But where?'

'I don't care,' shouted Manel, beside herself with anger, 'but they are not staying here.'

'They bloody well are,' Vijay shouted back. Manel gave him a scornful look and stomped off into their bedroom, returning a few minutes later with a change of clothes in a bag. 'This is my house,' she said deliberately, 'and I want them gone by the time I get back tomorrow. And if you don't like it, you can go too.'

'This is stupid, Manel. You can't just abandon people.'

'They are not my people, they are yours.'

Vijay looked at his wife for a long moment, studying her. This was who she really was, this was who she had always been. Only, he had been too ashamed, for her, to see it, too mortified; he had covered up for her, covered her from him. He saw her now. And suddenly he felt released. The years with Manel dropped away from him like scales off his back. He felt gentle towards her at last.

'You have got to stay and see this thing through, Manel,' he said. 'You owe it to yourself. Otherwise you are nothing.'

'Nothing? I am nothing now,' she threw back at him, slamming the door as she left.

Vijay sat in thought for a while and then went to look for Meena and her father; hopefully they had not heard too much of the conversation. But they were not in their room, or in the kitchen, and their meagre belongings were gone. He called for them but got no reply. He looked in the back garden; the gate leading to the field beyond stood open. When had they left? Where had they gone? Could he catch up with them? He ran to the convent, but they were not there. He looked for them in the camp but they were not there either. Where to look next? No one could tell him. He was getting frantic . . . they should not

be in the open like this . . . it would soon be dark . . . they could easily be picked up and . . . and, oh God, she could be raped . . . memories of his mother's murder swam before his eyes . . . if only he and Manel had not quarrelled . . . he was furious with Manel, with himself . . . but Meena should have waited . . . she should have known that he . . . it would be just like her . . . no, she'd not be frightened at all . . . to try and hitch a lift . . . passing off as a Sinhalese again . . . from a passing truck perhaps . . . on the main road . . . the main Jaffna road, that's where they'd be headed for . . . he'd catch up with them if he hurried . . . Sanji was in no condition to walk.

He began to run, up the hill from the station, towards the road above, when he heard his name being called. It was Sarath's voice but, in the growing dusk, he could not quite place it.

'Sarath? Where are you?'

'Down here, by the railway lines, they are safe.'

Vijay ran down the hill and almost fell on top of his friend. 'Where are they?' he asked breathlessly. 'How did . . . ?'

'Come along, I'll take you, they are in my friend's, the station-master's room. I was coming to your place when I saw them. I brought them down here.'

'Why here and not the convent?'

'Because the SM told me, in confidence, that he is expecting a train any minute.' He stopped in his tracks, peering into the dark. 'Hey, there it is now, can't you see it? There, there, that light behind the trees? Come on, we'd better hurry.'

'Sarath, you are great,' panted Vijay, scampering behind his friend across the railway lines and on to the platform which was beginning to get crowded. There had been rumours of a train that night, as there had been every night for the past week, and people were milling around for a vantage point of entry.

By the time Vijay and Sarath had fought their way to the SM's room, the train had slid quietly into the platform. The room was empty.

'He's taken them to the guards' van,' said Sarath. 'Hurry.' He rammed his bull-like frame through the crowd without ceremony. Vijay followed feverishly in his wake but, seeing that they were losing time, shinned briskly up a steel girder to get a better view.

'There they are,' he called down to Sarath, and began to shout out Meena's name, holding on to the pillar with one hand and waving desperately with the other. Meena had seen her father safely into the guard's van and was herself about to enter when she saw Vijay and stopped. The crowd was thinning out now and Vijay, sliding down the girder, rushed up to her.

'Oh Meena, Meena, why did you run away like that,' he panted, 'and without telling me ... I thought something ... had ... I thought ...'

'I know, I know, but it's all right now, don't you see, it's all right now. And once we get to Jaffna -'

'I am going with you.'

'No, you are not. We don't need you.'

'I am going with you. I have finished here. I have finished with Manel.'

The SM blew his whistle, the train began to move. Sarath thrust the parcel he was carrying into Vijay's hand. 'Here, you take it,' he said, 'it's a sarong. Brand new.' Vijay pushed Meena into the van and jumped in after her.

'Goodbye Sarath,' he called out, shutting the door. 'You are beautiful. I'll marry you some day.'

17

UNCLE PARA LOOKED OVER his 'land' from the comfort of his easy-chair, an oily, black Jaffna cigar clamped between his teeth. Everything was sand-yellow and bare and barren. There were no onions or aubergines or *murunga* to give life to the land - and the green was gone from where once the margosa and tamarind stood. The wells had long run dry, and the water-pump lay rusty and limp from that morning, all those years ago, when Ravi had suddenly abandoned it and gone off with his friends.

Everything had changed that day - for him, for Ravi, for the country. It was as though history had taken a quantum leap, backwards, the moment Ravi had abandoned the water-pump. There were still the familiar things around him, the old facts of life, but they seemed to arrange themselves differently, present themselves in configurations that Para could no longer grasp. Homes were caves, cowsheds arsenals, and the land sprouted guerrillas from underground bunkers.

Guns in udders ... Para shuddered at the image ... milking out death ... nothing was sacred any more ... the cow profaned bestrode Shiva ... in a cosmic dance of the cows ... O'm Krishna ... O'm ... O'm ... blasphemy is the last cry of the believer.

Devi had found an easier way: everything was karma for her ... no history ... no determination ... just a cycle of birth and death and birth again ... earth and water and air ... if only Ravi had not gone away like

that . . . leaving the land and water and all the growing things of this earth . . . he had a gift for them, he had been given as a gift to them . . . and he had left them . . . offending the gods . . . slighting their benison . . . turning the world upside down . . . bringing forward the reign of Kali . . . Kali Yuga . . . Oh well . . . 'upside down, downside up, it's all the same to us women', he could hear Devi upbraid him. 'We give birth to you and you destroy what you make us give birth to; what could be more topsy-turvy than that?'

