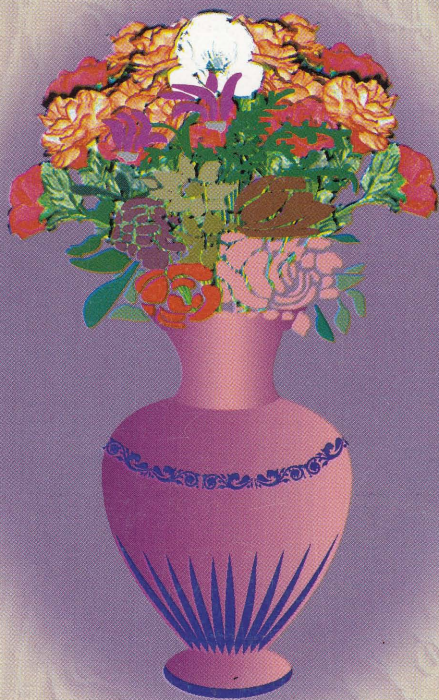


# 12 Short Stories



**Vina Kandavanam**





# 12 SHORT STORIES

**VINA KANDAVANAM**

Compiled by  
**DONNA PLESTER**

VIVEKA PRINTERS  
SCARBOROUGH, ON  
CANADA

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To Mr. M. K. Segaram,  
a noble and able teacher  
who taught me English in the S. S. C. classes  
at Drieberg College, Chavakachcheri  
in Sri Lanka.





## **Publishers' Note**

The Viveka Printers and the International Movement for Tamil Culture - Canada have jointly undertaken the publication of this anthology of short stories by Kavignar V. Kandavanam.

The International Movement for Tamil Culture was founded in Jaffna, Sri Lanka on January 8, 1974. Today the IMTC has branches in 52 countries and sustains its head office in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The broad objective of the movement is to encourage the Tamils living in various parts of the world to preserve and foster the age-old Tamil culture. Kavignar V. Kandavanam's writings always depict the good aspects of Tamil tradition and culture, some of which are also reflected in the '12 Short Stories'.

We are indeed proud to have had the opportunity of publishing this anthology.

We are certain that the readers will find these stories interesting.

Viveka Printers

S. Chelliah

President

IMTC - Canada

## Acknowledgements

All of these stories except the one entitled 'Thanks to Canada' were originally written in Tamil and have appeared in the weekly Tamil paper 'Namnaadhu'.

Apart from Mr. V. Rajalingam, the editor of 'Namnaadhu' for publishing eleven of these stories in his weekly news paper, there are many other friends who have put in lot of their time and energy towards the publication of this book.

I am greatly indebted to -

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Mr. Sinniah Sivanesan, writer and dramatist, emeritus principal of Kopay Christian College, Sri Lanka, for the introduction

and Mr. T. Iswara Kumar for his general assistance and support.

I thank them all sincerely.

Vina Kandavanam



## Foreword

I have had the great privilege of getting to know Vina Kandavanam over the past eight years. Through him, I have learned a little about the political unrest and turmoil of life in Sri Lanka.

This collection of short stories provides the reader with a small window of the difficulties immigrants to this great country encounter. It reflects their desire to become a part of a less stressful community, and to become one of us — a Canadian.

Read, reflect and enjoy the stories contained in this book. Go a step further; obtain and read some of Vina's poetry and other writings. I think you will find them interesting and thought-provoking, as did I.

Donna Plester.

## Introduction

In this '12 Short Stories' ten are dealing with Canadian situations and two with Sri Lankan scenario. All these stories have very forceful messages and themes. Anyone who has no background information of Sri Lankan Tamils, their customs, manners and mentality will have a taste of them, to a certain degree. The political situation under which they abandoned their homeland and went out in search of peaceful places and how they are managing in new situations and surroundings, are very vividly described in some of these stories. The language is simple and serene with similes and metaphors appearing in the appropriate places.

Some of the analogies may be foreign to many non-Tamil speaking readers. If they are interested to know more about them, they may seek the help of their friends and acquaintances.

I have a feeling that this is the first collection of short stories written and published in English by a Sri Lankan Tamil, about Sri Lankan Tamils. Hence I congratulate Vina Kandavanam for venturing out into a new field. This may be an eye-opener for the others to follow suit.

Unfortunately because of some untoward incidents, perpetrated by a few Sri Lankan youths in the recent past, the main stream Canadian population is likely to have a wrong opinion about the Tamil community as a whole. Hence it is the duty of some of the elders, to venture out into new avenues of informing every one about the long-standing cultural traditions and aspirations of the Tamil people. I am happy to note that Vina Kandavanam has taken the first step in the right direction.



Let us take a look at some of the stories in this collection. The first story is about a Sri Lankan small boy's first winter in Canada. He refuses to go to school because it is very cold. The father takes a positive step and makes him realize that life goes on unabated, whether it shines or rains and it pays. A nice theme and a good lesson for youngsters.

The second story deals with an intercommunal marriage and how it is solved amicably by tolerance and better understanding of each other's culture and traditions. A good theme very well handled. It answers all the questions posed by the author himself in the story. Susan is a superb example of a dutiful wife and partner, who understands people as human beings, leaving aside minor differences of colour and customs.

The tragic situation of a family torn apart by the protracted war in Sri Lanka is very well portrayed in the story 'Family Reunion'. It depicts the family bond and love of a father for his only son. I was really moved by this story and hope it will have a deep impact on most of the readers.

Similarly most of the stories bring out the inner feelings and unique mentality of the Tamils. But few of them like jealousy, hatred, class struggle, violence among the youths, pomp and pageantry are still seen among the Tamils and these need to be addressed seriously.

'Let it be a Secret' is the title of a well knit story, dealing with the illicit affair of a father and the son finds that out, after coming to Canada, under a very unusual situation. He decides to keep it as a secret for ever. This story has a universal appeal and parents must take note of it.

Paying tribute to Canadian government for accepting refugees with open arms, is indeed a grateful act of the author, through the words of Gowrie in the story 'Thanks to Canada'.

In the story 'Critique' the pseudo communist tendencies seen in some people have been brought out explicitly by the character Dr. Varatharajan. He portrays real people living among us.

I have had the privilege of knowing the author very well for nearly three decades and I have seen him as a Jack of all trades and master of all of them. People back home in Sri Lanka know him as a leading Tamil poet and a well-known Geography Teacher. He is also an actor, eloquent speaker, writer, good organizer and as an expert story teller.

He has used various techniques of story telling with vibrant and moving words and phrases. His wide knowledge of the Sangam Literature, philosophical and religious ideas have been planted in many of the stories.

I understand that these stories, originally appeared in Tamil in the newspapers written by the author himself. Now he is publishing them in English. This is indeed a remarkable feat.

I am greatly honored , for giving me this opportunity to write an introduction, to the work of an outstanding man, whose invaluable services to the Tamil community will go into history. I thank my colleague Vina Kandavanam for his magnanimous gesture.

Hope our readers will benefit by this collection of short stories.

Sinniah Sivanesan.

## 12 SHORT STORIES

1. Rooting in a Foreign Soil	1
2. Have Mercy on Your Enemy	8
3. Family Reunion	15
4. Wedding Feasts	21
5. Compassion in Tears	28
6. A Secret Forever	35
7. The Art of Anonymity	43
8. An Honourable Hobby	49
9. Love and Lust	55
10. Thanks to Canada	62
11. Critique	71
12. House-warming Ceremony	78
<i>Glossary of Tamil Words</i>	85





## 1

**Rooting  
in a Foreign Soil**

After the bus picked up her son, Sunthari looked around, relaxed.

Houses are all turbaned in milky clothes. Trees are festooned with white flowers. Open spaces appear like the sandy areas of Chavakachcheri. The walkways are filled with silver deposits. White, white, white snow everywhere.

It must have been snowing heavily last night.

She couldn't observe all these when she was taking her son to the school bus. Her mind was with the boy who was refusing to go to school. Oh, it was a difficult task for her to have him brushed, bathed, dressed and taken to the bus.

This is the first winter for Sunthari and her only son, Amuthan. Karunakaran, Sunthari's husband, arrived in Canada from Ealam eight years ago. Yet, his family was able to join him only last April. He was so happy that he organized a reunion party, inviting his relatives and friends.

Soon after the arrival of his family, Karunakaran found a school for his son and Sunthari was pleased with it.

Amuthan is ten years old. He studied grade 5 in Ealam. Here he was admitted to grade 4.

The school is about two miles from home. Karunakaran takes the boy to the school in the mornings and his wife brings him back by bus in the afternoons which arrangement inconvenienced both of them. With the arrangement of a school bus for their son three months ago, the chore of escorting him back and forth to the school was eliminated.

Amuthan appeared to be enjoying going to school. In Ealam teachers would always give lots of written work and passages and poems to memorize. It is not so here. Education through games attracted Amuthan and he would go to school willingly and happily. Karunakaran and Sunthari are very happy about that.

But they had noticed considerable changes in Amuthan's attitude towards school, especially since the Christmas break. The usual pleasure of going to school is not there. He no longer gives an account of his involvement in school activities.

Sunthari did not take many days to understand why. Amuthan's unwillingness to get up from bed in the mornings, creeping under the blanket early at nights, expressions such as 'it's cold, I'm freezing' have all given her the reason, beyond a doubt.

Today, soon after coming from school, he even questioned his mother about the cold weather.

'Why is it so cold here?'

Sunthari's Geography knowledge is minimal. That was not one of her subjects for the Advanced Level classes. Yet, she tried to explain.

'The weather is different from country to country. Some countries are warm and some countries are cold. Ealam is warm and Canada is cold. Even so, there will be cold months in warm countries and warm months in cold countries. Didn't you feel cold in Ealam in December and January? Likewise this cold weather will soon change to warm weather.'

'How long this cold weather will last?'

'Appa said it would be here for two to three months.'

'Can't we stay away from school on cold days?'

'No, not just because it is cold. You go to school wearing winter clothes. If you don't go, you will miss classes. If you miss classes you may not do well in the exams. If you don't do well in the exams, you may not be promoted.'

The mother-son dialogue was interrupted by the arrival of the father. Karunakaran entered the house with shopping bags in both the hands. With him came freezing wind through the opened door. Sunthari rushed to the door and closed it. Karunakaran's eyes were heavy and his nose red with cold.

He removed his gloves and rubbed his palms saying, 'Ah! What a miserable weather! Can I have a cup of coffee, please? It's minus twenty I hear.' So saying he gave a hug to his son who was standing nearby staring at him.

'Uoo.. Appa's hands are cold,' screamed Amuthan. He got himself relieved of the hug and stepped back.

'One cannot run away to another country for fear of the moon. Don't run away for fear of cold, my son. Come here. You are the one who's going to do shopping hereafter. Understand!'

‘Mmm, your son doesn’t even like to go to school. Do you think he will go out to do shopping in this weather?’

‘What? I’m not aware that he doesn’t like going to school. That’s strange! If one doesn’t keep himself busy in this weather, then he’s going to feel more cold and fall sick. What’s the time now... six thirty. Get ready, let’s go watch a game.’

‘I’m not going. Got to cook meals. Take Amuthan with you. But, why in this cold weather?’

‘Don’t worry too much about the weather. I have bought some things for Amuthan to fight the cold weather,’ Karunakaran, said. He opened one of the bags and pulled out two pairs of gloves, a jacket and a pair of boots.

‘He has all these. Why do you have to waste money on them again?’ his wife grumbled.

‘One has to have two to three pairs of winter clothes so that you can choose the right clothes to suit the weather. Look at this glove. It’s very thick and ideal for today’s weather. This jacket is so padded that it can drive any cold away. These boots are specially designed for winter. Their soles and heels are grooved to prevent skidding. Even so you have to walk carefully in the snow.’

