

THE HURDLES

M. THAYALAN

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES



Luxmi
Publication

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Acknowledgement

'Our future depends on stories. As the world advances, Literature has the ability to ground us - in our humanness, our imaginations, and our enlightenment.

Pawan Mishra

Dear friends, this is my third book in English.

Whoever lives in this world has to face many problems, whether they like them or not. Especially with the Srilankan Tamil community, which has many contradictions, such as caste, religion and marriage.

My short stories contain more incidents I have seen or faced, and I have tried my best to find solutions through my stories for those ongoing problems. All my experiences are related to my home country, Srilanka and London, where I live now.

As my profession is a teacher, I have seen many children born in London who face an indispensable situation between the western culture and their own culture as Tamils.

Our parents never considered this situation severe and acted in an unconcerned manner. This behaviour of

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our parents created a vast gap between them and their children. The parents will lose everything from their hands at one point, leaving both parties alone without help. So first we need to make our children have an indepth understanding about our society.

The Major problem for children born in London is 'Language'. They do not read Tamil and do not write in Tamil also. Worst of all, our children do not want to learn their mother tongue. This behaviour is not the children's or their parent's mistake. This mistake is merely on the surroundings only. The children spend most of the time with their English-speaking friends. They never had any opportunities to use or speak Tamil anywhere.

There was no English fiction for them to read and learn about our culture. So writing books in English was an urgent need for our children to ensure the survival of our culture and language. I have tried my best to bring this book in simple English. Now you need to introduce this book to your children.

Thank Dr Jeyarupalingam for writing the preface with his tight schedule and also offering my gratitude to my son for designing the lovely cover for this book.

M. Thayalan

Introduction

This book is a collection of twelve short stories depicting the lives of Sri Lankan Tamils living in the UK. Every story in this book I felt I could relate to someone I knew (or knew of), covering eternal issues deeply familiar to the people in our community by laying them bare – without ever presuming to preach to the reader.

Written in clear, simple English, this collection of stories explore the way Migrant communities bring their cultural values, and traditions of their home country with them, wherever they go. It also scrutinises the duality that brings with it. The way it allows them to retain their identity and their pride in places that feel nothing like home... whilst also keeping alive practices no longer relevant in a modern world, all in the name of ‘tradition.

Thayalan looks at the way caste, dowry, and horoscopes still dominate marriage proposals in the Tamil Community - regardless of where they are living in the world and their socio-economic status. In stories like ‘The Hurdles’ and ‘Love’, he tells of the younger generation -

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children born in western countries who neither relate to or understand these concepts... but become victims of their parents need to 'follow tradition'.

In 'Tamarind Tree', Thayalan tells us the story of Kanthasamy who is returning to his home village in Sri Lanka after many years. What we think will be a pleasant nostalgic journey down memory lane, ends up showing us the harsh realities of caste discrimination in the village of his youth.

We see the children of migrant communities struggling to cope with two different worlds. Their world at home so vastly different to the outside world they see in school. 'A London Boy' story describes the consequences of being raised among two worlds, by migrant parents who struggled to understand the issues their son faced.

In 'It is not the end', Thayalan shows us how a young couple trying to balance their parental responsibilities and their careers come up against the issues of traditional, gender-based stereotyping of male provider and female homemaker, a concept found in both western and eastern cultures, but no longer relevant in today's world, where both parents are working.

Anyone who's owned a pet knows that it becomes a part of the family, but does that mean we should treat

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them as equal family members? ‘Leo My Dog’ is an emotional story that tries to answer this question.

The impact of the coronavirus was felt all over the world. Some families struggled more than others because of their situation. ‘One Day One Man One Family’ is a story about one such unlucky family.

Thayalan is a well-known writer amongst the Sri Lankan Tamil community. Although we live in the same country and not too far away geographically from each other, I have never met him in person. I know Thayalan through his Tamil writings and as an editor of Sirukathai Manjari monthly magazine. He has also recently ventured into publishing with his own publishing company as the next step in his literary work.

I wish Thayalan every success in his future writing and publishing ventures.

Dr. N. Jeyarupalingam

Tamarind Tree

Kanthasamy, who had lived in London for many years, decided to visit Sri Lanka. His friends advised him to hire a minibus to travel to Jaffna from Colombo, but Kanthasamy wanted to enjoy the train journey, so he booked the ticket and started his trip to Srilanka.

When he arrived at the katunayaka airport, he cleared his immigration formalities and hired a van from the airport to Colombo to travel by train to Jaffna.

On his train journey to Jaffna, he watched through the train window. The train passed many small villages, and Kanthasamy enjoyed seeing this beautiful scenery.

The train passed Mathavachi, heading towards Kodikamam, a famous city connecting all the northern towns such as Nelliady, Karaveddy and Point Pedro.

When he saw the name board for Aanaiiravu, he felt happy. When travelling from Colombo to Jaffna, most Tamil people will smile and find themselves in a happy

mood if they see Aanairavu. Kanthasamy used to have this experience often in Sri Lanka about twenty years ago. And now Kanthasamy saw the palm trees through the window, and he felt happy and smiled slightly.

The train approached Kodikamam. Kanthasamy prepared to get down. Kanthasamy needed to travel on the Kodikamam–Nelliady bus to reach his hometown, Karaveddy. The bus left from the town of Kodikamam.

Kanthasamy sat in the last row of that bus and started sightseeing. He had come to this town after a long time from abroad, and everything seemed to him very different. So much of the surroundings had changed, like the bus stops and the shops' name boards. He couldn't believe these changes.

He needed to get down near the tamarind tree, a landmark for anyone visiting the villages Kanpollai and Anthiran.

Anthiran is the place where Kanthasamy lived twenty years ago. There, a group of people lived in the surrounding Murugan temple. From the tamarind tree, if he went towards its left side and turned right, he would reach his place called Anthiran.

This tamarind tree had so many stories behind it. Kanthasamy started to think about that tamarind tree, and

he realised he didn't know whether the tree was still there or not.

The person who sat next to him started to talk with him.

'Brother, I am Arunan. Are you coming from abroad?' the unknown person asked him. Kanthasamy smiled slightly to himself and said, 'Yes, I am from London.'

'Then, brother, you must have lots of money,' Arunan said.

Kanthasamy looked at him in a hateful manner.

'Don't get angry with me; the people here always say that the people from London have more money. That's why I said what I said.' Kanthasamy didn't say anything to him, but he wanted to ask about that tamarind tree from Arunan. 'I am coming here after twenty years away. Everything changed here. Is that tamarind tree still there?' Kanthasamy asked.

Arunan didn't answer Kanthasamy's question. The bus jolted along.

'All these roads were damaged before the war,' Arunan said.

'Why won't the government repair them?' Kanthasamy asked.

Arunan laughed. Kanthasamy understood the meaning of his laugh. Kanthasamy asked again about the tamarind tree.

‘The tree is not there now. In wartime, the army destroyed it.’

The bus stopped at Varani’s stop.

Varani was a big village; most people who lived here were farmers.

Some people got down, and some got in.

The bus resumed its journey.

‘Where are you going?’ Arunan asked Kanthasamy.

‘I am going to Karaveddy,’ Kanthasamy answered.

Karaveddy was Kanthasamy’s birthplace, a vast area with many temples and schools. Most of the people were teachers. Its town was Nelliady. People here were more friendly but, at the same time, adamant about the caste system. The men’s conversation continued.

‘Whereabouts in Karaveddy?’ Arunan asked.

‘I need to go to Kanpollai street,’ Kanthasamy answered.

Kanpollai is another small village in the Karaveddy district. In this village, the people were considered low-profile people. Therefore, they were not allowed to study

with the other children in the village or enter the temple for worship. These were undeclared laws for them declared by high-profile people. Therefore, the street was named Kanpollai.

‘Oh, you are going there,’ Arunan said.

‘Not to Kanpollai. I am going to Anthiran.’

‘Okay...okay...’ Arunan said.

‘Why did they destroy that tamarind tree? That is the only landmark for the people,’ Kanthasamy said.

Kanthasamy was a bit worried about that. So he was silent for a time.

Arunan continued his conversation.

‘You are worrying about this tamarind tree, but do you know how many other landmarks were destroyed?’ said Arunan. Kanthasamy had some old memories about that tamarind tree.

‘I have some memories about that tree,’ said Kanthasamy. At that time, Kanthasamy and his friend Sivam supported the Communist party. Karaveddy’s caste problem was severe. The high-profile people were stopping the food supply from going into Kanpollai, and at the same time, the people in Kanpollai could not leave it. One day, Kanthasamy and Sivam tried to take the food

from that tamarind tree to Kanpollai on bicycles; the high-profile people stopped them and beat them severely. Kanthasamy was gravely injured and stayed in the hospital for two weeks.

Arunan asked, 'Brother, are you dreaming about the incidents happen under the tamarind tree? Come back to this world.'