Para could understand her turning herself around like that, on her own axis, as it were. She had never been one to give in, accept her lot, she was a fighter like him. But her whole life had been given over to Ravi after her husband had died. Even looking after him, her father, was a way of looking after her son, getting him properly educated, sending him to university to make him into a doctor, a lawyer, a something. She had always been ambitious for him, till that day Ravi had come back from school, earlier than usual, and, flinging his books at his mother's feet, yelled 'sell them'. 'Oh *Muruga*', Devi had cried out, sighting the end of her plans and casting her eyes upward, 'don't let him have chucked it, please, don't let him have chucked it.' But chucked it, Ravi had. No more school for him, he said, there was no future there, it was not a place of instruction any more but of interrogation . . . the army was there every day, questioning them all the time about their whereabouts . . . getting them to inform on their friends, on their older brothers . . .

One life had closed for Devi when her husband had died; another would have closed that day, had not he, her father, persuaded her that it was all for the best. Ravi had such green fingers, he had told her, like his great-grandfather Pandyan, except that Ravi had chemistry too. He may not become a great agronomist, but he could turn this arid Jaffna soil fertile. That, after all, had been the boy's ambition all along, to turn this brown land green. And turn the land round he did, such a feel he had for the land, for telling the soil by taste, almost, to see what it would grow, for concocting chemicals and fertilizers from dung and decay.

And, then, he had left that too. That was when Devi had gone into karma and horoscopes in a big way. She had skimped and saved for that water-pump and when he didn't come back for days and days afterwards she knew he was gone from her forever. Strange, it was the day PC Arumugam had come, too, and gone, for ever – she might have married him once. And it was the day Vijay had landed on his door-step, just like that, out of another past, dragging other memories out of him.

Everything was happening that day . . . one grandson gone, another turning up . . . grandson, grand-nephew, what did it matter, Rajan had

been a son to him . . . and Vijay, his son . . . step-son . . . who cares . . . he had loved that boy at first sight . . . so much of Rajan's decency he carried with him, and Lali's fortitude . . . but when Ravi returned, Vijay had gone.

Ravi never looked back on the land after that day. He turned away from it as he had turned away from school, with a finality that brooked no doubt. It frightened Para, that quality in the boy: he never lingered in the past, never carried past relationships with him, only the present mattered.

He still carried on with his experiments, though, down in the disused cowshed, but exploding things, not concocting them. That puzzled Para, the boy's devotion to chemistry, till it suddenly struck him that the strongroom in the Manipay bank had been blown open. Ravi had refused to tell him or his mother where he had been those missing days. But Devi seemed to have known; some unspoken message must have passed between her and Arumugam that day, because it was after that that Devi had started to go to temple every morning.

'What are you doing with your life, son?' she had asked Ravi after one of his explosions had taken out a window.

'Still learning chemistry, mother, like you asked me to,' he had laughed.

Para, who had overheard the conversation, could not help laughing too, and, laughing, gave in, to whatever it was Ravi wanted to do. That was the damn thing about the boy; he disarmed people with his laughter, so full and abandoned it was.

Then, one day, Ravi disappeared for good. Or so it had seemed to Para then, so close had he been to Devi's sense of loss. But looking back now, he realized that Ravi had indeed come back, just once more, some six months later. Yes, of course, he had, how could he have forgotten. The laughter had gone from the boy, and he came dressed in army fatigues, a pistol at his side and a machine-gun in his hands. He had joined the freedom fighters, he said, and neither his grandfather nor his mother should expect to see him again. He was sorry he had left without telling them, but that was the day, that was the day . . . Ravi was crying . . . strange, an army man . . . with a pistol and machine-gun . . . crying . . . that was the day they had killed Gnani, his great friend Gnani, tortured and killed him, the Sinhalese army, because he would not tell who had robbed the bank with him, because he would not tell on his friends.

Devi had looked on her son, in a state of shock, unrecognizing. Para had buried his head in his hands and accepted. But Ravi had cried out, as though unable to bear his grandfather's acceptance, wanting his approval instead.

'You have never had to fight for anything, grandfather, have you?' Ravi had asked, and Para had been taken aback. Never fought for anything? he had bristled inwardly, chewing on his cigar. No, not like that, I suppose, not with guns and bullets and . . . not with my life. And not for my future. For my past perhaps, to keep something of myself, my language, my history against the encroaching British. Only, they were more subtle than the Sinhalese, they took away my past by stealth, the Sinhalese are taking away your future by force. And they are no foreigners, they are your countrymen, and that is hard. 'No, son,' he had said aloud. 'I haven't had to fight like you.'

His reverie broke as he heard Devi call from the other side of consciousness. 'Can't you hear me, father?' She seemed to be shouting, from some far-off place. 'Your food is getting cold.'

What had she managed to put together today, he wondered . . . rice and *dhal* again . . . full of stones, the rice . . . he had broken his last tooth . . . ah, well . . . others in the village had less to eat . . . they made sure that Commander Ravi's mother did not starve . . . out of love once . . . out of fear now . . . but Devi sent it all back . . . to the children . . . with their toy machine guns and empty, swollen bellies.

Once he had been proud of them . . . the Boys . . . the guerrillas . . . the Liberation Fighters for Eelam, LIFE . . . the Life-Boys. He chuckled mirthlessly . . . what a silly joke . . . senile . . . no one to laugh with any more . . . no one laughed any more . . . when the Commander stopped laughing, they all stopped laughing . . . LIFE was a serious business . . . another silly joke. Oh hell, what did it matter . . . it was time to die, anyway . . .

That day at Nallur temple, what a celebration that had been. The Boys had sealed up the army in the old Dutch fort and come out into the open at last. Everybody ran to the temple to see who it was who had come out of the bunkers. And they were stunned and proud to find not just their sons, but their daughters, in the guerrilla parade. Who'd ever have thought that Premi would have joined? She was the shy one in Kannamma's family, hid behind the curtains when visitors came. And Gowri, she was lame from birth, and here she was carrying a Kalashnikov. So that was where Mani had disappeared to? One by one, their relatives and friends counted them out, standing tip-toe in the crowd, shouting and yelling at each other. 'It's her, it's her, my baby . . .' 'Oh look, there is so-and-so . . . Who could have thought . . .' 'Oh no, not him, he's too young.' Everyone vying with each other for the merit of the unknown contribution they had each made to the struggle for their own freedom.