Amuthan was moving nearer as his father was lining up the items. He felt like trying them on.

Sunthari served coffee for both Karunakaran and Amuthan. Having had it, Karunakaran put the clothes on Amuthan and left with him for the nearby arena.

Amuthan’s eyes widened and his heart swelled on seeing the inside of the arena. He has never seen one like that.

The lights are very bright. The oval shaped floor is white

in colour. It has a kind of decoration with red and blue lines. There are some children, probably of his age, moving about and hitting something with sticks.

There are two nets on each end of the oval. In front of each of them stands a little one, like a sentry. They have thick pads on their legs. They do not run about like the others. They become alert only when that black chip comes near them.

There is a big man going about with the children. Occasionally he blows a whistle. There are more children standing with big people, probably their parents. Some times they shout aloud, cheering.

More than all this, Amuthan is surprised to find children falling suddenly on the floor, getting up quickly and continuing to play. This is a totally new experience for him.

Karunakaran explained to his son a little about the hockey game following which Amuthan was able to understand that the white oval floor was made of artificially created ice, that the children were moving on skates, and that the black chip was called a puck.

He even made attempts to understand more by asking his father some questions. The first question he asked was about falling on the ice. He wanted to know if the children were not hurt by falling. Karunakaran patiently tried his best to answer his son's questions. He also tried to find out if his son was interested in actually learning the game.

'If you are interested, I can help you become a member of the children's hockey club. The club has teachers to teach children the game,' he said.

Amuthan wasn't sure what to say, other than to rub his



shoulders against his father's hip.

They came out. Karunakaran continued to explain more about the winter life pattern to his son.

'See how children like you are active even in this cold. Cold seasons will come and go. Activities don't stop because of bad weather. Look! Look at that vehicle with blue lights. It clears the snow from the walkway despite the weather, day or night.

'Do you know what this is? It's a newspaper stand. Whatever the weather - chill wind blowing, snow falling or rain freezing, a person comes every morning to lock up papers in this box.

'Watch! There comes a bus and it's full of people. Neither the bus driver nor the passengers thought of being indoors to avoid the cold.

'It's not going to be cold like this every day. Normally the cold season is tolerable. There are winter clothes that are made specially to keep us warm. We have to wear them and do our work. It's only when we don't dress properly, that we feel the cold.

'We have come to Canada and have to adapt ourselves to Canada's weather. I too didn't like the weather at the beginning. But as the years passed, I got used to it. In the same way you will also be able to live with the winter season. There won't be any problem at all.

'Mind you, there are millions of people living in this country, working actively for the development of their country, whatever the weather is. Canada is a great country with all kind of facilities for better living. You should be proud you

are here.'

A pleasant surprise waited for Sunthari the next day. Amuthan got up in the morning without fuss, went through the morning routine of bathroom duties unassisted, got himself dressed, had his breakfast which was prepared by his mother and was ready to go for the school bus enthusiastically.



## 2

**Have Mercy  
on Your Enemy**

*To* go or not to go? That is the question.

This is not a school examination question. This concerned a real life issue. Even though Kumar came across several problems in his life and successfully solved them, this question has been racking his mind for the past two weeks.

He told his wife, Susan, about it, knowing well that she is capable of treating his disturbed mind. 'I have no say in this matter, dear. It's you who have to come up with an answer. Whatever your decision, I shall abide by it,' said Susan.

Susan respects her husband's wishes and would go all out to please him. In the same way Kumar too would give in to his wife's desires and preferences. Many people within their circle did not know that this mutual understanding is the key to their successful love-life.

It was those who did not know that ridiculed their true love at the beginning.

'How long is their love going to last?'

‘It is possible that soon she will abandon Kumar and go with another man?’

‘Whites’ culture is different. They do not stick to one person. They jump from person to person.’

‘Why should he go after a white girl when there are many Tamil girls?’

‘He must have thought that he would get a higher status if married to a white.’

The very person who was behind such derision has sent an invitation to the young couple now.

To go or not to go?

He finds it difficult to make up his mind because the moment he thinks about it, there is always a down pouring of past events.

\* \* \* \* \*

In spite of aggressive displays of disapproval and mockery, the Kumar-Susan love affair continued progressively.

It was Susan who lit up the lamp of love in the heart of Kumar. They were both working as accounts clerks in the same company. To him she was just a friendly co-worker. But to her he was more than a co-worker. It was not his smartness, not his intelligence, not his sense of humour - it was something else which was not very clear to her. Unknowingly she became attracted to him and for many months she was desperately trying to find a way to express her love for him.

Somehow she found out his birthdate and waited anxiously for the day. And when the day came, she presented him with a bouquet of flowers and wished him happy birthday.

From that day onwards Kumar fell sick - sick of thinking about Susan all the time, day and night. When he mustered up his courage to disclose to her the sickness one day, she admitted that she too was in love with him.

Attempts were made to mar their true love and separate them by spreading derisive rumours - all coming from Kumar's circle and the chief architects were none other than Kumar's own sister, Kanmany, and her husband, Arnanthan. They both totally despised Kumar's love affair with Susan. They wanted to nip it in the bud.

Are you going to -  
abandon your religion?  
pawn your culture to an unfamiliar culture?  
forget your mother tongue?  
cut the links of your relatives?  
be a curse to your own family?

So many questions were aimed at him like arrows. Even when Kumar said 'no' to those questions, nobody was prepared to listen to him. Cunning people have courage to question, but not to listen.

They even sent anonymous letters to Susan saying that Kumar was a dirty person, not to be relied upon, and that he was dating another girl, and on and on. Thank god, Susan happened to be a very strong-willed girl.

There are umpteen number of stories about the murder of true love by those who failed to understand the power of love. Some of the stories have been made into living literature of which the tragedies of Romeo and Juliet in English and

Ambigarvathy and Amaraarvathy in Tamil are two famous examples.

What is the use of having examples? They hardly tame dullards. Yet, the period in which Romeo and Ambigarvathy lived was quite different. It was an age of stratified society in which love was prevented from flowing from one level to another. Although love is a powerful weapon, lovers belonging to different levels were powerless in those days.

It is not so today. And Canada is a paradisiacal haven for lovers. Canadian rights and privileges provided the necessary courage and opportunity for Kumar and Susan to have a married life.

Susan's parents were Sai Baba devotees. They arranged for their daughter a simple wedding ceremony which was attended by some Sai devotees. Kumar's parents and his sister's family were also invited, but none of them attended the wedding.

Kumar was certain that his sister and brother-in-law would not bother to attend, but thought his parents would somehow be present. They too, boycotted, and that was, Kumar thought, a terrible insult. He could not forget that. He knew well they would have very much liked to, but Arnanthan would have prevailed upon them not to go. Otherwise his parents were supportive of his relationship with Susan.

Hence the two families were not on speaking terms for the past seven years. As a result, the six year old daughter of Kumar and Susan did not have any chance to know any relatives on the paternal side.

Two weeks ago there was a letter from an entirely unexpected person. It was from Kanmany, Kumar's sister. Of Kanmany's three children, the first two were girls and the last a boy, to whose first birth anniversary Kumar and his family were invited.

That was a change of heart, of course, but what could have been the reason?

That evening Susan's parents visited them. Among other things, Kumar informed them of the invitation received from Kanmany and sought their advice whether to go or not.

His father-in-law spoke:

'I feel there's a reason for their change of heart. A vacancy has occurred for a computer network manager in my company and applications were called for through the press. Arnathan is one of the applicants. According to information furnished in the application, he is unemployed at present. After patching things up at the birthday party, Arnathan might approach you for a favour - to recommend him to me. Although I have a final say in the appointment, you know very well that I cannot be influenced. I'm a Sai devotee. The job should go to the most qualified man.

'I would suggest that you take this opportunity to renew your relationship with them. You two have a higher degree of self confidence. Confidence is man's supreme weapon to conquer any person, any situation. As long as you have this weapon, no one can harm you. Many have tried to break your relationship. Have they won? No, because the confidence both of you have has defeated them.

'Success and failure are based on karma. Your confidence



is something that you have earned from God as a result of your Karma. Confident people are fearless people. That must not make a person proud. No harm would come to you by going to the party. 'Love your enemies' says the Bible. 'Have mercy on your enemy' says Bhagavad Gita. Let what had happened between you and them be gone. Treat them like bad dreams. Our minds are gold mines and they must not harbour any grudge against any person. Better that you go.'

Kumar is edified now. He has got the answer to the question that has been bothering him for the past couple of weeks or so.

Kumar went with his family to the birthday party. The main banquet hall of the Easttown Restaurant in Scarborough was bustling with a party mood. The hall decoration reflected English culture. Like the balloons that were used in part for the decoration, the faces of the people blossomed in happiness. Invitees were still arriving.

When Kumar and Susan arrived at the entrance with their daughter, every one turned to watch Susan. The reason being she was dressed in a sari like a Tamil lady and looked very attractive. The eyes of those Tamil girls who turned up in western dress stared wide in shame.

Arnanthan's face tried to camouflage his guilty conscience. Kanmany, who once questioned Kumar if he was going to pawn Tamil culture to marry Susan, appeared ashamed, yet rushed to the entrance to receive them. When she said, 'Hi' to Susan, Susan put her palms together against her chest and said, 'Vanakkam' in Tamil.

Kumar's parents who were standing nearby were very

much impressed by the appearance of Susan. When she asked them in Tamil if they were keeping well, they were elated by her Tamil and felt Kumar was really fortunate to have such a good lady as his wife. What about them? They too were lucky to have such a caring daughter-in-law. No person in Canada so far had inquired about their health so affectionately as Susan.



## 3

**Family Reunion**

*T*he news squeezed Veerasingam's heart.

He could not have his evening prayer as usual. Yet, he sat down in meditation, asking his family god, Lord Murugan, 'Why should You bring me this news when I begin my prayers to You?'

Veerasingam is a religious man with a sense of family responsibility. He has two daughters. Both are very good at studies and are in university now. He must work so that they can continue to study and come up in life. In addition, he must send some money occasionally to his sister's family who by the grace of Lord Murugan have escaped from the Jaffna war zone, and arrived safely in Vavuniya. Apart from that, Veerasingam has no other ambitions in life.

He works full time as a security guard during the day, at the end of which he proceeds straight to a telemarketing company for a four-hour part time telephoning job. By the time he returns home it is usually 9.30 or 10.00 p.m. What ever the time, or how tired he is, he never fails to have a wash and say his prayers.

That was what he did even today.

When he was about to pray, the phone rang. Having sensed that his wife was in the kitchen, he answered the call.

The voice on the phone was crying. The news peeled off his heart. Shock and sorrow shook the person who had just returned home fully exhausted. He did not know what to do. He grieved as if it had actually happened to him.

He failed in his attempt to unload the grief in front of his god. He failed to meditate at the lotus feet of the supreme Lord peacefully.

Prayer, as far as Veerasingham is concerned, is an act of uniting with Lord Murugan for some minutes. During that time, he would visit Nallur (in his home country) where Murugan has a colossal temple. He would also enjoy the company of Yogar Swamy who was enlightened at Nallur. Veerasingham is also a follower of Yogar Swamy. He was one of those who showed up in time for the Yogar Swamy Guru pooja held for the first time in Canada on April 11, 1992 at Lansdowne Cooperative Homes hall.

The peace and pleasure he receives as a result of such meditation are immeasurable. But today, he could not get them.

His dutiful wife, Rarsamma, warmed the food in readiness to serve.