'It's nothing. I just thought about them. My friend Sivam and I took food to the people in Kanpollai and were injured badly for it,' said Kanthasamy.

Arunan laughed loudly. Kanthasamy did not like this; he looked at the other man with irritation.

'Brother, there is no use thinking about the past,' said Arunan. Kanthasamy agreed with his statement.

'Under that tamarind tree, the army shot four freedom fighters,' Arunan said. 'Those days, that tree was armour for our boys, who fought for our freedom,' he continued.

'How do you know all these things?' Kanthasamy asked him. He smiled and said, 'I am also one of the fighters.' Frightened, Kanthasamy moved from him a little bit.

Arunan noticed this and asked,
'Are you scared of me?'

‘No...No...’ Kanthasamy managed.

‘Do you know something else? Earlier, you said that you were carrying food with your friend to the Kanpollai people, and then you were beaten by some people; I am also one of them,’ said Arunan. Kanthasamy was shocked.

‘You said you are one of the freedom fighters,’ Kanthasamy asked.

‘After that, only fighting for freedom started,’ Arunan said. Kanthasamy looked at him with surprise.

‘That tamarind tree was wide and very strong also,’ Arunan said.

‘It is true. In those days, so many small meetings were also held under that tree. When my sithappa died, the drums people had a special drumming event under that tree. Still, I can remember them,’ said Kanthasamy.

‘But the army destroyed it at the end of the day,’ Arunan said. After this, neither man talked about anything. Full silence. The conductor on the bus said, ‘Those who want to get down at Tamarind Tree Place, please come to the front.’ Even though they had destroyed the tamarind tree, the name still lived on.

Kanthasamy got up and moved to the front of the bus to get down.

On a snowy day

His name is Thevan. The time is early morning, three am. Suddenly, he hears the alarm clock, gets up and looks outside.

Everywhere he looks, it is milky white because of the snow last night. His car is fully covered by snow. He turns and looks at the bed; his wife is sleeping deeply.

He doesn't want to disturb her and moves slowly without making any noise and walks towards the bathroom. He finishes all his morning duties and is ready to go to work. Unfortunately, his workplace is not nearby, and he needs to drive for at least an hour. If there is no traffic on the road, he can reach his workplace in only an hour; otherwise, he needs two hours to get there.

His workplace is a petrol station, so he needs to be there every day at five am, but London roads never cooperate with him. They are always busy, lots of cars on the road, and in winter you can't drive fast. The fastest you can drive is fifty miles per hour. Therefore, Thevan

starts his journey a bit early.

He needs to get there on time to relieve the other cashier from duty. Today, there is lots of snow outside. He cannot drive fast. Also, he cannot take leave from work, so some way or another he needs to get to his job.

Every day he needs to work for ten hours. During those ten hours, he needs to clean the place, work as a cashier, and fill up the shop with items for sale. Sometimes, he feels terrible back pain. He takes paracetamol to manage the pain. If he takes a rest, the petrol station owner watches through a camera from home and begins to shout.

For all this work, he gets only five pounds per hour. If he asked for an increase in salary, the boss wouldn't give it to him; instead, he would fire him. The owner doesn't care because there are people outside who are willing to come and work for £3 per hour. So, Thevan never talks about his salary with the owner.

After he finishes his morning duties, he goes to the kitchen and makes some tea. Then, he drinks the tea in the kitchen, comes to the bedroom, and looks at his wife; she is still sleeping deeply.

Silently, he gets his clothes and gets ready to go out.

The horrible cold air hits him in the face when he goes outside. His hands are stiff when he reaches the car,

and the vehicle is covered with snow. He takes one of his bank cards and scrapes all the snow from the front and back windows.

Thevan hates this life.

He remembers the letter his mother wrote yesterday.

In that letter, she wrote that they can't complete the house they started to build four months earlier. If only they could finish that house, they could look for a groom for his sister. So, they were indirectly asking for money.

He scrapes off all the snow, gets into the car and tries to start it—but it won't start. He is about to cry.

Again, his mind starts to think about his mother's letter: *'Here everyone has a car. ... Your sister wants to have a car. You can do this. It must be a small thing for you. If you send ten thousand rupees, we can buy a second-hand car.'*

He tries to start the car again, and fortunately, it starts. Maybe the car understands his problem. It starts to move slowly.

All the cars are moving slowly because of the heavy snow on the road. The council people are pouring salt on the road to prevent the cars from sliding.

Today he is going to be late for work. He phones the

place and informs them of the situation. He remembers what his wife said yesterday about the summer holiday.

His wife is an anomaly: She never shouts at him about the money he has sent for his sister's marriage, and she never asks for anything for herself the way other women do. She wants to go on holiday to another country this summer. He agrees and has arranged the money so they can go.

When he asked her, she mentioned his mother's character and said not to listen to her. He hadn't expected her to say that, and when she said this, he got angry at her and shouted.

Now the car is going at a good speed. He needs to be at the workplace in fifteen minutes.

He knows his mother and sister are living a luxurious life in Sri Lanka. But he can't say anything to them because she is his mother.

His elder sister also used to write letters asking for money. However, her husband is lazy. He doesn't go to work. So he forces his wife to get money from London.

He arrives at the workplace now and takes over from the other cashier. The man who has been working there is now ready to go to his other job.

His name is Sunthram. He is older than Thevan. He has three sisters, but none of them have gotten married yet. He is working very hard and sending money to them. He also has not gotten married yet.

This is the life of every Tamil person living in foreign countries. Thevan has asked him to find work in his second workplace for him also.

‘I will try, Thevan,’ Sunthram says and leaves the place.

Thevan starts his job. Today significantly fewer people come to the petrol station. So he sits at the counter and thinks about his house problems.

Suddenly, the phone rings. He answers. On the other end is the petrol station owner.

‘Thevan, why are you wasting time? If there are no customers, go and clean the pumps!’ And he hangs up the phone angrily.

‘You give me only £5 and ask me to do all the work,’ Thevan murmurs.

After ten minutes, another call comes. This one is from Thevan’s friend, who has given Thevan money for him to send to Sri Lanka. Thevan takes the phone and answers. His friend needs the money this month. But

unfortunately, Thevan can't respond to his request even though he agreed to pay the money back this month.

He was the only friend who immediately gave money when Thevan asked for it. So Thevan doesn't want to disappoint him.

Thevan decides to give him the money he has saved for his summer holiday visit. The only problem is how to manage his wife. Some or other he has to manage and he decides to go next year.

He finishes the work for today and gets ready to go to his second job.

It is not the end

In the wedding hall, there are many people making a lot of noise. Most Tamil weddings take place in this hall because it is a famous wedding hall within the Tamil community. It is pleasant and beautiful, and compared with other wedding halls, not too expensive.

Today, Sabesan and Saratha will be married in this venue.

Sabesan is twenty-eight years old, reasonably tall and good-looking. Saratha is also beautiful and as fair as Sabesan. The pair both love each other. Saratha and Sabesan met while both working for the same company. They met there and fell in love, which led to this marriage. Their parents didn't oppose the marriage and fully supported it.

Many guests are still arriving for the wedding. The hall is almost full. The bride arrived early and waits in the bride's room. Everyone is waiting for the groom to arrive. In the east corner, the musicians are playing music

loudly.

Suddenly, everyone's eyes look towards the entrance door. The groom enters the hall. The Nathaswara musicians walk with the groom towards the stage. The priest begins the rituals, and the audience watches.

Now is the time for the bride to arrive.

When she enters, they play a lovely song, and the bride matches her steps to the rhythm of the music.

The priest performs his rituals for the bride and groom. He takes the Mangala soothra and gives it to the groom, instructing him to tie it in the bride's neck. And then the wedding function is complete. Hindu weddings have always taken too long to finish because they are made up of many rituals and are connected with God. The priests also increase the traditions from person to person as they see fit. They don't have strict guidelines for this.

This was the way Sabesan and Saratha were married three years ago. For three years, they had a good life. On holiday, they enjoyed travelling to two countries. Both worked and earned good money. Economically, they never had problems. After their honeymoon period, Sabesan began to think about the couple having a baby, but Saratha was against the idea. Sabesan and Saratha

discussed this baby matter several times, but Saratha adamantly opposed it.

They couldn't make a firm decision about having a baby because they fought every single day. As a result, their happiness and enjoyment disappeared. However, Sabesan remained patient and persistent, continuing to try and convince Saratha.

One day, after a long argument, they finally agreed upon a plan. Saratha firmly insisted that she would continue to work. Sabesan agreed. After this, life returned to normal, and Saratha conceived within a month. Sabesan looked after her very well. He gave her good food, and never allowed her to do any housework. At home, Sabesan treated her like a queen. They regularly visited a health clinic, and the baby grew in good health. Saratha was so proud to have Sabesan as her partner.

Nine months passed very quickly. Then, finally, the doctor set the date to welcome the baby into this world. Sabesan was so happy and waited in great anticipation of the day.