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive – how the memory of his alien

schooling had come back to Para, then, turning it native. Bliss was in that dawn . . . crushed by the crowd, but bliss . . . barely able to keep his feet, but exalted . . . couldn't see his grandson though . . . or Yogi . . . Devi had gone looking for her son, but did not find him. Ravi had kept out of it all . . . through modesty or stratagem? . . . the war was not yet over . . . and he was not Commander, then, but *thambi*, everybody's younger brother . . . and to be young was very heaven.

That evening Para had sat among his cronies in the toddy tavern of his youth and regaled them with stories of his grandson. His friends, not to be outdone, matched him, tale for tale, with stories of their own progeny – till, tired and proud, they rose unsteadily from their seats, proclaiming that it was the Boys who had raised them to their feet again.

Yes, Para had been proud of them, then, proud of the way they had brought back legend to a people starved of heroes and fed on fear, and prouder still of the practical way they had gone about relieving people's hardships with food redistribution centres and medical supplies and nurseries.

And then, they had begun to fight each other over who could serve the people better, which faction, which dogma, till the people mattered no more . . . and the army came back . . . and the war had to be fought all over again . . . only this time there were no people in it, only armies and warlords and fiefs and kingdoms . . . and the redistribution centres became places of ransom, medicines ceased to arrive and the nurseries grew into nurseries of war.

'Can't you see what you are doing?' Para had asked Yogi, who was in charge of their district but visited it less frequently since he was made Second-in-Command. When he did, though, he made it a point to look up his adopted grandfather and guru, if only to listen to 'the old man's lectures' as he put it.

'What are we doing, grandfather?' Yogi had challenged him affectionately.

'The Africans have a saying: when elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled.'

'Where on earth do you pick up these things?'

'I just read. Well?'

Yogi would not reply and Para had pressed him. 'Well?'

'Well, yes, all right,' Yogi had answered reluctantly, 'but you should speak to your grandson. I don't have his ear.'

'Nor have I. He never comes.'

'But you can't go on like this,' Para had continued. 'You are destroying everything you built. You must unite.'

'Unite with those who betrayed us? You can forget that one, grand-

father. You know how he hates disloyalty, and informers. He has never forgotten Gnani's death you know: someone told on him and he died, refusing to tell on anyone.

'That's why we carry these damn things around our necks,' he added, fingering the cyanide capsule that hung from a string. 'We'd rather die than inform.'

Para had remembered the circumstances only too well, but he could not let Yogi go on that note. 'What happened to your socialism, son?' he had asked Yogi as he was leaving.

'Once we take power—'

'You'll keep it,' Para had laughed cynically, but knew that he had planted a seed of doubt in Yogi, so close had the lad grown to him since that day he had first come to see him with Vijay.

Soon after, though, Yogi's father was arrested and tortured by the army, and Para had seen him only once since then, transformed into a bitter and vengeful man.

Para had tried to reach Ravi, send word to him before it was too late . . . after all, he had brought up the boy . . . but Ravi had his own advisers by then, theoreticians he called them . . . even his mother's pleas to see him again (she was not well, was all she would say, though she was dying of cancer) had not moved him . . . but he had come . . . surely he had come . . . when his mother died, with Yogi . . . was it then or was it before . . . if only his memory would stay in place and not keep slipping off the edge . . . like Ravi that time, on that chair . . . oh, there it was in the corner . . . in uniform he was, all strapped up and puffed up . . . and the chair had broken under his weight . . . yes it was when Devi died . . . how could he forget a thing like that . . . was his memory failing him . . . or succeeding . . . in blotting out Ravi . . . he had not stayed for the funeral . . . he had not stayed to light the pyre . . . the only son . . . poor Devi . . . he had a war to fight, he said, and left.

'Can't you hear me, the food is getting cold.' That wasn't Devi, that was Parvati, come to help . . . he was getting too old for this world . . . it was time to die . . . the world was too new for him . . . he'd try it a little longer . . . he'd like to see Vijay again.

A sigh rose from the passengers, like the sigh of the engine, as the train pulled to a halt at Jaffna station. Their faces, drawn and tired, were at last streaked with smiles and hope.

Vijay shook Sanji awake. He had fallen asleep atop a loose pile of somebody's clothes. Meena pulled her hair back and tied it into a knot, tidying herself, as for a visit. Vijay helped the others out of the compartment and got out last, stretching his long frame in the sun like a lizard.

Home. Smilingly he shuffled along behind the others towards the exit, longing to show Meena the mighty parade of resurrected Austins outside the station. But the car park was empty; only a Somerset, half of it blown off, lay on its rusted side like some prehistoric animal.

Someone shouted that there were coaches waiting for them, at the bottom of the road, to take them to the camp. The word hung like an omen in the air and, for a moment, no one moved. And then there was a wild surge towards the coaches.

'So this is Jaffna,' exclaimed Meena, seated at a window. Vijay, standing beside her, craned his neck forward and, seeing the craters on the road and the blasted buildings, remarked that it had been Jaffna.

'The people look happy,' rejoined Meena.

'Hmm.'

The coaches stopped at the Jaffna Esplanade, which had been turned into a refugee camp, and let the passengers out. A loudspeaker announcement required them to queue up at the several stores set out on the perimeter of the camp to collect their ration of clothes and pans and toiletries. After which, the announcer went on, they would go to their particular section of the camp, women to the left, men to the right, and be allocated accommodation.

'They are well organized, aren't they?' observed Sanji. Vijay pointed to the flag flying over the camp and its emblem.

'Oh, it's the LIFE people is it? Running it I mean?'

Vijay nodded.

Life in camp was orderly and peaceful and boring. Vijay saw Meena in the dinner tent at meal times, but was not allowed to spend any time with her. The separation between the sexes was strictly maintained, and anyone breaking the rule was liable to be put into solitary confinement. Nor were visits to town encouraged, though people could leave camp to find work and then move into lodgings.

Vijay had tried to get a permit to go into town and look around, and visit Nadesan too, but he was actively discouraged, because he was a Sinhalese, he suspected, albeit with Tamil credentials – which he could understand. He then asked to see Yogi, but all the camp manager would say every day was 'tomorrow'. When finally Vijay was allowed to visit Nadesan, it was in Sanji's custody.