'I'll have it later. Get ready, we have to visit Navaratnam now.'

'Why at this time of the day? You look sad, what happened?'

‘Navaratnam’s son is shot dead!’

His voice trembled. Rarsamma’s eyes, wide open, focused on her husband.

\* \* \* \* \*

Veerasingham and Navaratnam are mutual friends. They worked together in Colombo before in the same department. Following the July 1983 communal violence, Veerasingham and his family moved to Canada. When after four years, Navaratnam arrived, Veerasingham accommodated him in his apartment and offered all possible assistance like a right hand man.

Navaratnam also had no one to go to in Canada other than Veerasingham, whom he knew as a man who goes all out to help others without expecting anything in return.

Navaratnam is grateful to his friend for accompanying him to a lawyer for his refugee claim which was later accepted. When he got the work permit, it was Veerasingham who filled out a job application form for him to take it to a company that gave him a job.

Last year, an apartment became vacant in 40 Tuxedo Court where he was staying with Veerasingham. Since his family were to join him within months, he managed to rent an apartment with the help of Veerasingham and moved there and began furnishing it. Time moved faster and it was a matter of days for his family to board the plane to arrive in Canada.

They, in fact, should have been here a long time ago. His wife and three daughters have been in Colombo for the past two years ready to leave for Canada. But they did not want to leave without Chandran, Navaratnam’s only son who could

not join them from Jaffna without an exit permit from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam which was fighting for a separate Tamil State within Sri Lanka.

By the time Chandran was given a permit, he was over nineteen and hence the Canadian High Commission in Colombo removed him from family class sponsorship. Navaratnam's appeals to Immigration Canada and to the High Commission in Colombo were not successful. Finally he agreed to leave his son and sponsor the rest of the family.

Navaratnam, who has been anxiously awaiting the arrival of his family, today received shocking news that devastated all his hopes of starting a new life in Canada.

His son, Chandran, was shot dead.

A seedling that was forging his head above to grow was nipped in the bud! A gorgeous flower garden was trampled by a wild elephant!

\* \* \* \* \*

Veerasingham and his wife hurried to the elevator.

'Who shot the boy?' his wife asked.

'Who else? It has happened in Colombo. It must have been the Sinhalese army. Navaratnam told the news and started crying. So I didn't feel like going into details at that point.'

'Poor man. Very unfortunate that it has happened at a time when his wife and other children are preparing to come over here. He is his only son. I don't know how he's going to take this.'

'Mm... He loves his son a lot. He told me some days ago that he had advised his son to file a self sponsorship application

and was praying that he would be successful.'

The elevator was going up like their grief.

There were two people in the elevator talking in English.

'He's the boss,' said one.

'And therefore, we have got to listen to him,' said the other.

They apparently were talking about their boss at their workplace. But Veerasingam, who heard them talking, was thinking about God as the boss. He is the boss of all bosses who rules the world. There is no person more powerful than Him. He is everything. His commandments are our lives. He has determined our lives long ago. Everything has been done for us already.

As the elevator came to a standstill, Veerasingam's philosophical thoughts also stopped. When the elevator doors opened, his heart also opened for mourning.

Rarsamma knocked on the door.

Navaratnam, who answered the knock, started crying, throwing his arms around Veerasingam's shoulders.

Rarsamma was weeping too.

Sharing in one's grief is a sign of love and love's emotions have no limit.

Veerasingam was also in tears. Yet, he managed to control himself and tried to console his friend.

'I can understand your feelings. There's nothing that we can do when Fate plays its part. It's a testing period for the Tamil people in our country. Like Chandran, so many innocent boys have fallen victim to the atrocities of the Sinhalese forces.

Try to control your feelings and concentrate on what has to be done next. By the way, when did you receive this news?’

There was no answer.

Veerasingham, feeling the arms around his shoulders getting cold, made towards the sofa and had Navaratnam sit. It was only then they both realized that Navaratnam was unconscious.

Rarsamma called 911.

Veerasingham was shattered when the Scarborough General Hospital confirmed that Navaratnam had passed away. He became unsteady and Rarsamma gave him a hand.

‘You are tired. Haven’t even eaten anything. Shall I get you a cup of coffee?’

‘No, thanks. Let’s go home. Call a taxi.’

Navaratnam has left Veerasingham in a miserable, burdensome situation. He carefully but quickly made his next move. He contacted Navaratnam’s wife in Colombo and told her first that Navaratnam was ill and in hospital. He thought he must prepare her to receive the shocking news of her husband’s death, which he disclosed the next day.

Navaratnam’s wife preferred to have her husband’s funeral along with his son’s in Colombo. Following that information, Veerasingham became busy making arrangements to take his friend’s body to Colombo himself.



## 4

# Wedding Feasts

*R*eturning from the bank, Uthayan parked his car and went into his apartment, voicing urgently to every one at home, 'Get ready, get ready! It's ten thirty already!'

'I'm ready,' said his father, Singham.

'Dress up Salini, dear, I'll be ready in a minute,' said his wife, Kunavathy, hopping up upstairs. By the time they were all ready and moving towards the car, the sun was sending down heat waves.

The month of August is a blissful one for the Tamil people. It is an auspicious month when most weddings take place. Many halls in the City of Toronto, booked well ahead of time, would, during week-ends appear attractive with colourful bridal altars and elegant decorations made with flowers and balloons.

All weddings arranged in heaven would take place in August.

Today is Saturday and Uthayan has three wedding invitations, all of which are noon functions and must be attended. One is his friend's wedding, the other for his wife's



relative and the third is for the son of his father's friend.

He has to drop off his wife at a hall in Malvern, his father at Atlanta Hall and proceed to Richmond Hill Pillaiyar Temple Hall where his friend is getting married. He wanted very much to be on time for this wedding because his friend was very helpful to him at his wedding. That sense of gratitude is shooting up in his mind.

He first dropped off his father at Atlanta Hall, handed an envelope to him and proceeded towards Malvern.

'How much did you give appa in the envelope?' Kunavathy asked.

'Thirty,' replied Uthayan.

'I thought you must have bought a wedding present for him yesterday when you were shopping for us.'

'He preferred a cash present to carrying a big parcel. Have you any money in your purse?'

'Yes, I have forty-two dollars.'

'Could I have twenty-five, please?'

'Sure. Why then did you go to the bank this morning?'

'I had some other business to do. Is Salini sleeping?'

'Mmm... She falls asleep quickly while riding in a car, you know that. So, why did you have to go to the bank?'

'I didn't realize until this morning that I had lost my purse in the shopping mall yesterday. Bank card, Visa, SIN - all the cards were gone. So I went to the bank to inform them, or else we would be in big trouble, you know.'

'How much cash did you lose?'

‘One hundred and twenty.’

They reached Malvern. The hall where the wedding would take place is situated near the Tapscott and Neilson intersection. Uthayan parked the car and his wife got out with Salini. He opened the boot, took out the present, handed it over to his wife, bid good bye and got back in his car.

By the time he arrived at the Pillaiyar Temple Hall, the time was almost twelve noon.

The groom was already on the bridal platform. Within minutes the bride was led to the altar. The ceremony was being conducted to schedule.

But caterers failed to show up in time, and the blessing/wishing part of the ceremony was purposely delayed because both the bride's and the groom's parties were concerned that the invitees might leave without eating.

The queue of people who got up to wish the couple well stood still. During that time Uthayan got himself involved in arranging the table for the wedding feast with others related to the couple. Once the foods arrived, he also gave a helping hand in serving them. Then he, too, sat down to have a quick taste of the food. And it was three-thirty in the afternoon when he finally went up to the couple to wish them well and give his present.

He was reluctant to leave without worshipping the Lord Pillaiyar. He went into the temple, bowed his head to the holy statue of Pillaiyar with sanctify, had a quick walk through the inner aisle and left.

Outside the Atlantic Hall his father was waiting. Uthayan picked him up and was heading towards Malvern.

On the way he asked his father how the wedding went. His father described:

‘They did not keep to their time at all. The auspicious time to wear the Thali was supposed to be between 11.30 and 12.30, but the Thali wearing ceremony was performed only around 1.30. They delayed the ceremony until the arrival of the photographer. People got fed up with the whole arrangement. Nothing was done to time. They started serving food a few minutes ago. I didn’t wait for food. I didn’t go in since I came out to check if you were here.’

Uthayan stopped on the way at a restaurant and bought a tray of muffins and a cup of coffee for his hungry father.

At Malvern people were coming out of the wedding hall. Uthayan went in, leaving his father in the car. Kunavathy was talking to one of her friends. On seeing her husband, she bid good bye to her and walked towards him.

‘Now that you are here, why don’t you go and congratulate the couple?’ suggested Kunavathy. ‘All right. Let’s go together,’ he said.

Both went up to the couple who were standing at the bridal setting and wished them. When they were about to leave, they were looking for Salini.

Salini was missing.

There were few people in the hall by that time and therefore searching for Salini did not pose any problem for them. But she was not there, not even in the washrooms. Panicking, they both rushed out to look for her in different directions.

Uthayan saw his father holding Salini’s hand and called

his wife. Their tension disappeared and relief began to prevail.

'It was so hot inside the car. So I got out only to see my grand child coming from the other side of the parking lot, crying,' said Singham.

'When?' asked Uthayan.

'Just now,' came the reply.

'Jewelry is missing,' cried Kunavathy fretfully.

'Where are the bangles, chain and the ear studs, dear,' she asked.

'Uncle took them.'

'Where's that uncle?'

Salini turned around and pointed her finger in the direction of the parking lot down behind the hall. Uthayan rushed towards that direction which was the very end of the parking lot.

Someone had lured the child to the back side of the hall and removed all her jewelry and took off with them unnoticed. Thank god, he did not kidnap the child. With that satisfaction, they all got into the car.

It was apparent that they all wanted to go home and rest. It was hot and they were very tired.

'Why did you go out, my daughter? What did that man who took the jewelry tell you?'

'He said good child.'

'Did you hear that, dear?' Kunavathy tried to draw the attention of her husband and said the person must have been a Tamil.

‘Shut up! You failed to keep an eye on the child and now try to do a big investigation! What use of knowing if the thief was a Tamil or non-Tamil?’ said Uthayan in an admonitory tone.

‘I’m going to inform the police,’ she said boldly.

‘This is a very small incident. The police have lot of other useful work to do. Let’s keep quiet. What’s gone is gone. It is said that things lost would bring in virtuous results,’ said Singham with the intention of pacifying them. He also diverted their attention by asking Kunavathy about the wedding she attended.

‘O, that’s a pathetic story, marma. Most people couldn’t watch the ceremony. There were lot of people in front of the bridal altar blocking the view from the beginning to the end. Even when some of the people moved, video and camera men continued to stand there unmindful of the invitees seated in the hall. We didn’t see the wearing of the Thali at all.

‘Salini wanted to see the bride and the groom but she couldn’t. We were able to see the couple only at the time of blessing them with sanctified rice. But one thing ... the food was great. Rajaram were the caterers. They were the ones who catered for our wedding, do you remember? They did a good job for this wedding too.’

The only person in the car who was not interested in Kunavathy’s comments about the wedding which she started with frustration and ended up tastefully, was Salini. She was fast asleep. They have reached their building but Salini wouldn’t get up. Uthayan has to carry her on his shoulders.

They all walked to their apartment and found a note on

the door which said, 'I have good news for you. Contact the number given below.'

'I guess it's about the jewelry, dear. Call him, call him!' urged Kunavathy.

Uthayan phoned the person. His wife and dad stood besides him, watching intently. Uthayan was talking in English and that indicated to Kunavathy that the person on the other end must be a non-Tamil.