On the morning of that day, Saratha was admitted to the hospital. The labour pain started little by little. Sabesan ran to the temple, prayed for Saratha and cried in the temple in front of God.

In the hospital, Saratha experienced severe pain; the hospital people informed Sabesan, who rushed to the hospital. Saratha was taken to the labour room, and Sabesan followed.

The baby entered this world with a loud cry. Sabesan was incredibly happy. Saratha fainted for a short time. The baby was a girl. Sabesan and Saratha were so happy; they named the girl Poorani.

After two days in the hospital, they came home. Saratha was advised to feed the baby and not return to work until the child was weaned. Saratha felt a little annoyed by this advice and looked angrily at Sabesan.

After they returned home, Saratha did not behave as expected and always murmured about staying home all the time. She appeared to be missing her work environment. They had many arguments each day, which put pressure on Saratha. Finally, in an effort to avoid all these things, Sabesan agreed that she could return to work. They looked for childcare for their baby and found suitable carers near their house.

The following week, Saratha returned to work.

In the morning, Sabesan dropped the child off with the childminders; in the afternoon, Saratha picked the

baby up. This arrangement became their daily routine. Both enjoyed playing with the baby in the evenings and enjoyed their happy life together.

At this time, they did not fight with each other. They both spent most of their time with their baby. When they came home from the office, they brought many things for the baby. Saratha was very happy and enjoyed her life.

However, during this happy period, they unintentionally conceived a second child. Saratha was shocked. She could not accept this fact. But Sabesan was happy and celebrated the pregnancy with a colleague. Shortly after, Saratha announced that she planned to abort the child. Sabesan disagreed with this. They had many arguments about it each day. Saratha was adamant that they should abort the child.

But all this time, the child had been growing inside her. So, it became too late. Still, Saratha was adamant she would continue to work. Finally, the day came to welcome their second child. After the baby was born, Saratha said she wanted to return to work and leave both babies with the childminders.

Sabesan argued it wasn't worth it because the childminders were paid more than her salary. He said,

‘It’s better if you stay home and look after the babies, I will earn enough money.’

Saratha disagreed. She said, ‘A woman goes to work not only to earn money, but because the job gives her more freedom and happiness. Every woman needs to work for her own self-respect.’

But Sabesan disagreed with her and argued that looking after children was the most fulfilling role for a woman and society. So, Saratha said, ‘You stay at home and look after the children; I will go and earn money for the family.’

Sabesan got angry and hit her in the face.

The problem then escalated. Next-door neighbours began to keep watch on their house. After these incidents, Saratha seemed to become mentally depressed. Her behaviour changed, and she became destructive. Unfortunately, Sabesan didn’t notice this change in her behaviour.

Sometimes she mistreated the babies. When they would cry, she would put them in a room and lock the door. Sabesan never knew this was occurring. When he would arrive home, the children behaved normally. He loved them very much and spent most of his free time with them. However, Saratha couldn’t tolerate the fact that he loved them well.

That day, after he left the house, she took a rope and tied it around Poorani's neck. Initially, the small girl cried, but then her voice faded slowly. Saratha did the same to the other baby. Afterwards, it was only when she saw the bodies of her children that she realised what had happened. She ran about and screamed.

Saratha decided to kill herself. She tied the rope to the top of the ceiling and hanged herself.

Following the door people, got doubt and tried to open their door. They couldn't open it; it was locked inside. They informed the police and sablesan also. Before they come..... Pointlessly, all three souls left the house.

The Hurdles

My name is Kanjana; I will reach the age of thirty-five by the end of this month. My parents and relatives are worried about my marriage, and some blame me for not falling in love during my days at university.

Truth be told, I did not have time to find love. I spent most of my time studying, and although I tried several times to love someone who I saw as decent, I was not successful. Falling in love is not that easy; it is challenging for me. At times I was surprised by my friends who fell in love quickly.

Sometimes, I look at myself in the mirror and feel happy about my appearance. I am beautiful; no one can say anything negative about my looks. However, no one has loved me yet or wanted to marry me. Why? This is the main question that often arises in my mind.

My parents are also keen to find me a partner; at least four times a year, potential grooms and their parents visit

our house to see me, but none have shown any interest yet.

Everyone comes in the hope of discovering something other than simply appearance; they have different motives.

First, they ask about my parent's native place; then, they mention people's names in that native place and ask whether we are related to them. If my parents say no, that marks the end of their visit. I was wondering about this attitude and asked my dad about it.

My dad explained that they ask this question to identify our caste. This helped me understand the problem going on in my life.

I didn't understand the nature of this caste problem. However, when I asked my dad about it, he did not want to say anything further on the matter.

I was born in London, and my life is probably very different from those who grow up in Eastern culture. I am an educated and broad-minded girl. So, you may wonder why I listen to my parents and have agreed to marry an Asian man. In this respect, I am different from most girls who were born in London. I respect my parents; my education, broad mind, and calm attitude are all due to my parents. They would never harm me; I trust them hundred percent. These are the reasons why I agreed that

they could look for a partner for me.

I do not speak in the Tamil language at home because I have studied everything in English. This does not mean I am not a Tamil girl.

I like my parents very much and do not want to disappoint them in their duties. Therefore, I do not mind marrying a Tamil boy, if he suits me.

Despite looking everywhere for the past ten years, my parents have failed to find a suitable match. And it is only recently that I have come to know about this caste problem.

When I asked my friend about the issue of caste, she explained that there are many divisions in the Asian community divide, and people on different levels are labelled with other names, although she did not know the names. Higher caste people will not marry the lower caste in these divisions. However, lower caste people are willing to have marriage relationships with those of higher caste — the above information I received from my friend.

In light of this, I started to analyse my history of failed marriage proposals. Most of the grooms who came to the house rejected me, which means they were higher caste than we are.

One day, my dad came to me and said ‘Kanjana, could you apply for a short leave tomorrow? The groom’s family is coming to see you.’ I agreed.

The next day I applied for a short leave from my office. When I explained the reason for my absence to my boss, he laughed. I was annoyed and left the room in an angry mood.

In the afternoon, four people came with the groom to see me. My mum prepared coffee and small bites to eat. After they had eaten, the groom’s mother came into our kitchen to speak with me. She asked me to come and see her son, so I went into the hall to take a look.

He looked brilliant and well-dressed. I had heard he was an accountant who worked in a private firm and was also born in London. This time, I noticed they did not ask the usual questions about our native place and other details. Instead, they chatted happily and enjoyed themselves.

Although they appeared to be of the same caste, hence removing that hurdle, they also talked about other issues. Upon listening to their conversation, I realised one was about the horoscope and the other was about the dowry. So, another two hurdles had to be overcome. If everything could be finalised, the groom and I were to exchange

phone numbers so we could discuss plans.

The plan was perfect, but first we had to pass the other two hurdles. The groom's uncle took my horoscope and gave the groom's horoscope to my dad. After that, both parties seemed happy and left to continue to the next step.

A week passed with no message from them. My parents were very tense, and I helped them calm down. My parents said the groom was a lovely boy and was well suited to me, and they prayed to God that everything would move forward positively. However, how had they decided that the groom was well suited to me? I decided that the final decision must be in my hands, not those of my parents. Therefore, I explained to them that even though the horoscope was finally matched, I would talk with the groom and make the final decision. I felt very sure of this. They were shocked when I told them this but did not say anything.

The groom's father came to our house on a Friday and explained the horoscope matching. However, unfortunately, he said that something in the horoscope language, the details of which I did not understand, meant my horoscope did not match the groom's.

So, we had failed at the second hurdle. Despite both families having the same caste and dowries, and my

parents being prepared to give whatever they had because I was their only girl, it had not worked out. My parents were worried. My dad emphasised how challenging it is to find a groom in our caste, and although he and Mum were very upset, they began the search for grooms again.

They also worried about my age.

At this point, I realised I had to speak up.

In my office, a boy called Edward is interested in me. He had once told me so. However, I had explained my situation, which he understood. I had not said anything to my parents about this.

Edward is a very intelligent, well-educated boy. So, if I speak openly, I can admit that like him although I would never say this directly to him.

I had to tell my parents that my marriage prospects were worsening, so I called them and explained the failure and the reason. I then spoke to my parents about Edward but did not mention his name. Suppose they didn't agree with it; it would be yet another failure. Dad listened carefully, without saying anything, and asked me to bring him to our house. I did not expect an answer from my dad like this. I thanked him several times. I have told my parents as the relationship between Edward and me was only a friendship, not more than that.

The next day in the office, I told Edward about my conversation with Dad. He was pleased and agreed to come to the house the following day.

On the day Edward promised to visit my dad, I stayed home from the office. My parents and I waited for him.

My mum asked about Edward's caste many times. They were expecting a Tamil boy to arrive.