'How do they know we won't run off?' asked Sanji as they started walking the five miles to Nadesan's house.

'Where to? And how? Everything is in the hands of the guerrillas or the army, and if the other groups know we are with LIFE, we are dead.' He laughed at his involuntary humour.

'I thought you knew this place.'

‘This is not the place I knew. This is a different map.’

The bustle had gone from the streets. People moved around on leaden feet like in a slow-motion movie. Here and there, a man quickly passed as though on a mission yet to be determined. A depression descended on Sanji.

‘Come on, I’ll show you the bazaar,’ Vijay tried to cheer up his companion. ‘It will only take a few minutes.’ Sanji gave in reluctantly; their pass was for only two hours.

But when they got there, there was no bazaar, only the charred remains of wooden pillars and the stumps of concrete posts standing forlorn in a flat landscape. ‘Every time we built it up,’ said an old beggar in reply to Sanji’s inquiry, ‘the army burnt it down.’

Vijay turned away with a sigh. The Jaffna of his boyhood memories was gone. He recalled now that Uncle Para had mourned the burning of the bazaar and the library in one of his letters – the two pillars of our life, he had called them, community and scholarship, the social and the ascetic. We Tamils have never wanted to get rich, he had said, we wanted to have just enough to go on learning.

‘Can we go now?’ asked Sanji. Vijay nodded dejectedly and led the way. There was a shorter route to Nadesan’s from here, but he was not in the mood to ask anyone. He was not even sure that Nadesan and Chitra lived in the same house any more and, when he and Sanji got there, they found the doors and windows locked and barred, and no one answered their knocking.

‘God knows whether he is alive or dead,’ said Vijay, who had told Sanji about what had happened to Nadesan at the hands of the army.

‘Are you sure this is the house?’ asked Sanji.

‘Yes, of course. I stayed here.’

They were about to leave when a bundle of rags in the corner of the verandah stirred, and a gruff voice came out of it, saying: ‘go round the back’.

Vijay thanked the bundle, but could find no way to the back except through the side entrance of the next house, which was also boarded up, its garden overgrown with weeds. ‘Chitra,’ he called, as they made their way to the rear of the house and came to a break in the fence. ‘Chitra,’ he called again, going through the gap into Chitra’s house.

‘Is it Vijay?’ came a voice, hardly above a whisper, from a window.

‘Yes, yes, it’s me, and my friend. Where are you?’

A moment later Chitra appeared, from behind the vegetation, on the steps of the back porch.

‘Yogi told me you were here,’ she said embracing Vijay. ‘And this is Sanji, yes? Meena didn’t come then? You see I know all about you all.’

Chitra was haggard and old, her hair all grey, her body stooped, her majesty gone. She was not the woman Vijay remembered.

'Come in, he will be so happy to see you,' she said leading the way through the kitchen to a bedroom on the farther side of the house. A window was open and sunlight bathed the room. Nadesan was lying on a bed in a corner, his face wreathed in smiles.

'Oh, Vijay, my boy, how lovely to see you.' He stretched out his withered arms to Vijay and, as Vijay went up to the bed, he saw there was nothing beneath the sheets.

'This is Sanji,' Chitra intruded, giving Vijay time to compose himself. 'He and his daughter had to escape from Hatton.'

'Oh yes, I remember. Please sit down, Sanji. Is your daughter all right in the camp?'

'Yes, she is fine. It's better than most camps.'

'There's room here, you know,' Chitra invited.

'I say, Chitra, that's a great idea,' Nadesan leapt at the suggestion. 'Vijay can have his old room.'

'No, no, we can't put you —' began Sanji.

'There are three rooms doing nothing, and Meena can help me around the house.'

'And they can do with more room in the camp,' added Nadesan. 'Aren't there more refugees coming?' Vijay nodded.

'That's settled then,' chirped Chitra. Her voice was still strong. 'I'll go and make the tea.'

Nadesan stirred in his bed, lifting himself up, and Vijay realized that his friend was not completely paralysed. There was some sort of movement under the sheets and there were crutches on the floor. Nadesan noticed Vijay's interest and remarked that he was not as bad as he looked. He was better off than Chitra, he said, a grave sadness entering his voice. She had grown old the night the army took him, waiting for him to come home, not knowing that he would, fearing that he wouldn't be in one piece if he did. Yogi, too, had been desperate, not knowing where his father was being kept, and helpless — a freedom fighter unable to free his father, a guerrilla and helpless — and bitter that he was helpless. Fortunately, the younger children were not at home at the time — the boy was studying in Madras and the girls still went to school in Chitra's village — and were told that their father had been injured in a car crash.

'We'd go back to the village too,' said Chitra, bringing in the tea, 'but we can't get his medicines there, and without the painkillers . . . Not that things are any better here,' she ended angrily, 'and I bloody well tell them that.' She raised herself proudly to her old height.

Jaffna town was supposed to be a liberated zone, she went on, but

the hardships never ceased. Hadn't Vijay noticed the beggars and vagrants on the streets, their arms and legs shot off, children maimed and blinded, liberation indeed, and the houses all boarded up?

'I thought I saw soldiers —'

'Oh, yes, they come out of their barracks from time to time, arrest a few civilians and run back into the Old Dutch Fort again. That is all they do, the government's economic blockade does the rest.' She shook her head from side to side as though in bewilderment. 'The Boys rule an empty town.'

'And the money they collect in taxes from us goes to buy guns and ammunition,' complained Nadesan. 'They can settle for peace, but the gun has taken over, and they've got greedy. They want everything.'

'Oh, come on, *appa*,' interjected Chitra, 'that's not fair. The government plays a double game. How many times have we talked peace with those snakes. Peace for them is a way of war. That is what Yogi says.'

'Yes, that's true,' conceded Nadesan, rethinking himself.

Vijay could not help noticing that Chitra still used the term 'boys' to describe the guerrillas, but her husband didn't. Chitra stirred the pot once more and poured out the tea in two of her best cups (their saucers had long left them for other uses) and handed round a plateful of *vadais*.

'Remember the first time you came, Vijay? We had *vadais* then too. Must be a good omen.'

'I thought you didn't believe in omens.'

'What else is there to believe in?' she asked half seriously.

'Yogi?'