The man who removed the jewelry off Salini seemed to have spoken to her in Tamil. Could there be a security guard or police who saw the criminal and took him into custody?

Kunavathy's high hopes were punctured by the description given by Uthayan on the phone. He took down the address given by the person, thanked him very much and hung up.

It was not about jewelry, but it was good news too.

Uthayan's purse, which he lost yesterday in the Eglinton Square mall, was found by a white person. Using the address in the purse, he took the trouble of going over to Uthayan's apartment to give it to him, but the door was locked and nobody was home. So he put a note on the door and left.

Uthayan is on his way now to claim his lost purse from that Good Samaritan.



## 5

**Compassion in Tears**

*S*aturday, 7:30 a.m.

Ambalavanar turned the pages of his diary on the desk to look for that day's appointment. There was an entry which said, 'Yossi Eben: 10:00 a.m.'. On seeing it, he began to get ready in a hurry.

Yossi Eben is a leading immigration and criminal lawyer in Toronto, and Ambalavanar, who is very fluent in English, Tamil and Sinhalese, is one of his translators. His experience as a translator for the government in Sri Lanka is helping him a great deal in Canada.

Yet he is not doing this just to get an income. He wants to help other people also, especially the refugees from his community. This benevolent attitude is keeping him active even at this old age. He is already employed as a security guard by Paragon Security Service, a job he got within a month of his arrival in Canada.

His first visit to Yossi Eben's office was to help a refugee claimant. Impressed by his command of the English language, Yossi retained him as a part-time translator. To suit



Ambalavanar's convenience, Tamil refugee cases were scheduled during weekends.

Ambalavanar and his wife Annammah arrived in Canada on sponsorship by their children, a son and two daughters, who were all married and settled in Canada. They first stayed with their son for some months, then with their eldest daughter, and afterwards with the other daughter. After two years of moving from apartment to apartment, they now have a life of their own in the basement of a house which their son had recently bought.

His wife served him breakfast — a couple of sandwiches, a banana and a cup of coffee. The coffee was hot so he blew air into it to cool it, and gulped it in succession and hurried out of the house.

It was 8:30 a.m. by the time he reached the road for the bus. The sun was wearing a veil of cloud. Some maple trees are preparing to decorate their faces early this year, signalling the departure of summer.

The lawyer's office is downtown on St. Clair Avenue West. Ambalavanar took a bus to Warden Subway Station, travelled by train to Yonge, changed over to the yellow line and reached St. Clair, where he got onto a streetcar and reached the office at around 9:45 a.m.

Yossi's legal assistant, Terry Lerner, received Ambalavanar. 'We are expecting a client called Canarsekaaram. He hasn't showed up yet. I called him yesterday to remind him of the appointment. I guess he will be here soon. Take your seat,' she said.

The client's name sounded unfamiliar to Ambalavanar,

so he asked Terry for the name again. Terry showed him the papers she had with her, and seeing the name on one of them, he read the name out as Gnanasegaram.

‘Oh, is that the way it is said? Sri Lankan names are long and difficult to pronounce at times.’

‘Well, they become long when they are written in English. In Tamil, Gnanasegaram needs only six letters.’

‘Is that so? I have to do some work before Gnanasegaram comes. Have a look at this cutting. It’s the editorial from last Wednesday’s Globe and Mail. I’m going to attach it to Gnanasegaram’s PIF.’

‘Thank you.’

It was an editorial under the heading ‘The pressing need to halt the killing in Sri Lanka’, from the Globe and Mail September 26, 1990 issue, and Ambalavanar’s eyes delved into its contents.

The editorial, citing a stinging report by Amnesty International, blamed Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa for the killing of thousands of Tamils, and said Canada and other concerned nations should persuade Premadasa’s government to find a solution to the ethnic problem, if necessary with the help of the United Nations or the Commonwealth.

A youth stepped into the office. On seeing him, Ambalavanar thought he must be Gnanasegaram.

‘Come in, Mr. Gnanasegaram.’

‘Good morning. You are ...?’

‘I am Ambalavanar. I have been called to assist in

translating your Tamil into English.'

When Ambalavanar informed Terry of Gnanasegaram's arrival, Terry said, 'I'm ready. Bring him in.'

Filling out Gnanasegaram's personal information form (PIF) began. Terry questioned Gnanasegaram one by one and Ambalavanar listened to his answers and delivered them in English. Terry did the writing herself. Box 33 of the form requires, among other things, to set out in point form and in chronological order the incidents which have caused the claimant to have fear of persecution and to explain why those incidents have caused the claimant to have such fear.

Gnanasegaram began to narrate his story.

'I am a Sri Lankan citizen, and was born on 02.09.1969 in Thondamarnaru in the Northern Province. I am a Tamil by race. Tamil minorities in Sri Lanka have been discriminated against and oppressed by the majority Sinhalese ever since the country received its independence from the British in 1948. Non-violent campaigns by the Tamil leaders against the various oppressive measures adopted by the successive Sinhala governments resulted in several violent anti-Tamil racial riots, mostly aided and abetted by government forces. Tamils, therefore, have lost confidence that the armed forces would protect them.

'Failure of democratic struggle to find a solution to the Tamil problem gave rise to the emergence of armed resistance movements against which the government has been fighting since 1979, the year the Prevention of Terrorism Act was passed by parliament.

'On November 24, 1984, my mother and I were travelling

by bus to visit my aunt, my mother's older sister, who lived in Kankasanturai. That day Tamil rebels had attacked the Kankasanturai police station, of which we were unaware. Our bus was stopped on the way by police, and four youths, including myself, were taken into custody. We were detained at Harbour Front Camp where I was taken to a separate room and questioned on suspicion that I was a Tamil rebel. I was accused of lying and was beaten with gun butts by two officers. The next day I was released as a result of efforts taken by my mother.

'On December 21, 1986, the Sri Lankan army shot and killed two devotees at our village Selvasannathi Temple while poojas were in progress. One of the two killed was a cousin of mine. Although a committee of temple priests, manager and other leading personalities of the village met with the Government Agent, Jaffna, and lodged a complaint about the incident, the army opened fire into the congregation during pooja time the next day too. Two devotees died as a result. Following the atrocities by the army, poojas were suspended and the temple was closed.

'Selvasannathi is a sacred place for the Sri Lankan Hindus, and the closure of the temple without notice caused untold hardships to the pilgrims. Hindus believed that the army had committed the murders in the holy place with malice aforethought.

'Soon after the shooting incident, the army at Thondamarnaru was reinforced and their atrocities escalated. They began to harass women, intimidate elderly men, loot houses and arrest youths.

'Fearing persecution by the army, many fled the village.

Our family also fled to a village called Atchuvely. As a result I had to discontinue my studies. However, in January the following year, I joined the Atchuvely High School and continued my studies.

‘On the night of May 10, 1987, I was taken into custody by the Sri Lankan army on suspicion of assisting the Tamil rebels. I was sleeping at home at the time. I was driven to Palaly Camp where I was shown some photographs and asked to identify the people in them. When I told them I did not know anyone, I was beaten and threatened that I would be sent to the Boosa Camp if I did not tell the truth.

‘Boosa Camp was notorious for torturing and killing Tamil detainees. Many Tamil youths who were taken to that camp never returned. I was scared and could not sleep. I did not even feel like eating. On the third day I started shivering. I felt thirsty and asked for water. An officer ridiculed me, saying how could a person who refused to eat food drink water. I do not know what happened thereafter. I fainted. When I regained consciousness, I realized I was at the Jaffna Hospital. I was told my school principal obtained permission from the Government Agent for my release.

‘The atrocities of the government forces came to an end in July 1987 with the arrival of the Indian Peace Keeping Force which took control of the Tamil region in Sri Lanka. We returned to Thondamarnaru only to find our house damaged as a result of shelling. We somehow managed to repair it and tried to live there.

‘In September 1988, heavy fighting took place in my village between the Indian forces and the Tamil Tigers. My father, who was coming home along the road, got caught in



the cross fire and ... and ... died.'

Gnanasegaram was in tears and was finding it difficult to continue. Everybody sat quietly for a moment. Then Ambalavanar put his hand on the young man's shoulder and tried to console him. Terry passed him a kleenex, left her office, and returned shortly with a glass of water. Gnanasegaram, who appeared to have regained his composure, had a couple of sips of water and continued his story.

'Today is September 29. It was on this day my father died...'

Gnanasegaram sobbed aloud, covering his mouth with his hands. Ambalavanar noticed tear drops rolling down Terry's cheeks.

'Shall we continue tomorrow?' asked Terry, blowing her nose into a kleenex. Ambalavanar translated. Gnanasegaram nodded his head in agreement.

Ambalavanar was waiting for the streetcar. The sky was cloudy and it looked as though it could rain any time. He in fact felt raindrops falling on him. Thank God, the streetcar was there before the cloud could burst.

Gnanasegaram, who is still lamenting the tragic death of his father ... Terry, whose cheeks were wet with tears at the sad story of a person whom she happened to meet only today...

These two people were painting sorrowful pictures in the heart of Ambalavanar. At the end of those pictures, Ambalavanar's thoughts ran thus: 'Terry's tears are a symbol of Canada's compassion for the refugees. True humanitarian outlook disregards racial, religious, language and colour differences.'



## 6

**A Secret Forever***Marthini -*

When I first arrived in Canada I stayed with a friend of mine. I noticed that she wasn't the same girl I had known back in my home village where she was mostly a caged parrot. I was indeed surprised to find that the parrot had now changed into a butterfly. She had adapted herself to the new atmosphere and went about with boys like a neoteric girl. I hated staying with her.

Although I didn't like her way of life, I was compelled to stay with her because I knew no other person in Canada at that time.

After the inquiry and receiving the legal documents, I found work at the CIBC. While working, I began to follow a course in accountancy at Centennial College. But I couldn't concentrate on my studies at my friend's place which was usually noisy in the evenings. So I rented a one-room apartment myself and began a new life.

Accounting books became everything to me. They were

my friends and they were my relatives. I spent most of my time with them and it paid off - I was successful at the final CMA exam.

At the graduation ceremony there was a Tamil gentleman next to me. He was one Marnickam, handsome and polite. He spoke to me softly and appeared to be interested in getting to know more about me. Except for his name, he didn't reveal much about himself. I didn't bother to ask him either. The function came to a close and I rose to my feet to leave when he asked for my phone number, which I gave.

The very next day I got a call from Marnickam asking for my birth chart. If anyone is interested in the birth chart of a girl of marriageable age, it means that person is interested in the girl. I was a bit shocked at the request because Marnickam appeared to be much older than I. I guess he should at least be around forty-five. So I asked him why he wanted my chart. The dialogue that ensued dispelled my fear.

Marnickam was a teacher back home, married with children. He wanted my chart to check with that of another person by the name Marthavan, a civil engineer working at the Markham City Council. I faxed my chart to the number given by Marnickam.

He called me again to say that the charts were agreeing perfectly and that Marthavan would like to meet with me. He also suggested a mall or a temple would be ideal for the meeting.

I have heard that Tamil Canadians usually select a convenient mall or a temple for the 'bride showing ritual'. Contrary to this practice, I opted for the traditional way and

told him Marthavan could see me at my apartment where I was the only person living. Marnickam didn't object to it and I was happy at that.

Yesterday was a Saturday. Marthavan, accompanied by Marnickam, visited me. In keeping with our custom, I served them with tea. The men did most of the talking and it centred around knowing more about my family. I didn't go far investigating Marthavan's family. I was a little nervous and didn't talk much. After about an hour they left.