Edward came and knocked on the door. I went and opened it; yes, he was there. I welcomed him in. First, Dad came and saw him. Although he was not who Dad was expecting, he welcomed him. I feared that sometimes Dad might shout at him, but that did not happen, so I was happy. I looked at Mum's face, which was horrified, but she also did not say anything and remained very quiet. Dad and Edward talked a lot, and Edward discussed his family. Dad also asked some questions, which Edward answered. Mum brought the coffee, which Edward got up and received.

Fifteen minutes later, Edward left.

I waited for my parents to speak but no one said anything; the place was dead silent.

Am I going to jump over this hurdle?

In the London streets

Nobody imagined that the problem was going to be serious. It was a small problem that started with an argument, ended with a physical fight, and turned very serious, but the person who started this has disappeared.

Only Ahilan, Kamalan and Sivanthan were there.

‘You shouldn’t have started that conversation,’ Kamalan said.

‘I didn’t start that on purpose. I only replied to him,’ said Ahilan.

‘No, bro... I have noticed. You are the one who started it,’ Kamalan said again.

‘So, you are saying I am the main reason for everything happening here!’ Ahilan raised his voice.

‘Why are both of you fighting? We have a lot more problems to talk about now!’ Sivanthan shouted at them. ‘If we kill one Sinhala army in Sri Lanka, that may be

worth it for our people, but here we have killed a person of our race. It's so shameful,' he continued.

'What is this, Bro? You are kicking the ball to our side. What happened to you?' Kamalan teased Sivanthan, smiling at him.

Sivanthan didn't reply to him.

'I don't think it's worth talking about what has happened, and there is no point in analysing who was involved more in this crime. We three did it together, so we need to face it together. Whatever happens, we three need to accept the outcome,' Ahilan said. The other two didn't say anything.

'Now, we need a plan to solve this problem, and find a way to get out of this,' Kamalan said.

The other two agreed and were quiet for some time.

The police will be coming in half an hour. The three boys don't want to hide or run away from the place. It is not the first time they have gotten involved in a crime. Numerous times, they have run away afterwards and gotten caught later. But this time, the offence is murder. So, whatever happens, they have decided to face the police.

The three boys are not related or friends from their

childhood. They are refugees. They also have different characters. They don't have any jobs or money to show for themselves.

They have become known as thugs who committed minor crimes.

Their clothes, hairstyles, way of talking, and especially their appearance to people are different from the average youth.

They wear colourful clothes, two or three silver chains, and earrings. So, sometimes you may feel afraid when you see them. The public never goes near them.

When they drive a car, they won't sit straight; they sit slightly leaning back.

They are also armed with weapons.

They never liked this job, but they were forced to do it. Sometimes they get frustrated and want to leave this horrible job. But that never happens because some people use them to 'take care of their problems', giving money and holding it against them.

Kamalan got up for some water and saw the letter on the table while he was drinking.

The letter came yesterday from his mother in Sri Lanka. It reads:

Dear Kamalan,

How are you? Are you keeping well? Here, your dad is not feeling well. There are insufficient medical facilities available in our village, so we need to take your dad to Jaffna hospital. Your sister also passed the exam. The situation is not good here. If you have money, please send it immediately so we can take your dad to Jaffna hospital.

Yours,

Mum

Sivanthan saw Kamalan reading the letter. He walked over and then asked,

‘Does your mum want money, Bro?’

Kamalan shook his head and silently said,

‘This time, if I go to prison, I don’t think I may come out. My dad is not well, my sister also needs money to go to school, and I don’t know what to do.’

Sivanthan didn’t say anything.

‘We have made a stupid mistake by doing this for that man. He has used us and escaped. Now we are in trouble!’ Ahilan thundered.

‘We shouldn’t have gone up to the murder level,’ Sivanthan said.

‘That’s true, but no one expected this.’

‘There was no witness to what we did,’ commented Ahilan.

‘Are you mad? That person who paid us to commit this murder could have informed the police by now,’ replied Kamalan.

Sivanthan’s phone rang.

They didn’t want to answer it because they thought it might be the police. It rang repeatedly.

Now Sivanthan took the phone. On the other end of the line is Sivanthan’s girlfriend.

She said,

‘Sivanthan, where are you? Do you know who killed that Rasa yesterday? Everyone is saying that your gang must have done this. Is it true?’

‘Are you mad? Why would we do that? Somebody else must have done it. People are just blaming us,’ Sivanthan replied.

‘I have told you many times to leave that gang and find a job at the supermarket, but you never listen to me. Now you are a murder suspect!’ Sivanthan’s girlfriend shouted at him.

'Bro, is it your girlfriend?' Sivanthan shook his head.

'Yes, Bro. Outside, everyone is talking about us,' Sivanthan said.

'So, the police are going to come now,' Ahilan said. Someone knocks on the door.

They didn't open the door, thinking it might be the police. Somebody was calling Ahilan's name.

Ahilan went and opened the door. It was his brother who came in and closed the door. Ahilan's brother was an accountant and respected in society. He started shouting at Ahilan.

'How many times have I advised you three, and you all never listened? Why did you all kill that innocent man Rasa? Do you all think that person who told you to kill Rasa will save you? Now I don't know what to do!' Ahilan's brother sobbed.

He didn't stay long and dashed out.

After he left, the three were very quiet and cried silently. They now realise their mistake and are ready to accept any punishment. Somebody knocked on the door vigorously. Ahilan went and opened the door.

Outside, the police were waiting.

A London Boy

A middle-class family was displaced from Sri Lanka because of the political problems there. Sivarajah was the head of the family, and he worked in the Department for Education. Thinesh was his only son.

One day, Thinesh went into his house very quickly and went straight to his room. He was only seventeen years old. When he entered the house, his father was watching television and his mother was cooking in the kitchen. His grandma was reading a book, but she was annoyed with the way Thinesh had come into the house. When Thinesh entered, his father turned his head and looked at him and then continued watching television. Thinesh's mother, Marakatham, also heard the noise when he entered the house, but she didn't bother with it and continued cooking. Thinesh didn't bother any of them in the house.

London is a multicultural country, and people come here from various countries and various cultural backgrounds. Young people like Thinesh face strict cultural

traditions at home, and then they spend most of their time outside of the home, including at school, where they face other cultural traditions. Cultural differences are a major problem for the younger generation living in London, especially for those who come from Asian countries. Unfortunately, parents and teachers rarely understand the problems that younger people face here.

As mentioned earlier, only Thinesh's grandma, Vadivukarasi, was concerned about his attitude. Sivarajah's family moved to London in 1984 after the riots occurred in Sri Lanka in July of 1983. When Thinesh was born in London, everyone in the family and their close friends were pleased to welcome him into the world.

Thinesh had a round face, beautiful eyes and a fair skin colour. He was a very handsome boy. The Tamil community always experiences a proud moment when they welcome a child who has a creamy skin colour. When a baby is born, the first thing they ask is whether the baby's skin is fair or dark. After Thinesh's birth, Sivarajah sponsored his mother's visit to London to reduce his wife's workload.

Three months after Thinesh was born, his parents decided to educate him to become a doctor, and they started saving money towards that goal. Thinesh was clever in his studies, and his teachers always praised him

during parent night at school. Because of this, both Sivarajah and Marakatham were very happy for their son.

After Thinesh's birth, many good things happened in his parents' lives. For example, Sivarajah got a promotion and a salary increase, so they bought a new house with four rooms. Sivarajah was getting a lot of respect in society, and he thought all those good things happened because of Thinesh.

Everyone in the household highly respected Thinesh. Sivarajah allocated one of the rooms for Thinesh, and he bought a mobile phone and television for his son's comfort. Thinesh had all the amenities of a typical middle-class boy in society, and he was enjoying life. Thinesh told his friends about his nice possessions and showed them off.

Sometimes his friends visited his house and enjoyed themselves with Thinesh. They played loud music with no concern for the other people living in the house. Not only did boys visit his house, but sometimes girls visited also. Sivarajah and Marakatham were never concerned about this because they trusted their son. When Sivarajah was in the house, Thinesh and his friends didn't make an immense amount of noise. But after he left, Thinesh's room became like a tsunami. His grandma noticed this behaviour and informed his mother about it, but she didn't take the complaints seriously.

Marakatham never disclosed the behaviour to her husband, and she ignored her mother-in-law's complaints. But then she started to fear Thinesh's behaviour. If she admitted that to her husband, he might get angry and shout at Thinesh, and the problem would become uncontrollable. She didn't want that, so she hid her feelings from her husband. Instead, she spent her time cooking and watching television dramas.

One day, Marakatham's friend complained that Thinesh got in a horrible fight with one of his friends in the street. Marakatham also hid that incident from her husband. She observed Thinesh developing many other bad habits, but she hid everything from her husband. That is the habit of a typical Asian mother.

Her mother-in-law, Vadivukarasi, pointed out her mistake many times. Hiding everything from Sivarajah was going to land Thinesh in prison shortly. At the same time, she also didn't have the guts to control Thinesh.