'Yes, he's a good lad. Still cares about people. But he is only one man.'

Sanji complimented Chitra on the *vadais* and marvelled that she could still get the ingredients. 'Ah-ha, that's not *ulundu* you are eating,' retorted Chitra triumphantly.

'What's it then?' But before Chitra could answer, there was a shuffle at the door and a man in an old army jacket and a torn sarong limped in on a stick.

'Good heavens, Kugan, I forgot your tea,' cried Chitra. 'Come in, come in. These are friends of ours, Vijayan and Sanji.' Vijay noticed that she had Tamilized his name for Kugan and decided to behave accordingly.

'Yes, I saw them come,' replied Kugan sitting down beside Sanji.

'Of course you did,' said Nadesan and, turning to Vijay, explained that Kugan was the bundle of rags Vijay had seen on the front verandah. He had fought with the guerrillas at the battle of Elephant Pass and had

half his leg blown off, and Yogi had brought him home. He kept watch over them now. In fact, many of the vagrants Vijay had seen on the porches and verandahs, confided Nadesan, were war-wounded guerrillas who acted as the eyes and ears of LIFE.

Sanji remarked that he had seen a couple of them being led away by soldiers. 'Ah yes, some of them have taken to drinking and stealing and getting hand-outs from the army.'

'Informers,' Kugan spat out contemptuously. 'If they get caught by the Boys, krr'k.' He ran a finger around his neck.

'So, what are you going to do with yourself?' butted in Chitra, turning to Vijay.

'I don't know really.'

'We are going to be late,' muttered Sanji anxiously, looking at the clock.

'Will you go back to your job?' Chitra went on.

'They should be going,' interrupted Nadesan. 'The curfew—'

'I don't know that I have a job to go back to.'

'And your wife?'

Sanji stood up to take his leave.

'Chitra, they really must go,' Nadesan was more firm this time.

'You can gossip all you want when Vijayan comes to stay with us.'

'Have you given him a letter?' asked Kugan.

'What letter?'

'To the camp manager, to say they are coming to stay with you.'

'Good heavens, no,' exclaimed Chitra, and rushed out to write it.

18

'WAIT FOR YOGI,' Nadesan kept repeating. 'He'll tell you what to do.' But Yogi did not come, and Vijay was beginning to feel listless, useless, as though he was dangling over the edge of the world, in a void, with no future and no past. He had hoped at least that, living under the same roof, he could get closer to Meena, but Meena held herself back. And when he tried to talk to her about it, she turned him away with a smile and a joke. Finally, one day, he went up to her in the kitchen and, taking her forcibly by the hand, led her out to the back porch.

'Why are you avoiding me?' he asked her. Meena was about to make a flippant remark when she saw the anguish on his face.

'What have I done?' he went on.

Meena lowered her eyes. 'Oh, Vijay.'

'What is it?'

'You can't leave her, you know.'

'But I have, I have.'

'No, don't interrupt me. It's hard enough to have to say it, but it's harder, sometimes, to carry it in silence. It isn't fair to you.'

'What isn't?'

'Please, Vijay.'

'OK, I won't interrupt.'

'Let's find a place where father can't see us,' she said and led the way to the side of the house where the grass was overgrown and the weeds had still not fallen to Sanji's scythe. But the moment she got there, she closed up again.

'Oh, I can't, Vijay.'

'Why not, for heaven's sake?'

'Because it will come out like an ultimatum, and that's the last thing -' He took hold of her roughly, desperately, and kissed her.

'Please,' she broke away, 'let me talk to you first.' She stamped down the grass around them and sat down, sitting Vijay down in front of her.

'Do you remember that time you came to see me in hospital?'

Vijay nodded.

'I was not ill, I was raped.'

Vijay looked stunned.

'By the lorry driver who helped us escape from Vavuniya.'

Vijay put his head in his hands.

'That's why I sent you back to Manel. I didn't want to, God knows I didn't want to. I needed you, I needed you more than ever. I needed you to touch me there where I hurt, where all my hurts had gathered, the hurts of all my years, of being a coolie and a woman and a . . . I needed you to touch me there, to kiss me there, like you did once before . . . only you could heal me . . .'

Vijay began to cry softly. Meena put her arms round him.

'You see. I know you,' and she dried his tears with her sari.

'Can I kiss you there, now?' he asked shyly.

No, she laughed, there was one other thing that preyed on her mind. That evening when Manel came home, that last evening at his house, when he and Manel had quarrelled over them, over Meena and Sanji being there, over her, really, she had heard Manel, before she and her father had left so precipitately, she had heard her screaming and shouting. But beneath all that shrieking anger, she had heard, too, Manel's desperate longing for her husband. She did not know whether she would have heard it like that before, before the rape, as part of her own pain,

but that's how she heard it now. And Vijay, she knew, had heard it too, heard his wife, heard her desperate love for him, or why else had he turned away from her so abruptly, so deliberately? But having turned away like that, he would keep on hearing her, keep on looking back over his shoulder, he was that sort of man, a just man, she loved him for that, but he would have to be sure of his justice before he loved her, wholly.

'That was quite a speech,' laughed Vijay uneasily, recalling Meena's words all those moons ago, 'but you are wrong. I had to leave her, don't you see? I had to leave her to find myself. Manel and I are useless together. Don't you see?' And Vijay went on to explain his life with Manel and how it was now finished, lived out. Any feeling he had for her was involved with who he was, and that he could not resolve without Meena.

'Hmm,' Meena mumbled and fell into a deep silence. She had voiced her fears to Vijay and found assurance there. It would be unfair to him to prevaricate any longer.

Vijay sensed the change in her and, taking both her hands in his, asked her, half-seriously: 'Does that mean I can make love to you now?'

'No,' she giggled, 'it means that Manel is your problem, not mine.'

'I can then, can I?' he entreated.

'You know you can, my love,' she replied softly, 'any time you like, but not here, you wouldn't want to, not with father around.'

'Will you go with me to Sandilipay, then? Just you and me?'

'Yes.' He buried his head in her lap and kissed her. 'If only the world was as straight as you,' he sighed.

She laughed uneasily. 'How long are we going for?' she asked.