Soon there was a call from Marnickam. 'Do you like Marthavan?' That was his first question. There was a kind of eagerness in the way he put it. 'Would there be a woman who wouldn't like him?' I asked in return, and I heard him laughing on the phone.

I believe Marthavan would like me too. He is attractive and educated. He really showed some interest in my family. At one point I saw his eyes fixed on my father's photo on the wall and he was sympathetic when I told him about his death. I have a feeling that he wished to be part of our family. I would be very lucky if this marriage were to go through.

This was not something I planned. Passing of the exam, meeting of Marnickam master, tallying of the birth charts are all signs of good times to come. Another good sign was that my application to sponsor my mother and brother has been accepted.

My wedding will take place after their arrival and I have indicated this to Marnickam the day he told me about the agreement of our charts.

He is a gentleman. He is actually trying to help me. I

still feel sorry for misunderstanding him when he first called for my horoscope.

### ***Marnickam -***

‘Why do you want to do unnecessary things?’ asks my wife sometimes. She has reason to worry because I often end up in receiving as present malignity for my magnanimity. Some of the malicious gossip about me have reached my wife’s ears. Many are concerned about results, not about the enormous amount of time spent and effort taken to do a job. If the result is positive, you are capable, if not, you are stupid.

Stupid all right. But I never get a cent from anybody for my services. Free service never satisfies clients. Some have even taken horoscopes I have charted to check if it was correct to astrologers who take money. If you charge for your service, you are a professional, if not, an amateur.

Charting horoscopes, comparing charts for the purpose of marriage and forecasting the future are my hobby. Being once a math teacher, I hardly go wrong in my calculations. That is the main reason for passing the accountancy exam at the first shot.

At convocation, I happened to sit beside a lady called Marthini. She looked beautiful, like a film actress. Thinking she would be a good match for Marthavan, I got her horoscope and checked with Marthavan’s. They matched perfectly well.

I came to know Marthavan only recently. He approached me with his horoscope and asked me to find a suitable partner for him. Subsequently, I made some investigations and found him to be of good stock. He neither drinks nor smokes. He did his engineering at Kaddubetha in Sri Lanka, and was

successful in finding a good job here, suitable to his qualifications. Marthini, now being a qualified accountant, would be a perfect match for him. So I made arrangements for their meeting, after which Marthini gave the green light, but Marthavan not.

He did not like the girl. I was totally surprised.

What could be the reason? I really don't know. Is it because Marthini is from Batticaloa? Jaffna people usually do not have marriage connections with Batticaloa people. I thought Marthavan was a progressive type of fellow. Well, however progressive people are, they are bound to be pushed backwards to the traditional ways of inquiring about the place, the caste, the family history, etc., of the party concerned when it comes to the question of marriage.

Who knows? It's hard to understand the minds of our modern boys. And it is still difficult when they are in Canada where they have more freedom. What else shall I say then? He was looking for an educated girl. I presented to him a beautiful and educated one. And now he says, 'I don't want'. When asked why, he bluntly said 'I don't like the girl'.

Well, you can only take a horse to water. Marriage is an important event in one's life. The boy and the girl must like each other to begin with. Some condemn our way of arranging marriage. But we never force a marriage. We can't. On top of consulting horoscopes, family investigation, and other kinds of formalities, lies the basic criteria - the consent of the prospective bride and groom. It is not the custom of the Sri Lankan Tamils to marry a couple who do not like each other.

Yet, I gave Marthavan two days' time to reconsider his



decision. This, as my wife used to say, is something unwanted, but I have a reason for it.

Although I have arranged many marriages, I never accompanied either the groom or the bride to their first meeting. When Marthavan requested me to go with him, I first refused, but changed my mind later for the sake of the girl.

Marthini has no relatives in Canada. I felt people like her must be given some kind of help, especially in arranging a marriage. Somehow I developed an interest in her marriage like a brother who would like very much to see his own sister getting married. It is this fraternal feeling that made me request Marthavan to reconsider his decision. Further, after the girl had expressed her desire to marry Marthavan, I felt bad to call her and say that Marthavan doesn't like her.

I hope and pray Marthavan will say 'yes'.

### ***Marthavan -***

I was really fortunate to have gone to Marthini's apartment to meet her. Else, there would have been a fatal accident. Had I met her in a mall or a temple ... said yes to the marriage ... and come to know our relationship after the marriage ... my life would have fallen into abysmal shame ... I would have even committed suicide. My future certainly will not be there!

God has saved me. Not only me. Even Marthini.

At Marthini's apartment I happened to see the photograph of her father. Only after that I realized her father is also my father. As for me, my father died long ago, but only that day I



came to know that he had actually passed away. He was bedridden for almost ten years as a result of a stroke, and died a year ago. Marthini had his photograph enlarged and hung on the wall in the lounge. The framed picture was garlanded. It clearly showed how much she loved her father.

I somehow managed to suppress my feelings and left the house.

My mother passed away some months after my birth. I was only able to know my mother's face through photographs. But one cannot say that I was unfortunate to lose a mother's love. My aunt, who is my mother's older sister, gave me all the love she could and brought me up like her own son.

I came to know my father also through photographs. While working in Batticaloa, he fell in love with another woman and after my mother's death, he married that woman and settled down there.

The feud that was brewing as a result of my father's conduct kept him away from our village. His attempt to see me was also thwarted. Hence the father did not have a chance even to see the colour of his own son.

I was told that he was willing to help financially with my upbringing, but my aunt declined the offer. That means our family had virtually excommunicated him. Not because he married a Batticaloa woman, but because he had an affair with her even when his legal wife was living, which is quite contrary to our culture. This affair, my aunt firmly believes, was the chief reason for my mother's torment and her death.

This is an old story. This old story was about to commit a new blunder. Thank God it did not happen.

There is absolutely no point in disclosing the reason for it. It is not going to help anyone. I doubt very much Marthini knows about her father's first marriage. There is no chance for her to know that. To disclose this now to a lady who is trying to marry and settle down in life is like cutting down the very strings of a swing.

Further, reviving a dead relationship could be a death pill for my aunt who is in Colombo. She would never ever approve such a thing.

I have no choice but to tell Marnickam master again that I do not like the girl. Let the fact that Marthini is my sister be a secret forever.

## 7

**The Art of Anonymity**

*T*he rising sun enkindled the hearts of everyone. Such a bright and beautiful morning was churned occasionally by the blowing of sharp and chilly air currents. The streets appeared to be groaning in pain under the weight of heavy morning traffic flow.

It was 9:45 when Mr. Ratnam Kathirkarmar reached the Social Services Department on Kingston Road in Scarborough for an appointment at 10:00 a.m. with Mr. Michael Anderson, Assistant Director.

On arrival, he produced the appointment letter to the receptionist. She glanced at the letter, asked him to have a seat in the lounge and buzzed Michael.

10:00 a.m.

Mr. Michael Anderson showed up, introduced himself to Ratnam and took him into his office.

Michael briefed Ratnam on his assignment.

‘We requested the Tamil Ealam Society of Canada for a translator, and they have recommended you. We sometimes

receive anonymous letters. Some are in English and some in other languages. These ones are in Tamil and you are required to translate them into English for us.

‘Your task involves utmost confidentiality. Please do not take this file out of the office or remove any of the letters from the file. We are not certain if the information provided in these letters is true or not. Therefore, it is our responsibility to keep them confidential.

‘You will be paid hourly. Will you be able to commence work right away?’

‘Yes, but since I have an evening job, I can only work here in the mornings,’ said Ratnam.

‘Fine. Before you start working on these, please go through the file and let me know approximately the number of hours you will need to translate them and how long you will be able to work here in the mornings.’

Michael passed the Tamil file on to Ratnam and went through some of the letters written in English that were in his file while waiting to get the particulars he wanted from Ratnam.

There were 69 letters of either one or two pages in length in the file. On counting, Ratnam found there was a total of 103 pages. He told Michael that he would need about thirty hours to translate them all, and that he might have to come for two weeks and work three hours a day in the mornings.

Having got these particulars, Michael left.

Ratnam translated six letters by 1:00 p.m. He had to go home to have lunch and get ready for his regular job. Before leaving, he riffled through some of the other letters in the file

and one of them took him by surprise. Appalled, he sat there, eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

Then suddenly, he got up and peered out the door. A lady came to his assistance. He told her he wanted to see Michael. Within minutes Michael showed up and took charge of the file. He also introduced the lady to Ratnam and advised him that he could get the file from her in his absence.

The bus stop was close to the department. Like the chill wind that was blowing Ratnam's combed hair loose, the anonymous letters disturbed his calm mind.

'What a people!' he uttered with a sigh. With a sigh much stronger than his came the bus. As he got onto the bus and sat down, some of the letters he had gone through tried to peer out of his mind.

They were all mostly about welfare fraud with particulars about names and addresses.

As Michael indicated, who could be certain whether they were true or false?

Yet, at least one was not true, for sure. He would not accept the information furnished in that particular letter as true. It was not fraud. It was utter lie. It was a harmful assault on an innocent old lady who does gratuitous service.

Ratnam knows the lady well. They both live in the same building. She is very good at making string hoppers. Some people seek her services to make string hoppers for them by providing the rice flour needed. She doesn't buy, she doesn't sell. She doesn't even accept any remuneration for the labour involved in the preparation of string hoppers. Ratnam knows that well because his wife got some hoppers made by the old

lady and tried to pay cash, but she declined with thanks.

Such a good lady has been accused of doing string hoppers business. Someone who failed to get her free service must have gotten hurt and written this. She could have been sick, or she could have had some other commitment.

In this way, there could be many other letters written with malicious intent or without proper investigation. Who knows?

At a bus stop, a known person climbed in. Noticing Ratnam, he took a seat beside him, smiled and spoke in English.

‘Do you recognize me?’

‘Sure, I do.’

‘I cannot forget you. You helped me to get a part-time job and I’m ever grateful to you for that. Where’re you going?’

‘Going home.’

‘From where?’

‘From the Social Services Department.’

‘Are you on welfare now? Have you been laid off by the bank?’

‘No, I’m still with Royal Bank. I have to do some translation assignments at the Social Services Department for a few days.’

‘Oh, they need a translator there too! Good. I got to get off at the next stop. Good to have met you. Bye now.’

‘Bye.’

Ratnam felt happy that the man is still grateful to him.



The man got a part-time job as a translator in a law firm on the recommendation given by Ratnam two years ago and he has not forgotten it. Not all people are thankful. This man is an exception, thought Ratnam. After all, what he did was trivial assistance. The worthy will remember with gratitude even if they receive a millet-like measure of benefit.

The work at the Social Services Department which Ratnam thought would take ten days, was over a day early.

On the last day, Michael thanked Ratnam for his services and said he might have to come again if the Department were to receive more Tamil letters. Ratnam said he would be able to come and was bidding him goodbye when Michael asked him a question.

‘Why do you think people from your community write anonymous letters?’

Ratnam did not anticipate such a question. Yet he tried to answer it in a non-committal way.

‘The Tamil community considers gratitude as a great virtue. Most people in Canada do not like to do unlawful acts in a country that has given them refuge. Therefore, they feel that it is their duty to report to the government any fraudulent activity they come to know about.’

‘Okay, if that is the case, why should anyone write a letter like this?’ asked Michael, showing him a paper.

Ratnam glanced at the letter. It was in English and was short. His eyebrows shot up. It was about him. Yes, he had to believe it!

‘Ratnam is not fluent in the Tamil language. How could you employ him as a translator?’ asked the letter. That was

also an anonymous art.

‘This is nothing but jealously,’ said Ratnam, with a tight grin of contempt. He then took his leave of Michael and walked out, head down.

It was scorching outside. The ignoble attitude of some people in his community was scorching his heart.