One day, Thinesh returned home in an angry mood. Without talking to anyone, he went to his room. His parents and grandma observed him, but nobody said anything. After a while, Sivarajah asked the others not to talk with Thinesh about his behaviour. Then he left the house and went outside. He was disturbed and immediately went to the house of Thinesh's teacher to find out about

his son's studies. The teacher was home, and he welcomed Thinesh's father. While they were talking, Sivarajah asked about his son's studies. The teacher's response was not good. He said, 'Thinesh is not like he used to be. His monthly exam marks were very low. We sent a letter home about his test performance, but we didn't get any reply from you'.

Sivarajah had a shocking realisation that his wife had hidden many things about Thinesh from him. He thanked the teacher and left his house. When he returned home, he looked as if he had lost something. He didn't talk to anyone. Instead, he just sat and thought about Thinesh. He still trusted Thinesh to not lie to him and not to do anything bad.

His mother said, 'I told your wife about the changes in Thinesh from day to day. But she never listened, and she never even notified you'. Sivarajah didn't reply.

Then Marakatham entered the room and asked him, 'Where did you go?'

'I went to see Thinesh's teacher', Sivarajah said. 'He said that these days Thinesh's performance in school is abysmal. And he said that he sent a letter to us, but I haven't seen any letters'. He looked at Marakatham and asked, 'Did you hide any letters?'

His wife shook her head yes.

‘Why did you do that?’

Marakatham was scared and didn’t reply right away. Then she said, ‘Shall we go see someone about his horoscope?’

Sivarajah looked at her angrily because he never believed in those things. He said, ‘I’m not going to stop you, but I’m not going with you. Go without me but take my mother with you’.

Marakatham was happy to hear that and took her mother-in-law to the temple to see the priest about Thinesh’s good or bad fortune.

Sivarajah was well educated and knew society’s ins and outs. He noticed Thinesh many times and had doubts about him, but he never asked Thinesh about the changes in his life. Suddenly he realised everything. He wanted to talk with Thinesh, but Thinesh had strayed very far from him. He asked Marakatham about him, and she replied that he hadn’t returned.

Sivarajah, sitting at home, looked at his watch. The time was 11 pm. Around midnight, Thinesh returned home and went straight to his room. Sivarajah entered his son’s room and asked, ‘Why are you so late?’

Thinesh didn't answer. He looked at his father and shouted at him to get out of his room. Sivarajah didn't say anything. He was about to cry as he left the room. He didn't want to fight with his son. After some time, Sivarajah went into his son's room and removed all the electronic luxuries, including the television. Thinesh didn't say anything about his dad's reaction.

Then the phone rang. It was Sivarajah's friend asking about Thinesh.

Sivarajah said 'He's here now. Is there any problem there?'

'Luckily, your son escaped from here', his friend replied. 'All of his friends were caught by the police with cocaine'.

Sivarajah couldn't say anything. He just sat on the sofa and cried.

Fathers and Mothers

I never thought my wife and I would face a situation like this. We used to live together. We have earned lots of money and given everything to our children. We have never saved for our future and have never spent anything on our entertainment. My wife has always told me,

‘ We need to save money for our future, to support us one day’.

She reminds me of this whenever I spend money on our children. I know she has her reason, but I never listen to her on this matter.

Now we have no significant income. We are retired and get a pension from the government, but this is not enough – it only covers our house rent and food.

I don't even have the money to buy a newspaper. I am so scared to ask for the money from my children. My wife always worries about me after seeing my financial

status. Sometimes when my children come over, she says,

‘Appa didn’t have any money to buy a paper; why don’t you give him some money?’

They don’t listen to her request, talk about something else and then walk away. My kids’ attitude makes my wife angry, but she won’t shout at them; instead, she jumps on me:

‘I have told you to save money for our needs, but you never listen and stubbornly spend money on these irresponsible kids’.

I listen to her words and never say anything back because I knew I have made a mistake.

One day my son and daughters came to our house to settle some things. As they paid my mobile phone bill, I thought they had come to discuss that. My son said,

‘Appa, you and Amma look like you are not using your phones efficiently. There’s a lot of money being spent on them. We think that you can use the landline in an emergency or to talk with your friends, so we have decided not to renew your phone’.

After he said this, my daughters got up, picked up our phones and put them in their bags. and left our house. I expected this, but my wife didn’t; she looked shocked.

She didn't speak a single word for two hours.

'You always watch the news on your phone, now what are you going to do?' my wife asked.

Good question!, I thought. But I didn't say a single word to her. I just smiled. If I had have replied, she would have started with her standard speech about how I don't save any money.

Two weeks went by, and I couldn't tolerate life without a phone, which caused me stress. My wife noticed this and worried, but, unfortunately, she had more to worry about than that.

My wife rang our daughter on the landline and shouted at her about the mobile phone.

'Are you all playing with Appa? How many times has he bought you what you need? Now all he wants is his mobile phone. I feel ashamed that you are my children',

I just watched her and smiled. I knew nothing would happen because I know my kids well. Five minutes later, our landline rang, and my wife answered. I guessed it might be our son.

'Amma, why did you shout at Thangatchi? Why do you need a mobile phone? Do you know how much money

we have to pay every month? The landline is good enough. Don't phone them and give them trouble'.

My son was shouting, but my wife never shouted back. She looked at me with an empty face and said, 'This is why I tell you to save money for our future, and you never listen to me'. She repeated her same old story. I just laughed and asked her,

'Why you didn't shout at your son?' She couldn't answer my question and just walked into the kitchen.

Our income is limited, as I told you earlier . At one point, I didn't have enough to pay the mortgage, so my children shared the cost and paid every month. All three asked me to apply for housing benefit, so I did. The government accepted my application and now pays me money every month. The children are so happy because they no longer need to pay our mortgage.

My daughter has three children, and my son has two; my other daughter has none. Every morning my daughter and son bring their kids to us and then go off to work. We feed the children and take them to school. We are happy to look after them because we love our grandchildren. We have never considered them as trouble in our life, but I believe our children think of us as trouble in their otherwise happy life. I have often been tempted to tell

them this, but have so far controlled myself.

One day, all of our children came to our house. This was surprising because they never all came round at the same time. I immediately thought that there must be problem. I looked at my wife, who also looked concerned.

My eldest son started to talk. 'Appa and Amma, listen to this carefully; we are doing this all for your sake. You two are very old now and need someone to look after you. So we want to take both of you to our house. For the first six months, Appa will stay with me, and Amma will stay with your daughter. Then, for the next six months, Appa will go to my sister's house, and Amma will come to mine'.

I said, 'So after this, your amma and I will never see each other. Is this your idea? Why can't we stay here?'

My daughter replied, 'Appa, house prices are now very high, so we plan to sell this house and settle our small loans'.

My wife rejected their idea straightaway and started to cry. They didn't bother with her, and I didn't say a single word. They said they would not change their mind and asked us to get ready to move in a couple of weeks.

They left and my wife didn't know what to do next.

One of my good friends, who lives a few roads away, visited our house, and I told him about our kids' behaviour. He said not to worry, to pack our things and that he would find a home for us to rent. My wife was reluctant to agree, but I made the decision for us and asked him to find us a place.

Within a week, my friend had arranged a house for us and paid the deposit. I explained everything to my wife, and she finally agreed to move. I wrote a letter to my children, and then we left the house and walked towards our new home.

Leo Is My Dog

I am someone who doesn't like to keep a dog in my house. I thought looking after an animal at home was an impossible task. My friend once said, 'Owning a dog is equal to keeping an elephant and feeding it.' The husbandry of a dog in my home country is easier than in London.

In this country, many rules and regulations exist for owning a dog. I think I hate owning a dog at home because of these things. But my bad luck, the dog came to my house without my permission. Still, I remember one December when my son brought the dog to our house. I couldn't refuse it, but at the same time, I couldn't accept it.

A one-year-old dog – so small and sweet. We named him Leo. My son told me the dog's breed is a German shepherd. After Leo came to our house, I started to love him and began playing with him. I started to look after

all Leo's needs myself.

After I came home from work, Leo would sleep on my chest. I don't know why I never refused Leo's activities with me. My wife also became close with Leo and talked with Leo like she talks to a human. Leo listened quietly without giving any trouble. Sometimes he urinated on our sofa, but we never got angry with him. He has his own language; if my wife said, 'som som', he'd be ready for the bath. Som som in his language means the bath. When getting a bath, he stood quietly and never gave trouble.

We needed to buy different food for him, which is too expensive, but we never worried about that.

He is scared of explosion sounds. Generally, in the new year, people use firecrackers. Leo is so frightened by those sounds, so he would run here and there to hide somewhere. On that day, Leo fainted because of the sounds. We got worried, but he woke up after some time. You won't believe it, but we took him to our bedroom to sleep with us that night. That night he slept very well. Now that Leo was part of our family, he went everywhere in the house without restriction.