'I don't know,' answered Vijay, sitting up. 'A month? Two months? For ever? All I can do here, now, is to write about the war, tell the people in the South about what is going on here.'

'And who's going to publish it?' interrupted Meena.

'I don't know. Set up a press. Use the pirate radio.'

'From Sandilipay?'

'I don't know. I'll ask Yogi. And, in any case, I want to interview my grandfather, Para, write up his memoirs or something. He spans the whole century and he has an eye for history. He remembers that we were one people once.'

Meena found that hard to believe, but Vijay had to find something to do to keep himself busy, and there was no point in being logical about it. 'Yes, of course, you are right. But let's speak to Yogi about your other idea first.'

At ease with himself at last, Vijay put himself about, helping around the house, putting up with Nadesan's unfailing cheerfulness, assisting Sanji in the garden. The one thing he dared not do was to tidy up his

room. Yogi's things were still there as he had left them all those years ago, the books on the floor, a cricket bat in the corner, the things so suddenly abandoned, and the legend 'Happy Birthday Son' chalked across the door. Chitra had probably left it like that to remind her of Yogi. What Vijay thought he could do was to buy some joss sticks from the shop round the corner and get the mustiness out of the room.

Halfway down the road he was summarily stopped by Kugan. 'You can't do that, *thambi*,' Kugan admonished him. 'The streets look innocent enough, but you are a stranger here. Anything can happen to you and no one will ever know. Not like Colombo.'

'Oh no, it happens there too, my friend, believe me, it happens there too,' and Vijay, sitting himself down on the verandah floor beside Kugan, told him the story of his arrest and detention and the scenes he had witnessed in prison.

'Yes, that was terrible, we couldn't believe that the government could do that, kill its own prisoners, it was terrible. It changed everything here, you know, it brought the various factions together for a time, and we mounted that attack on the barracks at Elephant Pass.'

'That's where you lost your leg, right?'

'And my arm.' He removed his blanket and showed Vijay an empty socket.

He didn't mind it though; it was all in a good cause. He himself had been a lowly toddy-tapper, but the Boys had accepted him as one of them. One day they would all be equals and the caste system would only be a memory. Wasn't that worth losing an arm and a leg for?

Vijay was moved by the man's dream. There was so much killing around that Vijay had forgotten why the war was being fought. The Boys themselves had forgotten. The gun, as Nadesan said, had taken over; the means had become the end.

Kugan was fatalistic about it. These things happen in a war, he said. What made him miserable was the Boys fighting each other, and that led to informers. And informers, for Kugan, were poison. He laughed, fingering the cyanide capsule that hung around his neck. No, there was no question about it, informers should be hanged.

Vijay had never understood the suicide pill. It was such a symbol of waste, of no-hope, of death as a way of life. It had such a finality about it. Maybe it was all right at the beginning when it symbolized a heroic refusal to inform, at least it implied choice; but now that it had been raised to dogma, belief, ideology, it symbolized the end of choice. And the end of choice was the beginning of terror.

'Loyalty and sacrifice are the things that hold us together,' said Kugan, reading Vijay's thoughts. 'Look at those other groups, just a bunch of

self-seeking individuals. Yes, loyalty and a hatred of the army. Without that we'll come apart.

'Without that and Yogi. They all love him, the Boys. They fear Ravi, but they love Yogi.'

Vijay now began to keep notes of his conversations. He saw himself as a serious writer, a reporter from the front line at the least. He found an old exercise book in Yogi's room and every night, before going to bed, wrote down the things he had learnt that day, and the thoughts and reflections that arose from them, till writing itself became a discovery. And soon he had a feel for Eelam as he had never had before. He had understood it in his head, but he had not felt it in his imagination; and the imagination, he knew now, had to be felt to become material.

He was just putting his notebook away one night, some three weeks later, when he saw his bedroom window open stealthily and a man creep in. Startled, Vijay reached for the chair.

'Hey, hey, it's only me,' said the man removing his hood.

'Yogi,' yelled Vijay, leaping to embrace his friend. 'Yogi, you bastard. How are you?'

'Ssh, not so loud. This is a private visit.'

'Stand here in the light. I want to see how you look. Hmm, grown a bit, almost as tall as me. And I like that dashing moustache. You've put on some weight, haven't you?' Vijay asked, feeling Yogi's arms.

'Muscle, my lad, muscle.'

'But why this sarong and shirt – and hood?'

'As I said, this is a private visit. And I thought you'd like me to come in through the window again.' He chuckled. 'Besides, the army has been nosing around these parts the last few days.'

'You didn't come in through the window last time,' recalled Vijay, 'or did you? I know you left through it hurriedly.' He sat down on the bed and offered Yogi the chair.

'Nowadays I've got to come in through the window too,' laughed Yogi.

'Isn't this a liberated zone?'

'Yes, but it's never very stable.'

They chatted for a while about the situation in Jaffna, but Yogi, Vijay noticed, was giving nothing away. His demeanour was still very boyish and open, but beneath it had developed a more serious man, a thinking man, a man who listened above all, as Vijay discovered from the questions Yogi fired at him in the course of their conversation. What were Vijay's impressions, what had he heard, did he think the movement was winning? What was the feeling among ordinary Sinhalese people in the south? How could they be weaned away from government propaganda?

Vijay answered Yogi as best he could, coming up, finally, with his idea of reporting the war on radio. Yogi was enthusiastic about 'dispatches from the North', but not so sure that they could come from the front line. That would not be possible as yet, and he would have to get permission from higher up even for the other thing.

'Funny, isn't it?' reflected Yogi. 'But for you I wouldn't have met the Commander.'

'Commander?'

'Ravi, your cousin, man.'

'When we went to Sandilipay, you mean? But we never met him that time.'

'No, but I knew who he was when I did, a couple of days later, in town.' Yogi smiled knowingly. 'With Veeran and the others. He came to see us, and we all knew that the talking was over.'

'What do you mean?'

'He wanted action, he wanted to do things, he wanted to get on with the business of liberating our people, not talk about it endlessly. He had an overall idea of what needed to be done to get rid of the Sinhalese occupation and he had detailed plans on how to do it. And he had worked out how we were going to get arms, and money to buy the arms, and when the arms stopped, he had anticipated that too, he would be ready by then to make them, landmines and explosives and . . . You know that he is an explosives expert don't you? That he is the one who blew up Manipay and those other banks?'