No one, other than his wife, knew about his visits to the Social Services Department. It was strange that someone had somehow come to know of it and it was still stranger that he or she thought it fit to write such a thing about a man who has a certificate of competence in Tamil/English translation.

Who could have done this?

Ratnam ransacked his brain. He did not think any of the Departmental assistants would have told an outsider about his assignment.

Suddenly that person ...

That person whom he happened to meet on the bus last week ... that person who said he was ever grateful to him ... yes ... that person appeared from the back of his mind.

## 8

**An Honourable Hobby**

*The* month is December.

Half an hour has passed since the sun put his head under a thick blanket, unable to bear the cold, maybe.

But even if the sun went to sleep, no one in Canada goes to bed early saying it is cold. Today is Saturday, and therefore the house is filled with the buzzing noise more than any other day. Soon everyone said 'Bye, bye,' and left the house in a hurry.

It would be better if the money spent on seeing film was given to charity. There are so many children starving in Wanni in Sri Lanka.

This is a kind of thinking that can only come from old people, not normally from youngsters. Youngsters are of the opinion that elders are the ones who take refuge in charity, temple worship, religious festivals and holy books like Thervaram and Thiruvarsakam.

Those who think in this line certainly do not know much about this old man, Gunaratnam. He is not thinking about charity just because he is seventy years old. He has been a

kind and benevolent person, even in his youthful heyday.

Ponnan, hired to mend the fence, was worried that he had no money to buy books for his son who was in Grade 6. From that day onwards, it was Gunaratnam who looked after the school expenses of Ponnan's son.

Kanthan fell from a palmyrah tree and broke his leg. He is still grateful to Gunaratnam for the financial support given to his family during the time he had been hospitalized.

There was a person in the neighbouring village who inherited a lot of land from his grandfather called the wealthy Thamber. That grandson was a drunkard. He did not know the value of land or money because he got them all for free. He sold his land to have a jolly good life. Finally, he became a pauper and was forced to sleep on the road. In the end, it was Gunaratnam who helped the wealthy Thamber's grandson out of his difficulty.

Not one, not two, but several delightful experiences of helping others.

But many would not know of Gunaratnam's experiences. His wife knew a little bit, but she had passed away six years ago. Gunaratnam does not talk much. So no one knows about his generosity, other than those who have received assistance from him. He must be one of those rare souls who firmly believe that the quality of meekness leads to heaven.

His son, in fact, asked him if he would like to go with them to the film show. But he did not want to go. Modern cinemas are full of indecent scenes. Surely he would not like to sit beside his son and daughter-in-law and watch half naked girls dancing and men feeling their private parts shamelessly.

The coffee his daughter-in-law served him before leaving was on the table giving off vapours. He prefers to drink it when it is lukewarm.

His son and daughter-in-law make a good couple; a compatible match rarely found in other families. His daughter-in-law is a gift in his life. She is of divine birth, he thinks.

The coffee cooled quickly because of the weather. As he sipped the coffee, those words buried in his heart took a new birth:

‘Marma knows well what is decent and what is not.’

What a delight ruminating over that conversation between his son and daughter-in-law.

‘Where does appa pick these things up from?’

‘Wherever he sees them.’

‘Mmm ... I know that ...’

‘No you don’t, when you go about in your car. On the walkways and in the bus shelters he finds several one cent coins while going for a walk in the evenings and he collects them.’

‘Collects them to build a castle? What will the public think about him when he collects the coins on the walkway like a beggar who has no means of living? You have to live decently in Canada, my dear.’

‘Who says it is indecent to pick up coins on the walkway? There are drunkards who vomit on the roads. There are people who quarrel while playing cards. There are others who cause problems in families by spreading dirty rumours about them. Even in the Tamil Seniors’ Association I hear of lots of

undercutting and tug-of-wars. Those are the acts people call indecent. Marma knows well what is decent and what is not.'

'Fine! Fine father-in-law and fine daughter-in-law!'

This incident had happened a year ago. His son, of course, spoke gently lest his father should hear. But the father listened to it all, unnoticed by them.

The son loved his father and always gave him due respect in keeping with Tamil tradition. Yet, differences of opinion as a result of the generation gap arise every once in a while. That too would not surface if it were their homeland. Since it is Canada, where they have to live with other communities, it crops up, especially when the son feels his father is off Canadian etiquette.

Other than that, there have never taken place ugly incidents like arguments, angry exchanges of swearing, shouting or accusations between the son and the father.

What does he do with the one cent coins he collects?

Who cares about one cent coins on the walkways? Likewise, nobody at home seems to bother much about his collection.

During December, Gunaratnam rolls his coins in fifties, takes them to the bank and gets bills in exchange. When he was counting his collection last December, his daughter-in-law came to his assistance. While she was counting, he went to his room to look for more coins. It was at that point that his son, who was ready to go out, saw his wife rolling the coins and asked her where the coins came from, and the rest of which conversation Gunaratnam overheard. He cannot forget that ambrosial reply from his daughter-in-law, which



rejuvenated his heart.

‘Marma knows what is decent and what is not.’

Gunaratnam is not a person who expects gratitude or praise from others. Yet this certificate from his daughter-in-law keeps on singing in his heart. How did she assess him so well when even his own son failed to understand him? She is super great! She is of divine origin indeed!

After his heart garlanded and blessed that wonderful soul who somehow had studied him so well, he got up slowly, went into his room and put his hand on the bag of coins.

‘Mm ... It’s heavy,’ he thought.

He put the bag of one cent coins on the dining table and began counting them. Then he went into his room again and returned with the rolling papers he had obtained from the bank. He had seventy-two rolls of fifty one cent coins. That was \$36.00. He also had dimes and nickels to a total of \$6.00, and a balance of another 17 one cent coins.

He was happy that he had collected more this time. Three years ago when he picked up only what he found under his feet, he got a total of \$18.00. But when he actually began to look for coins, the total increased to \$33.00 the next year and then \$42.00 this year.

It has become Gunaratnam’s hobby now to collect coins found on walkways and bus shelters, and donate them to the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization that looks after the interests of the people in distress in his home country of Sri Lanka, where there had been an ethnic war going on for years. As a result, Tamil people are suffering there, especially in Vavuniya and Mullaitivu areas called Wanni, the forest of which had

become the target of both land and air attacks by government forces.

People have become refugees in their own country of birth. They sleep under the sky on open grasslands which are plagued by snakes and arachnids. Also, there are man-eating tigers and bears in the adjoining forests. Worms and mosquitoes spread infectious diseases.

Above all, children continue to die due to lack of nutritious food and the shortage of medical facilities, and that keeps inflicting Gunaratnam's heart with severe pain. Every cent he picks up is a pain-relieving pill for him. And when he picks it up, he thinks that it will help provide nutritious food for starving children. He enjoys doing it as he is the calibre of man who finds satisfaction in helping others. Aside from that, the question of reputation or pride never enters his mind. He feels that he is doing a useful and honourable hobby.

They have come from the film show. Immediately on arrival, his grandchildren went to him, one of them calling, 'Appiah!'

'How was the film?' asked appiah.

'Oh, there were lots of dances, appiah,' said the boy, twisting his body. He was the oldest of the two.

'Not like that, it's like this,' said his sister, shaking her hips vigorously.

## 9

**Love and Lust**

*T*he branches of the pine bent down with the heavy accumulation of snow. The heart of Nesan was also down with the weight of sorrow.

Snow would melt with the appearance of the sun. Likewise, an opportunity to melt Nesan's sorrow away has also cropped up.

It fact, Nesan never expected such a situation would occur. It is a marriage proposal. Not for anyone else, but for himself. It is up to him to decide.

Even though Nesan's eyes were fixed on the pine tree beyond the window, his thoughts centred around the marriage proposal made to him that morning. Those thoughts kept on reminding him of the past. He didn't want to think about it, but it kept coming back. What can he do? He doesn't have any divine powers to control his mind.

Sixty days have passed since the incident, and he has been struggling all those days to forget the face which he had known for about sixty months. But he couldn't. That face is frequenting his thoughts without his permission.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lourdes would visit him every evening. During weekends she would take him in her car, sometimes to see a film, sometimes to enjoy talking with him alone in the park, or in a restaurant. She would meet the expenses herself always. Even when Nesan took out his purse to settle the bill, she wouldn't allow it.

She works for a lawyer as a receptionist/clerk. Nesan works in a bank. He met her five years ago when he went to the lawyer's office seeking assistance for a friend of his who was a refugee. Since then they have been dating, the calls coming mostly from Lourdes.

Lourdes' family have great respect for Nesan and whenever he visits Lourdes, the reception was overwhelming. But Lourdes does not always get such a reception at Nesan's apartment.

There is a reason for it. Nesan's mother once came out with it quite frankly.

'Do you really love Nesan, my daughter?'

'What a question aunty? You still don't know that?'

'I know ... but ...'

'Yes, I know what you have in mind. We are Catholics and you are Hindus. You are worried how we are going to get married, right? Aunty, all religions lead to one God. My grandparents were Hindus before they converted to the Catholic religion. Religion won't stand in our way. I'll abide by the decision taken by Nesan in this matter. Don't you worry.'

It was a kind of assurance, and his mother was pleased

by it. She knew what Nesan's decision would be. He would never decide to change his religion. He is an ardent Hindu who never fails to go the Richmond Hill Pillaiyar Temple on Fridays with his parents. His mother firmly believed that her son would ask Lourdes to cross over to Hinduism and that he would never dream of becoming a Catholic.

Nesan is like a river with a barrier across it. A dammed river is different from a normal river. It spills over the dam. One day Lourdes came to him weeping, and Nesan began to spill over.

'My dad says you have to become a Catholic if our marriage were to take place. If you are not willing, he says I should forget about you. I never expected that he would say that. I can't forget you, Nesan. I am helpless. I want you to solve this problem. Please ...'

'Do you want me to change religion?' asked Nesan.

'If you don't, then I will never get married. If my parents force me to marry someone else, I will commit suicide,' Lourdes sobbed loudly.

Nesan had not seen Lourdes in tears before. He was moved. He could not find a better way of consoling her than to tell her he would become Catholic.

A volcano erupted in Nesan's apartment because of his parents disapproval of his decision to become a Catholic. Nesan was marking time, hoping to come to terms with his parents. Lourdes avoided visiting him lest she should exasperate his parents.

Lourdes' father, Joseph, knows well Nesan's character — that he is a quiet boy, respects his elders, is very helpful to

other people, and so on. He had a hunch Nesan would change religion for the sake of Lourdes.

True to Joseph's expectation, Nesan crossed over to the Catholic religion without the knowledge of his parents and went to see his lover only to be received and told by Joseph the shocking news that Lourdes had been kidnapped the previous night.

There was utter confusion in Joseph's apartment. Everyone at home, including Nesan, began to look for her. On inquiry, Lourdes' story unfolded.

Lourdes was a singer in the Christmas choir and during practising days, a youth who was also a member of the choir became attracted to her and enticed her to elope. That youth seemed to have been after her for quite some time.

The idea of informing the police was despised by Lourdes' parents on the grounds that the press could highlight the elopement and damage the reputation of the family which would certainly affect the future of his other daughter and son who are also of marriageable age.

As the family was pondering in panic their next move, the phone rang. Joseph picked up the phone. The caller said, 'No need to look for Lourdes. She is safe,' and hung up bluntly. It was a man's voice, apparently Lourdes' new lover.

The next day the parents of the new lover came over, met with Joseph and confirmed that Lourdes was in safe hands.