Then my daughter delivered a child, and we needed to have some restrictions on Leo. He stopped coming

inside the house, and all these days, everyone had looked at Leo as a baby in our house, but after my granddaughter arrived at our home, Leo was considered an animal. This situation made me worry. There were so many reasons for these restrictions for Leo.

After this, he stayed in the garden where he ran around all those days and watched our hall through the patio glass door. Sometimes my son and I went to the garden and played with him.

I have to tell you about one incident that happened in our garden when we were cleaning our garage at the back. By mistake, we had kept the rat poison outside without thinking about our Leo. Leo found that poison and ate a little bit of it. My wife noticed and started to cry loudly; I ran to the scene and found the reason. We took Leo to our car and rushed to the veterinary clinic, which is thirty minutes from our house. The doctor checked him and gave him treatment to vomit all the poison out. He did that, and in ten minutes, he was back to normal. From that day, we decided to give the back garage to Leo to live in at night.

Leo didn't like our decision because we had controlled his movement within the garage. When we called him for a bath, he refused to come out. He did his toilet inside the room. Leo didn't want to obey our rules. My wife

and I needed to clean his room every day. That created an infection in my wife's leg, and because of this, my wife stayed in the hospital for one week.

Everyone in our family worried about Leo a lot, and we made a callous decision to give Leo to somebody else. This was a cruel decision, and we worried every day until he left us. We didn't want to give him to any unknown people, so we started to look for a familiar person from our friends' circle. Finally, we found a family that was so attached to us.

I think Leo must have understood our decision. He started to listen to us and did many good things. The date was fixed, and they came to collect him. He didn't want to leave us. My wife and son started to cry because he grew up with us as our child.

After he went on that evening, we didn't eat anything. Still, we were talking about him.

There was no God

I was walking in the street thinking about my friend's problem. But unfortunately, in my rush, I didn't look at the road conditions; the stones on the road damaged my feet. I sat on the corner of the street, looked at my feet, and got angry at the stones. Can I shout at the stones for what they did to me? I thought I walked carefully, but maybe I didn't, so how can I blame the stones? I started to walk again. The road was so busy; many cars were coming and going, and people with so many problems were walking and talking to themselves.

The letter that came yesterday was still hurting my inner mind terribly. The letter came from one of my friends who was in Sri Lanka. He was one of the ex-freedom fighters against the Sri Lankan government to free the Tamil's homeland. He had lost everything in the civil war, and today he doesn't have any money to eat. In his letter, he asked me to send some money to him so he could afford to buy at least one meal a day. He writes well also, and his words are more powerful than a metal

weapon. This society needs him, but no one understands.

I stopped walking, opened my banking app on my mobile phone, and checked my financial situation. In my account, I only had £140, which would leave my account tomorrow to pay for my electricity bill. I work hard, but I can't manage my own financial needs. How is my friend going to manage? He doesn't have any sign of income. I needed to help him, but I didn't have enough money in my bank, so I thought I could ask to borrow money from a mutual friend living in London who had plenty.

I walked fast to see my friend, and when I arrived, he was home. I didn't want to ask about the loan straight away. I talked about our childhood memories, country politics, and so many other things. Finally, I asked for the money and told him the reason. He didn't say a single word to me. He just listened. Suddenly, his wife called him. He went into another room to see her. I knew what was going to happen. I listened to his wife's harsh voice. He then came back to me and straight away said, 'No.' Of course, I expected this answer, but I didn't get angry with him and explained our friend's situation.

'I told him not to join those movements, but he didn't listen. Now he is suffering. What can I do? This is his fate,' he told me. 'I don't want to help anyone involved in the war. So, therefore, please leave from here before

I get angry.’ The way he said it made me angry with him too. I shouted at him, and when I left his place, he said some rude words (I think those words must have satisfied his wife). I was upset and walked aimlessly.

If I have a serious problem on my mind, I usually walk the streets without purpose. Today was one of those days; I didn’t know where to go or how to end this problem, which was killing me inside.

One time in Sri Lanka, many brave Tamil boys joined the freedom fighters – my friend was one of them. Today, he doesn’t have anything; his wife doesn’t have any clothes, and his children don’t have any food. He also wrote in his letter that people from foreign countries are helping orphans, but no one is helping those who fight for freedom.

Tired from walking, I went and sat inside a nearby temple. The temple is beautiful, and lots of people visit it regularly. While inside, I heard a visitor describe many incidences when he visited Sri Lanka last month to one of the temple managers. So, I got up and went to that manager, told him my problem, and asked him to help my friend through the temple fund.

He refused immediately and then left me alone. Then I noticed my friend enter the temple –the one who refused to help. The manager came back over and advised me to

ask this man, my friend, for help because he spent £10,000 on renovating the temple, and he is also a nice man. When he saw me, he was shocked. I didn't say anything; I just looked the inside the temple. I couldn't see any Gods there.

Love

She had decided in seconds and completed the task. The company was proud of her for her commitment. Everyone in that department looked at her with pride, but she just smiled and moved on to her next task .

Her name was Mathavi. She had a beautiful face, an attractive smile, reasonable height and long hair. She always wore clothes that suited her slim body.

Mathavi was a clever girl in her school days. She was the one who placed first in the class in every subject. In university, she passed her degree with first class.

She met him at university. His name was Muhunthan. He was a handsome boy and the same height as Mathavi. They were best friends – in the same university and the same course. They always discussed their subjects and helped each other. Because of this, they frequently met at the university.

Muhunthan was not as clever as Mathavi, so he needed a lot of help from her. Mathavi almost acted as a teacher

to Muhunthan.

Their university was in the city of London. Therefore, they had to travel one hour on the train from their homes to the university. Muhunthan's house was thirty minutes from Mathavi's house.

Mathavi's dad was a tranquil person; her mother was a pious lady. Madhavi's mum never talked loudly in any circumstances. Mathavi had one older sister. Her name is Sinthiya. Sinthiya as like her mum and dad. They were the loveliest family.

Muhunthan's dad was a draconian person. He always imposed his decisions on his children without asking for their opinions. Muhunthan's mother was the same as his dad.

The families differed in their characters; even so, Muhunthan and Mathavi became friends.

Society started to look at them differently. Many of their friends also started to assume they were lovers.

Some people went and told Muhunthan's dad about Muhunthan and Mathavi. By revealing their relationship, they experienced some enjoyment in their hearts. This type of behaviour was usual in the Tamil community.

After hearing this, Muhunthan's dad asked Muhunthan

about this face-to-face. Muhunthan denied that they were lovers and said they were only friends.

Once, Mathavi's dad also asked about this rumour, but Mathavi also denied it and said they were only friends.

Mhunthan was a good friend to Mathavi; she couldn't think of him as more than that.

But, Muhunthan started thinking another way. So, why couldn't they be lovers? He started to have doubts about this matter. Were they lovers like the others said? He asked this question internally several times.

When he thought of Mathavi as his lover, he felt a new and enjoyable bird flying inside him.

Mathavi was an independent girl. She always made decisions on her own. She would listen to everyone, but the judgment would be her own.

Once, when Muhunthan and Mathavi were talking, Muhunthan asked, 'Why can't we be lovers?' Mathavi was shocked; she had never expected this from Muhunthan.

She didn't shout at him, just smiled and changed the topic, but Muhunthan had thought her cool move was acceptance of his proposal.

He thanked her, but she didn't understand the reason for his gratitude.

The next day, when she saw Muhunthan, she couldn't talk to him as easily . Because of yesterday's incident, she forcefully put a barrier between them.

Muhunthan also felt this barrier, but he thought this move was due to her shyness. So, he changed his style of talking with her to mix in a bit of romance.

Mathavi didn't like this. She felt very uncomfortable. She asked Muhunthan to stop talking like this until she made a final decision.

A few months passed like this without any change. These days, both of them had reduced their talking to a minimum.

One day, Mathavi was studying in her room. At that time, her mum and dad were talking about her, and she was eavesdropping on them.

They were talking about her wedding. Mathavi's older sister's wedding would happen in a short while. Sometimes, though, the bride might reject the groom, and other times the parents might reject the groom. So, this was an ongoing problem for them. Mathavi's mum had an opinion about Muhunthan. She was asking Mathavi's dad about his opinion of Muhunthan. But he didn't give any positive answers.

Mathavi worried about her parents. They were expecting

a wedding at home as ordinary people would. So, Mathavi started to think about her future marriage. She had decided that she would marry after her studies. Then, she had the thought, 'Why can't I marry Muhunthan?'

The next day, when she went to university, she felt shy when she saw Muhunthan. Muhunthan also felt that Mathavi's actions were different.

So, they talked about their future and decided to marry after their studies. However, they didn't want to tell their parents about their decision yet.

Three years passed.

Mathavi finished her studies and got an excellent job, and at the same time, Muhunthan also got a job.

Now was the time to talk about their relationship with their parents.

Mathavi spoke to her parents about it, but Muhunthan didn't because he was scared of his dad.

Mathavi was annoyed by his timidity.

So, she asked, 'If your dad refuses, what will you do?'