Vijay saw the awe and reverence on Yogi's face and wondered how such a level-headed chap could be so wrapped up in one man.

'I know what you are thinking,' said Yogi, 'but there is something about him.' He went on hesitantly, looking for the words. 'A presence, you could say. Yes, a presence, quiet, aloof. But commanding of attention, of devotion even, there is that glow of certainty about him, you know what I mean. I don't know how to say it, but you could see straightaway that he is never going to lose. You can follow a man like that.'

'Where to?' muttered Vijay under his breath.

'Pardon?'

'Where to? To what end?'

'I don't follow.'

'What are you fighting for? Yes, yes, for Eelam, I know. But what sort of Eelam?'

'A socialist Eelam, of course.'

'But where's the socialism now?'

'How do you mean?'

'In the way you run things, your civil administration, law and order, that sort of thing.'

'What about them?'

'I know it's none of my business, but isn't it all very high-handed and top-down? You don't seem to take the people along with you. Or do you think you can take power on behalf of the people and then hand it over to them?'

Yogi did not say anything and, encouraged by his silence, Vijay went on. 'It never happens like that, you know, Yogi. That way socialism never comes. Those who take power don't give it.'

'But then, we'll never take power.' Yogi's voice rose in irritation.

'There's that chance, of course, but this way you are bound to end up replacing one tyranny with another. Where's your socialism then?'

'It will bloody well have to wait,' shouted Yogi, pushing back his chair angrily, 'till after the liberation.'

'Oh, Yogi,' rejoined Vijay, his heart filling with affection as he realized that these were not his friend's convictions, but those of the High Command. 'That way liberation never comes, and you know it. Socialism is the path to liberation, not just its end.'

But Yogi refused to be shaken of his anger, holding on to it tenaciously. He calmed down enough, though, to hand over Vijay's pass to Sandilipay and to wish him and Meena a safe journey.

'I would like to see her sometime,' he said as he left, through the window.

A week later, Vijay set out with Meena for Sandilipay. He had wanted to leave the very next day he had received the pass from Yogi, but there were skirmishes in Kopay and, although the town was not directly on their route, Chitra had suggested that they wait till the fighting died down. She urged them to leave at first light; the journey itself should take no more than two, three hours, by bus and foot, but the roads were pitted, the buses broken down and the bits of no man's land they had to traverse fraught with uncertainty.

It was Friday, a good day astrologically, according to Nadesan, on which to make a journey, and before they left Chitra took them to the shrine room to pray for their safe passage, and Sanji applied holy ash on their foreheads and sandalwood on their cheeks.

It was his way of blessing their relationship, their future union perhaps, while pretending to know nothing about it. Of course, he was fond of the lad, but he was not sure about all this divorce business. It did not sit easily with him. Chitra had tried to reassure him by pointing out that she herself was married to a man who had been married before. But that was different, Sanji had rejoined. Nadesan was a widower.

Vijay's wife was still living. It was not the same . . . there was something about a divorcé that he carried with him for life, like a caste-mark . . . but who was he to talk, a coolie . . . or perhaps that made them equal . . . not that Vijay had ever made him feel otherwise.

He gave them his blessing. The proprieties had been observed; his daughter was only going on a journey, with a respectable married man. He himself could not go because his name was not on the pass.

Meena was dressed in a plain cotton sari and a chiffon blouse that Chitra had given her, and a scent of jasmine lingered in her hair from the previous night. For days, Chitra had been teasing Meena about her 'Sandilipay honeymoon' and, seeing the jasmine in sudden abundance in the garden, had woven a necklace for her friend. But as she was about to put it on Meena, she had stopped and looked at her askance.

'No-oo,' she pouted, 'it should go in your hair.'

Meena giggled and obligingly tied her rich, black hair into a knot.

'No-oo,' said Chitra again, 'we should do this properly. Come on in, I've got an idea.' She took Meena by the hand and ran excitedly into the house and to her bedroom.

'Now, where could it be?' she muttered to herself, ransacking a large *almirah*. Meena sat on the bed wondering what the older woman was up to; there was no point asking her till she was ready to tell.

'Ah-hah,' cried Chitra suddenly, lifting a large old cardboard box out of the wardrobe and, bringing it over to the bed, took out her wedding sari and blouse and petticoat and slippers.

Meena did not stir; this was a private trip her friend was on and she'd want to be surprised. With a flourish, Chitra scattered the mothballs from her sari and held it up for Meena to see. Meena gasped. She had never seen such splendour before: the sari shimmered in the dull light of the room, dripping gold and silver beams as Chitra draped it around her, fold upon fold. Meena reached out and touched it like a dream she did not want to lose.

'Manipuri,' she whispered in awe, never having touched one before. 'A Manipuri blue. Silk, hah? Silk all through, the tassels too?'

Chitra nodded. 'The blouse too.' She took it out and held it aloft. 'Silk and gold. Try them on, they are for you.'

'Oh no,' Meena began. 'It's too . . . you are too . . .' She started to cry.

'Oh, dry up, girl, it's my wedding present to you. Come on, try them on; we might have to take the petticoat up a bit, but the rest should fit, even the slippers. I have small feet.'

For the next half-hour Chitra relived her wedding, dressing Meena up in her wedding clothes, oiling and combing her hair and threading jasmine through the plaits before coiling them into a knot.

'If only I hadn't sold the earrings,' Chitra was lamenting, when there was a knock on the door and Vijay walked in.

'Out, out,' Chitra shouted.

'Oh my God, it's Meena.'

'Out,' shrieked Chitra.

Vijay turned round and left the room, in a daze, muttering, 'She is beautiful, she is beautiful.'

'Men,' said Chitra and Meena in unison, and burst out laughing.

'What was all that about?' inquired Vijay of Meena on the way to the bus station the following morning.

'I am not telling you. It's Chitra's secret, none of your business anyway.'

Vijay made a face and increased his pace.

'Walk up, then,' he said, pretending anger. 'We've still got a couple of miles to go.'

They had left at the break of dawn when there was hardly anyone about, but as they approached the bus station, the streets began to fill up with people hurrying in the same direction.