Nesan was staying with Joseph. He called home and told his parents he would be away for a couple of days. He has yet to recover from the shock of his life. At first he thought Lourdes was kidnapped, but when more information poured



in, he was unable to bear the murder of true love.

True love ...? The question magnified into gigantic size and besieged him.

‘How could she do this to me? What offence have I committed? I deserted my parents because of her, deserted the religion with which I was brought up because of her, and now she has deserted me. Why ...? The only thing I did was, I think, I failed to take her sexual advances seriously. That was not a mistake. Our custom doesn’t allow sex before marriage. If we do not live up to that kind of decency, then we are not Tamils. I never knew she would behave stupidly like this.’

\* \* \* \* \*

As Nesan who visited Joseph was reflecting on the past this morning, a question was put to him.

‘Would you like to marry Mary?’

The questioner was Joseph. Mary was his second daughter. He did not just ask the question and leave. He sat down and tried to explain to Nesan the reason for the question.

‘How long are you going to be worrying like this? Who on earth thought Lourdes would plunge us all into an immeasurable grief and mar the honour and good name our family has been striving to preserve generation after generation? Your grief is our grief. You have already become part of our family. It has now become our responsibility to look after you and make you happy. You are not going to be like this for long. There is absolutely no point in crying over spilt milk forever. You have to get marry and settle in life. When there is a suitable girl in this very house, why should

we go elsewhere looking for a bride? Mary is willing. I have already consulted her. You know Mary and she also knows you pretty well. You two will make a good couple. This is a very good opportunity for you to turn a new page and also for us to mend our worries. Think about it.'

If fact, Joseph's family had displayed great care and affection toward Nesan who had virtually become a bird that had lost its wings since the disappearance of Lourdes. The guilt that Lourdes had deceived such a good person as Nesan was pricking them all, all the time. Yet, without exposing much of their own feelings, they were looking after Nesan well who spent most of his spare time at Joseph's apartment. If not for their love and care, he would have gone mad.

Like the conch shell which was damaged by improper use, Nesan's heart too was damaged by the improper conduct of his fiancée. It was she who initiated the relationship, it was she who tried to keep their love alive and it was she who killed that love. The Lourdes known to him was not the same as the one who ran away. Were there two souls within one body?

He was unable to establish a valid reason for her conduct. Yet he neither hates her nor is angry with her. Just shock, disappointment and pain is all he feels. He feels bad about himself. He feels that he has failed to rise up to Lourdes' expectation and a kind of inferiority complex began to cloud over him.

It was at that point that Mary came by, neatly dressed, asking if he was going to have his tea in the lounge or should she bring it to his room.

He raised his head and looked at her as if seeing her for the first time. Their eyes met. Of course they had met several times before. But this time they seemed to be exchanging quite a different feeling.

‘Please bring it over, I would like to discuss an important matter with you,’ replied Nesan.

## 10

**Thanks to Canada**

*I* am Gōwri, a Tamil from Sri Lanka. Tamil minorities in Sri Lanka have been discriminated against and treated as second class citizens by the majority Sinhalese since the end of the British rule in 1948. The Citizenship Acts of 1948 and 1949 disenfranchised a million hill country Tamils. The Sinhala Only Act of 1956 compelled the Tamil public servants to learn the Sinhala language or leave employment. The most vicious form of oppression was the government's colonization policy by which lands traditionally belonging to the Tamils were given to the Sinhalese.

These oppressive measures alienated the Tamils, who under the Federal Party carried on a bitter opposition within the norms of democracy. The Sinhalese government paid no heed to the vigorous protests expressed by the Tamil leaders.

Then came the last straw, the introduction of a new scheme in the early seventies by the Ministry of Education called 'Standardization of Marks' under which it became necessary for students studying in well equipped schools to score more marks than students of poor schools to gain

admission to university. Most schools, especially in the North, were well equipped due to the support of their Parent/Teacher Organizations. So it was widely believed that the scheme was evolved to undermine the Tamil students.

With a view to show the government that the Tamil people were united in their fight to win their lost rights, major Tamil political parties merged into a single party called the Tamil United Front which advocated the establishment of an autonomous Tamil State within Sri Lanka, if all other efforts to have the government concede to their demands failed.

The government did not budge. Instead it was fanning communal flames which broke into a wild fire in 1977, killing thousands of innocent Tamils.

The standardization of marks affected thousands of Tamil youth and I was one of them. This, along with continual communal violence, compelled the youth to get involved in politics actively. Since democratic ways of finding a solution to the Tamil issue failed miserably, youth took up arms. Their goal: a separate Tamil State!

Tamil militant groups carried out a spate of bank robberies and killings of police officers, the most sensational of which were the killing of Inspector Bastianpillai and the bomb blast that destroyed the AVRO passenger aircraft flying between Jaffna and Colombo.

The government wasted no time in declaring the Tamil militants terrorists and in July 1979 passed the Prevention of Terrorism Act in parliament. This Act gave more power to the police to arrest and detain suspected terrorists without trial and, for the first time, gave the military an active role in the

Tamil region. As a result, atrocities of the government forces escalated. This Act was considered by many political analysts similar to the 1967 Terrorism Act of South Africa.

On July 23, 1983, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE), who were fighting for a separate Tamil State, killed 13 Sinhalese soldiers at Thirunelvely, Jaffna. The police and the army retaliated by rounding up Tamil youths and torturing them. My brother, who was coming home on his bicycle, was stopped and assaulted for no reason. They threw his bicycle on the road and completely damaged it by driving their truck over it.

On July 25 of that year, a holocaust against the Tamils in Colombo and other Sinhala areas erupted. Hundreds of Tamils, including children and sick people, were brutally killed and a large number of houses and business centres belonging to Tamils were looted and burned.

The very next month the government enacted what is now known as the Sixth Amendment to the Constitution of Sri Lanka. Under this amendment, it was an offence to espouse the creation of an autonomous state within Sri Lanka. The punishment for this offence was life imprisonment and confiscation of all property.

When the Tamils affected by the July communal violence were brought to the North by ship, refugee camps were set up wherever necessary. A section of the Ayurvedic Hospital in my village, Kaithady, was converted into a refugee camp and I was one of those who volunteered to work there. I heard from the refugees frightening stories about the atrocities committed on them. I was told that the police and the army were simply looking on while the Tamils were being



massacred and burned alive.

Almost all government forces are Sinhalese and they are communal minded. Tamils have no faith that the forces will protect them. Their contemptuous attitude became apparent when in Jaffna they began to harass and intimidate the volunteers who were helping the refugees. I was questioned by the army while going to the refugee camp and was ridiculed that I was trying to become a Mother Teresa among the Tamil people. I became more convinced than ever before for the need of an autonomous Tamil State where our people could live in peace and security.

The July 1983 riots resulted in many Tamil youths joining the various militant organizations with a view to taking revenge for the massacre of the Tamils. My brother joined the LTTE which eventually became the dominant force, having alienated and disbanded the other militant groups, and took control of the Tamil region.

In January 1987, I was engaged to Mr. Rajan Gunanayagam who the very next month was arrested by the army on suspicion that he was a member of the LTTE. All efforts taken by my parents to have him released failed. We were not even allowed to visit him.

In March the army took me to their camp at Palaly and questioned me about my brother and fiancé. I was not assaulted, but that night a young officer approached me for sex in return for early release. When I refused, he threatened that my parents also would be taken into custody on the grounds my brother and fiancé were terrorists.

I became nervous that he was going to rape me and did

not sleep the whole night.

God saved me when my father came in the morning with a letter from the Government Agent for Jaffna recommending my release. They released me, but detained my father for questioning. I went to the Government Agent with my mother to seek his assistance for my father's release. The sentry did not allow us to go in, saying that the Government Agent was out.

When we returned home, my father was there with a swollen face, his nose bleeding. He said he was questioned about the whereabouts of my brother and punched many times in the face. I told my parents that there was an officer in the camp who was trying to take revenge for my refusal to have sex with him.

A couple of days later the very same officer visited my house alone. Seeing me with my father, he left. Some days later also my father found that officer alone in the vicinity of our house.

My parents became suspicious of his behaviour and were worried about me. There were a few girls in my village who were actually raped by the army. Chastity, in our cultural setting, is traditionally valued as one of the supreme virtues of women. A girl who loses her virginity before marriage is considered inferior in conduct and shunned by society.

My parents, who were concerned about my safety, decided to send me out of Jaffna. I refused, saying I wanted to wait for the release of my fiancé.

Some days later a young man by the name of Kumar came to the house, introduced himself as a friend of my fiancé,

Rajan, and disclosed that Rajan was hiding in Colombo. He also told me if I would like to see Rajan, he would take me there. My father encouraged me to go, saying he would accompany us.

We left for Colombo, leaving my mother behind. In Colombo, Kumar told me that Rajan had already left for Canada and had made arrangements with an agent to send me also to Canada.

I was confused. My father explained that since Rajan was hiding from the government forces, he had to move secretly and suddenly, and that I should try to understand his precarious situation and follow his instruction.

In June 1987 an agent took me to Singapore where I had to stay for almost three months panicking about my future. In September another person took me to London where we boarded an aircraft to New York. We arrived in New York on September 11. The agent put me into a taxi and sent me to Niagara Falls. On arrival at the Canadian port of entry, I claimed refugee status.

The plight of fleeing my country of birth and claiming refugee status on foreign soil made me burst into tears. The immigration officer, who was very kind and sympathetic, allowed me into the country on the condition that I appear for an immigration inquiry when and where directed by a Senior Immigration Officer.

Once inside the country I was eagerly looking for my fiancé because the agent told me my fiancé would meet me at the border post. But he did not. The agent had given me a telephone number to use in a time of emergency. I stayed in a

motel and tried to reach that number. The person at the other end said the whole story about Rajan was a hoax played on me just to send me out of the country.

Disappointment demented me.

The next day I travelled to Toronto by bus. In the bus I met an elderly Tamil gentleman called Mr. Singham, who volunteered to accommodate me at his house. On arrival I wrote a letter to my parents.

At this point the lawyer who has been listening to the translation of my story with rapt attention interrupted me to ask if I had heard from my parents. I replied in the negative, and said it was two weeks since I wrote the letter, and I was expecting a reply any time.

He then said that, for the purpose of a refugee claim, the story up to my arrival in Niagara Falls was sufficient, and started to go through my personal information form again with the help of Mr. Singham who was acting as my translator and made me sign the form.

With that, we left the lawyer's office and came home to find there was a letter from my fiancé. I ripped the cover off and began to read the letter with anxiety:

September 21, 1987

To my love,

Following the arrival of the Indian Peacekeeping Force in July, I was released along with several others detained at the Palaly army camp.

I learned about your departure from marma on the day of my release. I miss you so much.

Today marma passed on to me your address and said you had expressed concern about my safety in your letter to him. You also seemed to have chided him for lying about my whereabouts. I feel what he had done was right because the fellow who was after you continued his visits to marma's place, looking for you, and after marmar's arrival from Colombo, he was subjected to severe intimidation and harassment by that man who was all out to know your whereabouts. He was later killed in a fight that broke out in our village between the army and the Tamil militants.

Even after the arrival of the Indian Peacekeeping Forces, fighting is common between rival Tamil militant groups.

On September 13 the Tigers launched a surprise strike against a rival group in Batticaloa district and killed about 70 militants, the papers said.

Tension is also mounting between the Tigers and the Indian army. Last week, Mr. Thileepan, the chief of the Tigers' political wing in Jaffna, began his fast unto death satyagraha in Nallur near Kandasamy Kovil demanding the withdrawal of the Indian forces. If he dies, the Tigers are likely to commence military confrontation with the IPKF any time.