He didn't give an immediate answer to this question. Because of this, Mathavi got angry with him and left.

She went home and sat on the sofa with a sad face.

Mathavi's dad sensed that she had a problem and went and sat next to her.

Mathavi told her dad her entire problem and cried. Mathavi's mum also listened to their conversation from the kitchen.

She gave up on hiding and came to the hall to ask, 'Mathavi, does he like you?'

'Amma, that is not the problem now. His family doesn't like me. If his dad says no, he will not marry me. He was always scared of his dad.'

'Then we will go and talk to them,' said Mathavi's mum.

Mathavi became irritated and looked at her dad.

Her dad said, 'Mathavi, this is your problem. You must think and make your own decisions. Now, go to your room.'

Mathavi went to her room.

Mathavi's mum didn't seem satisfied, though, because she liked Muhunthan.

Mathavi's dad told his wife, 'Don't interfere in their lives. She has to decide. If she asks us to talk to Muhunthan's parents, then we can go forward.'

When Muhunthan told his mum about his love, she refused immediately. He had expected these answers even though he argued with his mum by pointing out his true love for Mathavi. But she didn't agree at all. His dad said the same to him. Muhunthan's dad said that Mathavi was not of their caste, so they couldn't accept her.

Muhunthan didn't give up though; he continuously argued with his parents, and finally, they said yes.

After this, as per tradition, Mathavi's parents went to Muhunthan's house, and the parties fixed the wedding date together.

Before the wedding, Muhunthan brought Mathavi to his house and let her move in with his mum and sister. In the first meeting, Muhunthan's mum had said that after the wedding, they should stay with Muhunthan's parents. But Mathavi didn't like this idea and said that they would stay with them only for two weeks. After that, they had a house close to her and Muhunthan's workplace that they would move into. Muhunthan's mum didn't like this, and a small argument started, but Muhunthan interfered and managed to convince his mum.

Both parties were involved in the wedding organisation and busy with the invitations.

Only one week was left before the wedding, but

Mathavi was not happy. She didn't participate in anything. Mathavi's older sister noticed this and went to talk to her.

Mathavi said, 'Acca, can't we stop this wedding now?'

Mathavi's sister was shocked. 'Mathavi, what are you talking about? Next week is the wedding. Now, you want to cancel the wedding. Why?'

Mathavi said, 'I like Muhunthan, but I don't like his family. They are horrible. I can't go there and live with them.'

Mathavi's sister, Sinthiya, explained everything clearly to her. But Mathavi couldn't accept anything. Finally, Sinthiya said, 'Do you think amma will accept this? It is going to happen. One way or another, you need to accept that this wedding is happening whether you like it or not.'

Mhunthan had also observed everything, all the problems between Mathavi and his parents. He was in the middle and didn't know what to do now.

Despite all these problems, the wedding happened.

After the wedding, Mathavi started living with her husband's family.

From the start, there were lots of problems between Mathavi and Muhunthan's parents. Nobody respected her

as the daughter-in-law . Muhunthan also noticed this but didn't say anything about it. He was still scared of his mum and dad.

In the meantime, Mathavi got a promotion at her job. Mathavi told this to Muhunthan, and he insisted on moving close to her office. Muhunthan's parents heard this and decided that Mathavi needed to resign from her job. But Muhunthan refused their decision and supported Mathavi, planning to move to the house they had that was close to work.

Mathavi didn't know about Muhunthan's decision though. She phoned her mum and told her everything that had happened. Mathavi's mum got angry, called Muhunthan's Mum and Dad and shouted at them severely.

Now, the problem had reached a high level.

When Muhunthan and Mathavi got home from the office, there was pin-drop silence. No one dared say anything. Finally, Muhunthan's sister told him that Mathavi's mum had phoned their parents and shouted at them.

Muhunthan went to his room and asked Mathavi, 'Did you tell your parents about anything?'

'Yes, I did.'

‘Why?’

‘Your dad asked me to resign from my job. Do you want me to listen to that and then sit here like a doll?’

‘By telling them, you have increased the problem. Your mum phoned them and shouted at them.’ Muhunthan said.

‘Forget about these things. Are we moving from here or not?’ Mathavi asked.

Muhunthan thought for five minutes and said, ‘Okay, pack up. We can leave today already.’

They left the house, but no one said anything.

For about three weeks, no one from Muhunthan’s house contacted them.

Muhunthan’s father called his office, but Muhunthan didn’t answer any of the calls. Many times, his parents also rang Muhunthan’s mobile number, but he didn’t attend to them either. Mathavi noticed all of this and took pity on him and said, ‘Muhunthan, why don’t you visit them? They are your parents.’ Muhunthan didn’t give a response to her suggestion.

Muhunthan phoned her from his office the next day and said he would go to his parents’ house after work and come home later in the evening. Mathavi agreed to

that.

When Muhunthan went to his parents' house, no one welcomed him, but his father talked to him a little bit. Then, he waited there a few minutes and finally left.

When Muhunthan returned home, Mathavi didn't ask anything about his visit, and he didn't say anything either.

He went to his parents' house again the next day, but the situation was different, and everyone welcomed him. So, he stayed there until 11 pm and then returned home.

The following day, he went again but didn't leave on time, so he sent a text to Mathavi, 'I will come home tomorrow.'

She was scared and thought of phoning her mum, but she didn't do it.

Every single day, the same thing happened.

Mathavi asked Muhunthan about this, but he didn't give a proper answer. Mathavi couldn't sleep properly; she felt something was not right.

Eventually, Mathavi developed a high fever, but Muhunthan was again not there. So, she phoned her mum and explained the situation.

Mathavi's mum and dad rushed to her place and took her to the hospital.

Mathavi's dad tried to contact Muhunthan but couldn't, so he went to Muhunthan's office and informed him of Mathavi's status. But the way Muhunthan talked to him was a bit rude. He was not happy.

Mathavi's parents took her home from the hospital and waited for Muhunthan to come. He arrived at about 6 pm after work, so Mathavi's dad and mum left then.

Mathavi had too much mental stress and became weak.

So, Muhunthan's parents planned cleverly to separate them. First, his parents advised Muhunthan to send Mathavi to her parents' house. He did as he was told and also sent the divorce papers the following day.

Mathavi and her parents were shocked. After receiving that, they needed to figure out what to do.

Mathavi's situation became worse. She was suffering greatly from mental stress.

Why had Muhunthan changed like this? This was the question she always raised but received no answer for it. Time started to move fast.

One morning, Mathavi left her house to see her friend. By 9 pm, she had still not returned. Her parents were very worried. Her sister phoned all of Mathavi's friends but all of them said that she hadn't come to them.

Finally, at around 11 pm, someone knocked on their door. Mathavi's dad went and opened the door. A policeman was standing there and in his hand was Mathavi's car number plate.

Four letters and my friend

I have lived in London for roughly thirty years. Yesterday I received a letter from my dad saying that he and my mum were eager to see my children. He begged me to come to Sri Lanka at least once every year. It was a reasonable request. I discussed this with my wife.

My wife and I were tired as we worked long hours, in hot and cold weather, in London. So, we decided we needed a break. We decided to visit Sri Lanka in the children's school holiday time. We informed our children of our decision, and they were thrilled and very enthusiastic to see their grandparents.

My wife and I started to plan. We booked a couple of weeks off work and arranged our flight tickets.

After everything was organised correctly, I phoned my dad, informing him of the actual date of our departure and our arrival time at Katunayake International Airport.

That day arrived, and my family and I started our journey to Heathrow International Airport to go to Sri

Lanka. My wife and children were so happy and spent their time watching films on the flight. As usual, I read my book.

We reached Katunayake International Airport after ten hours of travelling. My parents arranged a van for us to travel from the airport to Colombo, where they lived. Finally, after another two hours of travelling, we reached their house. The same place I lived fifteen years ago. I was so happy to see that house. My parents hugged us and were so pleased to see us. It had been such a long time since we last saw each other.

The next day we all sat in the hallway and talked about our old days . My dad brought in a box and gave it to me. It was my box. I wondered how many years Appa had looked after it for me. I took the box and went into my room to open it. There were some minor things inside, which were kept nicely, and four letters. All four letters were written by my friend Thuraisingam, or Thurai for short. Two were from when I was studying in Colombo and the other two were from after I left the country.

Thurai is my close friend who studied with me, in the same class, from infancy to higher studies, in Sri Lanka. We always kept a book about Mao's political thoughts in our pockets. Those days, it was thought that the Tamil people could only achieve freedom by armed conflict.

Back then, the government introduced standardising the marks to control Tamils' higher education. This policy triggered my friend towards politics. Thurai was involved in political activities full time, but I was not.

I was so eager to read the letters from my friend. He wrote one of them in 1974, when I was still in Sri Lanka. It included all the incidents that happened in that time. When I read the first letter, I respected him and, at the same time, I hated myself. When the political environment changed to a different level, my father brought me to Colombo to avoid being involved in those activities. After I came to Colombo, Thurai joined the Tamil youth forum and wrote about all the activities he was involved in.