'Something's happening,' remarked Vijay. 'They can't all be going for a bus.'

'Why not?' teased Meena. 'They probably heard of our love jaunt.'

Vijay climbed on to a culvert and, looking over the heads of the crowd, caught sight of the barricades at the entrance to the bus station.

'Looks like trouble,' he warned. 'Keep close to me.'

A couple of hundred yards from the terminus, the crowd had become more orderly, separating itself into two rows on either side of the road. Through the middle ran the queue of passengers who were being questioned and searched by guerrillas in combat jackets.

'They are just making sure our passes are in order,' Meena reassured Vijay as they took their place in the queue. 'They are not searching everyone.' Vijay nodded and examined his pass again. Everything was in order. Yogi himself had signed it.

The officer who took his pass asked him a few questions in Tamil and, when Vijay answered back fluently, he smiled and waved them on. But a man in civilian clothes standing next to the officer whispered something in his ear, and Vijay was ordered back.

'You live at this address?'

'Yes, we've just come from there.'

'Hmm,' nodded the officer grimly and pushed Vijay and Meena towards a waiting jeep.

'Get in,' he said peremptorily and, bundling the couple into the back of the vehicle, drove off in the direction they had come from.

Sensing that the excitement was moving elsewhere, the crowd immediately broke ranks and started running behind the jeep. The streets ahead were empty of people, but a short distance from Nadesan's house, another crowd had gathered. There were LIFE troops everywhere and the approach to Nadesan's house was cordoned off.

As the jeep slowed down to a halt, a sergeant came up to the officer and muttered something in his ear. Whereupon the officer got down and, signalling Vijay to remain in the jeep, went off with the sergeant. He came back a few minutes later and told Vijay and Meena that they were not needed and were free to resume their journey.

'But what is going on?' protested Vijay. 'Has something happened to the Nadesans?'

The officer turned on Vijay angrily, but before he could say anything, Meena intervened.

'Can't we go in with you, *annai*? she asked sweetly. 'We live there, you know.'

'No, not now, the Commander is coming.' He turned to the sergeant. 'Keep them here,' he said and strode off towards Nadesan's house.

The sergeant, a lad barely out of his teens, was more forthcoming than his superior and more susceptible to Meena's charms. He was reluctant at first to say anything more than that there was going to be 'beeg trouble' when the Commander came. But under Meena's gentle probing, he came out with the whole story.

'You know, don't you, that we have arms and ammunition hidden away in all sorts of secret places?' he asked Meena conspiratorially.

'Yes, of course, everybody knows that,' replied Meena.

'Well, there was an arms cache there, not a big one, but quite a lot of explosives and some rifles stolen from the police and a few Kalashnikovs, things like that, next door to Comrade Yogi's house.'

'In the empty house, you mean?'

'Yes, and last night the army came and took it all away.'

'Last night? But we were... ' Meena began, but Vijay put a finger over his mouth and shook his head in warning.

'We found out only this morning,' the lad went on.

Vijay and Meena looked at each other; there was going to be trouble all right, 'beeg trouble', if the Commander himself was coming to investigate.

'They had better find the informer before the Commander comes,' observed the sergeant.

'Informer?' queried Vijay.

'Yes, someone must have tipped off the army, and it doesn't look too good for brother Yogi, not that he did it,' he guffawed at his own

joke, 'but it's still next door, isn't it?'

Just then, there was a stirring in the crowd. A car was approaching from the opposite direction. 'It's him,' someone whispered.

'I have never seen him,' said the sergeant. 'Wait here,' and he pushed his way through the crowd.

Vijay climbed on to the bonnet of the jeep and looked over their heads. The car had stopped and a portly figure in battle fatigues and side-arms, flanked by two armed men, got down and walked towards Nadesan's house. Yogi came out to meet him and they went back in together. Vijay sank back into his seat and held Meena's hand under cover of her sari.

Suddenly a cry went up. Vijay leapt back on to the bonnet.

'They've caught him,' shouted a man.

'They've caught him,' repeated another and another.

Vijay helped Meena on to the bonnet. The Commander was emerging from Nadesan's house, pushing a man before him. The crowd made a path for them and fell into a circle, forming an arena. The Commander flung the man down in the centre.

'There's your informer,' he told the people triumphantly, and they broke into an uneasy cheer.

Vijay could not see the man's face. He had fallen in a curled-up heap like a child in the womb.

'It's that toddy-tapper,' someone muttered. 'You can never trust these low-caste fellows.'

'Where's Yogi?' asked his neighbour. Vijay looked for Yogi but could not see him. The Commander's aides were now picking the man up from the ground.

'No,' said the Commander. 'Let's leave him to Yogi.'

'Yogi,' he called and Yogi emerged from the crowd. 'You deal with him. After all, he's your man.'

'Oh my God, it's Kugan,' cried Vijay.

Yogi was helping the man up and gently escorting him towards a van.

'Where are you taking him?' the Commander's voice rasped out.

'To question him,' announced Yogi.

'You are not in a position to question anyone. You put him in charge; if he didn't tell the army, who did? And how do you think he got that new sarong he's wearing? Hang him.' He turned to his ADC. 'From that lamp-post there,' he pointed with his baton.

Vijay leapt from the jeep and ran towards Kugan, breaking his way through the crowd, crying stop, stop, the sarong was his, he had given it to Kugan; Sarath had given it to him, oh please, stop, please, please, listen to me . . . the words clung to the roof of his mouth . . . please.

By the time Vijay got to Kugan, he was already hanging from the lamp-post. Sobbing uncontrollably, Vijay shinned up the lamp-post to untie the rope.

'Leave him,' thundered the Commander, pulling out his pistol. Yogi jumped to intervene, shouting, 'No, don't, Ravi, don't. He's Vijay. Your cousin, Vijay. Don't.'

Ravi lifted his pistol and shot Vijay down. Meena ran to where Vijay lay and cradled him in her arms. There was not a tear in her eye. The crowd fell silent. She looked up at Ravi.

'You have killed the only decent thing left in this land,' she said with a terrible dignity. 'We'll never be whole again.'

Ravi reached for his pistol. Yogi knocked it out of his hand.

'That's enough,' he said. 'I am taking over.'

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