When these activities were held against the government, I was in Colombo. I didn't reply to his letter. I feel guilty now for not writing a reply to him. He never said that my displacement from Karaveddy to Colombo was the wrong move. He understood my situation and accepted it. In this letter, he insisted that I study hard and he always asked me to reply, but I didn't do that. I don't know whether he is still living or has died. The letter was dated 28-07-1975.

After reading in my room for a while, my wife asked me to come out as some visitors were waiting for me. So, I put the letters in the box and came out to spend some

time with the visitors.

After they left, I returned to my room and read the second letter. This letter was about a political leader's murder. Thurai described that, as he was present at the time, he was convinced that the incident was appropriate. He also said that he was involved. I didn't like that, as I believe that killing your enemy is never the answer. I thought about writing this to him, but I didn't.

Throughout that period, he was adamant about the class struggle and spread propaganda within the community. But now, he was involved in the race struggle intensely. I couldn't understand this change in his life.

He explained this, also, in his letter. He wrote that the race war had started strongly, so, first, we had to finish this war and then we could have the class struggle. I couldn't accept this argument he had made.

After this, he didn't write any letters. So, I concentrated on my studies and my job. In the meantime, I also got married.

During this time, their fight against the army was reflected in Colombo.

That happened in 1983. There were big riots in Colombo against Tamils. In these riots, many Tamil people were killed, most of the Tamils' shops were looted, and many

women were raped. We were forced to go to refugee camps in Colombo.

After these things happened, my father asked me to travel to a foreign country. So, I came to London as a refugee. Then, after some months, I called my wife over too.

Time never stopped for anyone. It ran on its own. Whether we liked it or not, we had to run with time. In 2009 there was a big war between the government troops and the freedom fighters. Lots of countries helped to win the battle for the government. Unfortunately, they won that war, and our warriors lost everything.

In 2011, many people who came to London as refugees started to visit Sri Lanka as tourists. Time, again, began to move quickly. The Tamil people in Sri Lanka, especially those involved in the fighting, were not treated well by their people. So, the status of these freedom fighters became questionable.

My wife was angry that I was spending all my time reading the letters. So, I went to dinner before returning to read my friend's other letter.

This letter was dated 22-05-2002. In it, my friend said that he had trained for and joined one of the armed movements. He fought in lots of battles and won them.

However, in the same letter, he mentioned the killing of some Tamils who started to fight for freedom in a different group. He said he didn't like that. It appeared to me that he was getting frustrated with the fighting.

Finally, I read the fourth letter. This one was written in 2009. In this letter, my friend mentioned that he had been wounded and told me about his present life. He asked me to come to see him. I was a bit worried about him. I was almost crying at his words.

I decided to go to see him. So, the next day, we hired a van and travelled to Jaffna to see our periyamma. When we arrived, I thought about my friend and asked about him.

Periyamma told me that he had died three days earlier from his wound. I was shocked and cried silently.

One Day One Man One Family

Everyone in London was tense. No one was on the streets, and most shops were closed. Some were open, but they didn't have anything to sell. They were almost empty. The government hadn't declared a curfew, but the place looked like somebody had.

People at home sat in front of their televisions, watching the news fearfully. The government told everyone not to come out unless they had urgent things to do — those over 60 were not to come out for any reason.

There was a house at a crossroad from the main road. In this house, one family stayed inside fearfully. An old man named Kanthiah, his wife Katpakam, their daughter Thivya and her husband Gobi, and their kids Sena and Senthana all lived there.

'Amma, will Thaththa get Corona?' asked Senthana.

'I don't think so, Senthana, don't worry,' Thivya answered.

'Then why are you keeping him in a separate room?' Senthana asked again.

‘Can’t we play with Thatththa?’ Sena asked.

‘You can, but just wait for a few days,’ Thivya answered.

Sena and Senthana asked more questions, got tired, and then sat in a corner, worried. Thivya went to the kitchen to make tea. Gobi was looking on his mobile phone for the latest news.

Gobi works on a construction site as an assistant worker. If he goes to work, he will get a salary; if he doesn’t, he’ll have no income. There were no jobs because of the Coronavirus, so Gobi had a financial problem. He had to look after this big family but didn’t know what to do. At the moment, he could manage, but if this situation dragged on for three months, he definitely couldn’t control it. So he was thinking about finding a solution.

Thivya brought Gobi his tea, then sat beside him, looking at his sad face.

‘What are you thinking?’ Thivya asked.

‘This virus problem may drag on for three months. Do you have any money?’ Gobi asked her.

‘I don’t have that much .. a small amount I saved from what you gave me to spend,’

Thivya said.

‘Work will not resume for at least three months... we need

to feed the kids, and we need to buy medicine for your parents... I don't know what I'm going to do.'

Gobi worked for an Indian building contractor. Every day he left home at 8 am and worked till 6 pm; for this, he was paid £100 a day.

Now the virus problem meant no work. He couldn't get government help because he was working there illegally. When this problem arose, the English government helped people working legally get 90% of their salary to help manage their lives.

Contractors illegally hired people and paid lower salaries but reported the higher salary to the income tax department to escape from paying taxes. People like Gobi worked there illegally but hid that fact from their local council to get social help. Both parties were cheating the government openly.

'Why are you worrying that we will get the social money also,' Thivya said to Gobi.

'We can't use that for ourselves. We need to give that to the 'Cheetu' people.'

'Cheetu' is a way of saving money for Asian people. It is very well-known among Asian people.

'You shouldn't have cashed that cheetu two months ago.

You did that for your sister. Now you are suffering. I told you many times, but you never listened to me!' -Thivya said

Gobi got angry at her talk about his sister, and he shouted at her.

'All the schools are closing tomorrow,' Thivya said.

'What about the tuition classes? Are they closing also?' Gobi asked her.

'They also may be shut their classes. But I don't know,' Thivya said.

'Then there'll be no school fees?' asked Gobi, smiling.

'I think so,' Thivya replied.

They heard Thivya's dad coughing.

Thivya became annoyed and took him some water.

Gobi called Thivya and said, 'Don't let the kids play with him.'

'Why not? That's a normal cough, not Corona,' Thivya said firmly.

'I know that taking precautions is good for the kids.' said Gobi.

Thivya's Mum came to the kitchen and said, 'Appa is coughing. Do you have lemon, Thivya?'

'It's there in that corner,' Thivya replied.

'Thivya, should we take Appa to the hospital?' asked Katpakam

Thivya looked at Gobi and asked, 'Should we take him to the hospital?'

'If you took him to the hospital, that would be the end; he wouldn't return. Let's wait and see,' Gobi said.

After that, no one spoke about Appa.

He was isolated from everyone and stayed in that corner room. His wife took food to him on time. His wife Katpakam made some home remedies for his cough and gave that to him.

'Gobi, can you go to the shop and buy some vegetables, please?' said Thivya

Gobi didn't have any money. He looked at Thivya and said, 'There is a money box in front of the God. Can you bring that, please?'

'Are you mad? That is for Sena's elegance! Taking that is a sin!' Thivya barked.

'No problem, don't worry about it. God is not going to punish you. Do you think the shop people will give you vegetables for free? Go and bring the money box!' Gobi shouted at her.

Thivya didn't reply; she got up, went to the shrine room, and brought the money box to Gobi. He broke the box open and started to count the money. Thivya sat with him and helped. There was a total of £35. Thivya gave him a list and also asked him to buy some cough medicine for her dad. Gobi laughed. 'Thivya, we only have thirty-five pounds. You gave me a long list; we need at least sixty pounds to buy everything. Then you ask me to buy cough medicine too. That's why I laughed.'

Gobi left the house and started walking. No one else was on the road, but there were Police Officers at the junction. When Gobi reached them, they asked why he was outside, then Gobi explained to them as he wants to buy some vegetable from the shop. Then they let him go to the shops. There were only a few people shopping.

When Gobi looked at the prices, he was shocked that they were so high. He argued with the shopkeeper but eventually bought some vegetables. On his way home, he went to the chemist and bought cough medicine. When he turned the bend to his house, he saw an ambulance but thought it must be for somebody else. As he got closer to his home, he saw his wife's dad being loaded into it.

Gobi looked at his bag, 'Had I known earlier, I would not have bought the cough medicine.'

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My short stories contain more incidents I have seen or faced, and I have tried my best to find solutions through my stories for those ongoing problems. All my experiences are related to my home country, Srilanka and London, where I live now. M. Thayalan

“Written in clear, simple English, this collection of stories explore the way Migrant communities bring their cultural values, and traditions of their home country with them, wherever they go. It also scrutinises the duality that brings with it. The way it allows them to retain their identity and their pride in places that feel nothing like home... whilst also keeping alive practices no longer relevant in a modern world, all in the name of ‘tradition.’”

Dr. N. Jeyarupalingam



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