I am leaving for Colombo this afternoon to make arrangements to join you soon. Marma advises me to contact the same agent who handled your travel.

I intend to mail this letter in Colombo so that you get it faster.

Hope and pray everything goes well. Write to

Ramakrishna Mission, Wellawatte, where I will be staying.  
Don't forget to include your telephone number.

With love.

Your

Rajan.

I am very much relieved now. I hope he will have a safe journey and will be here soon.

Thanks to Canada for its kind and humanitarian treatment of refugees.



## 11

**Critique**

Amutha kept on weeping after her brother's acrimonious remarks. She never expected that he would ever speak in that fashion.

Her mother, who never speaks a word against her son, tried to console Amutha.

'Listen to your brother, my daughter. He is everything for us after the death of your father. Yet, we ladies also must co-operate with him to keep the family's flag flying high. Shroff's family is not an ordinary one. Your father used to say that he is of a royal descent and has ancestral connection to the great Tamil king Raja Raja Cholan. I hope you are aware that the former Prime Minister D.S. Senanayake used to stay in this very house during his Jaffna visits. The photos still adorn our albums.

Amutha was not interested at all about her mother's vanity flight. She had heard it all several times before.

What concerned her was her brother's attitude that had

completely deceived her. Her thoughts were busy making a critical study of her brother and peeling off his false image.

Dr. Varatharasan is a lecturer at the University of Peradeniya. Through his speeches and writings he has been disseminating progressive ideas based on the principles of Marxism and succeeded in wielding considerable power over communist writers who virtually revered him as their leader. Opposing the upper class, supporting the poor and the unsophisticated working population, ridiculing traditions, and condemning the caste system are some of the topics Dr. Varatharasan is well versed in.

Naturally then, Amutha became interested in her brother's policies, and on reading Karl Marx's writings herself, concluded that her brother was truly a Bolshevik.

But not any more! She had had a taste of his mind that morning which clearly exposed him as a cheat.

Punitham, Varatharasan's wife, was watering the flower pots, and having noticed Amutha sitting alone, approached her.

'I too overheard my husband's harsh words. I feel that you haven't understood your brother properly. He will never do anything to degrade his family's prestige. I'm afraid that your love affair is going to cause real problem in the family. If you were to change your route, your sister too might suffer by not being able to get a respectful partner.'

It is said that a woman best understands her husband, in and out. Punitham's words sprang from her experience.

Amutha felt that her sister-in-law was right in that she did not properly understand her brother. True, it is easy to

understand an honest person but not the deceitful.

A fact became clear to her. Punitham was born and brought up in affluent circumstances. Varatharasan, an ardent communist, cheated the world by marrying a wealthy lady. She was also able to understand why the wedding was held in Singapore, and not in Sri Lanka.

Punitham's paternal uncle was an influential person in Singapore and he made all the arrangements for the Varatharasan/Punitham wedding which was held there in a hotel with all pomp and power. By having the wedding in Singapore, Varatharasan clearly avoided the problem of inviting his friends of the lower caste, Amutha thought.

'Don't speak of ideals. I know when, where and how to deal with ideals. Why did Avvaiyar say in one place, 'Begging is disgrace' and then 'Help the beggars', elsewhere. Why? She is advising each class of people what is best for them. In the same way, communism is for common people. Not for you and me. I shall never agree to your marriage. Understand that!'

Varatharasan's concluding words were still piercing through Amutha's ears.

Varatharasan is a great critic. He has done several novel critiques on Tamil literature and continues to do such research to the amazement of his students and amateurish writers. But as far as his private life is concerned, he followed the traditional way. In looking for a suitable partner, he was very particular about ABCDE - A for age, B for beauty, C for caste and conduct, D for dowry and E for education - and married Punitham. He seems to believe that life can become literature

but not vice versa.

Amutha's love is beyond any critical study. On the first day of Law College, Amutha and Rasan were drawn to each other. When Amutha one day told Rasan that she was in love with him, he confessed that he belonged to a lower caste. She promptly replied that neither her brother nor she believed in the caste system. Rasan said that he used to read Dr. Varatharasan's articles and was well aware of his revolutionary ideas.

So they continued to date with the hope of marrying once they graduated from Law College.

But now there stands Varatharasan between them as a stumbling block!

She hates him more for being an imposter, rather than his dislike for her marriage.

Yes, he has two faces: one for the public, and one for himself, a quality he inherited from his forefathers.

Varatharasan is the grandson of Sinnappa Pillai who was a shroff during British rule. He was a king for his people in those days. He took many unclaimed lands for himself and had the lands of those who could not repay the loans he made, transferred to his name. He sent his son, Ramanathan, to London to study law, the first in that area rich enough to pursue higher education abroad.

Ramanathan too, was a man without morals. He was notorious for dancing to the tune of whatever government was in power.

Amutha analyzed her family's past as if she were not part of it, and deduced that dishonesty was in Varatharasan's

blood.

Kavitha, Amutha's younger sister, returned from shopping, handed the daily 'Thinakaran' to Amutha who was in the lounge, and proceeded toward the kitchen.

Amutha glanced at the paper disinterestedly and turned the pages. A picture of Varatharasan on page three arrested her eyes. Next to the picture of him was news under the heading 'There is no salvation for us as long as there is caste system.' - Dr. R. Varatharasan.

'Fifteen years have passed since Sri Lanka attained its independence. Even so, people of the lower strata have not yet gotten their freedom. They continue to suffer oppression by the so-called high caste people who still consider them as untouchables and treat them as slaves. There is no salvation for us as long as there is a caste system,' said Dr. Varatharasan in Colombo last Saturday at a meeting organized by the Progressive Writers' Association.

Amutha did not want to continue reading the news.

'There is no salvation for us as long as there are cunning people like Varatharasan,' she said to herself.

'Communism is for the common people. Not for you and me.' Varatharasan's words echoed again.

If communism is not for the high caste, how on earth can the lower caste be eliminated?

Amutha was able to understand some aspects of the answers to the question why communism failed miserably amongst the elite Tamils.

'What are you thinking about so deeply, akka? Any problems?' asked Kavitha, sitting next to her sister.



'Umm ...,' Amutha heaved a sigh, emerging from her ruminations.

'Soon after you left for the shop, brother was getting ready to leave for Peradeniya. Just before leaving, he talked to me again about a marriage proposal. I thought I should tell him about Rasan. He said I couldn't marry a person coming from a lower caste. I told him that I was trying to put into practice what he had been preaching and that this marriage would be an exemplary one, and would help dismantle the caste system. He was furious. He shouted at me, saying communism is for common people, and not for him and me, and he would never agree to my marriage to Rasan.

'I truly believed that he would welcome my love for Rasan. Now I have lost all respect for him. Can I ask you one thing?'

'Oh, sure. What is it?' encouraged Kavitha.

'What do you think of me marrying Rasan?'

'Do you really want to ask me such a question, akka? Don't you know me? Your wish is my wish. I am always with you. Go ahead and marry the man of your choice.'

'It's not that. Do you feel you will not be able to find a good partner if I get married to a lower caste person?'

'If I say yes, would you abandon your love?'

'No, but I could wait until you are married.'

'Akka, a good marriage is made in heaven. They say it is hard to find a partner who is both handsome and amiable. But you have found one. You are fortunate. I don't think your marriage to Rasan will affect my life. Further, I am still young



and haven't even started thinking about marriage. After completing my degree, I want to do my M.Sc. So don't worry about me. Don't worry about brother either. You are a lawyer now and he cannot do anything to prevent your marriage. Speak to Rasan right away about your marriage,' urged Kavitha.

Amutha soon left in her car to meet with Rasan.

One seeing her lover, her eyes became wet. Rasan, who always saw her with a smiling face, was perturbed.

After some minutes of silence, Amutha regained her composure and tried to explain to him Varatharasan's position with regard to their love affair.

It did not take much time for them to decide to give notice to register their marriage.

## 12

**House-warming  
Ceremony**

*K*ondarvil.

‘Vil’ means bow and this village is one of the bows most suitable for the economic arrows of the Jaffna peninsula, not only because of the fertile soil, but also because of the industrious people of the soil.

Kulanthaivelar is one such persevering type whose good pace of walking slowed down due to a strong voice that echoed from behind.

‘Kulanthaivelu, I hear the work on your new house is nearing completion.’

‘You only hear. So it’s clear you haven’t seen the house yet.’

‘I couldn’t find time. But people who have seen the house told me that no house in this area could match it. How much have you spent on it, if I’m not being too inquisitive?’

‘Ten lakhs.’

‘So astronomical!’

‘Sinnathamby, painting alone costs about a lakh. I’m sure you are aware that the price of building material have almost doubled since the communal violence.’

‘When are you going to have your house warming ceremony?’

‘I am in fact on my way to the priest to finalize a suitable day for the ceremony. I shall let you know and you should attend.’

‘Sure, I will.’

The morning pooja in the temple is almost over, after which the priest is likely to go straight to his residence. Kulanthaivelar paced faster in order to see him before the priest goes out on other business.

‘People who have seen the house told me that no house in this area could match it.’

Sinnathamby’s words were as sweet as the fragrant southern wood. Kulanthaivelar, who smelled it, was thoroughly thrilled. He was intoxicated with pride. Some others have also spoken highly of his house and their comments sounded like honey to his ears. In fact, that was his dream. He wanted everyone in the village to speak about the elegance of his new house.

‘The wealthy Paramar is doomed. His house is now a dog house,’ remarked Kulanthaivelar’s tickled vanity.

\* \* \* \*

Paramar is as famous as the tea boutique at the Kondarvil junction. His house is the largest house in Kondarvil. He was an ordinary farmer but became rich after starting a rice mill.

Laundering money is his side business. His interest rate is reasonable and people, in order to avoid the red tape involved in getting bank loans, patronize him greatly. His rice is dirt- and stone-free and hence is in demand for use in important functions like weddings, housewarmings and memorial feasts. His honest business has also earned him a good name even in other parts of the country.

The attempts of Kulanthaivelar to arrange a marriage between his son and the daughter of such a respected man as Paramar got nipped in the bud.

Nadarasan, Kulanthaivelar's son is an able farmer who studied G.C.E. (AL) at Kokuvil Hindu College. During the government reign of Srimavo Bandaranayake, he came into the limelight by making much money from selling onions. He was president, not only of the Kondarvil Young Tamils' Association, but also of the Village's Development Society, and he indeed worked hard for the welfare of his village people. His conduct and private life were flawless. No one could find any fault with them.

Yet, Paramar ignored such a noble farmer and found an engineer for his daughter, paying quite a handsome dowry, of course. He organized the wedding on such a grand scale that Kondarvil people would never ever forget it.

He has not done anything different. He only followed the practice of most Jaffna parents who go about hunting educated grooms for their daughters. Although Jaffna is basically an agricultural land, parents usually do not give a damn for the saying that only those who till the soil lead a good life, and all the rest go after others for their living.

What about Kulanthaivelar? He also did the same. He had a rightful match for his daughter, his own sister's son, a successful farmer. But he selected a B.Sc. graduate. In the same way, Paramar must have gone for an educated son-in-law, or could it be that his daughter did not like Nadarasan. Who knows?

It is not in Kulanthaivelar's nature to think along those lines. He only thought that Paramar, by rejecting the proposal, has shown the world that his family was inferior. And that disgrace fired him up to teach Paramar a lesson.

A Jaffna man's life is full of competition and challenge. There is not much difference between athletes competing for gold in the Olympic games and Tamils competing for a so-called respectful life in Jaffna except that the former takes place openly, and the latter is manipulated secretly.

Secrecy and jealousy go together. Competitions are good for progress, but when they are underlined by jealousy, the wheel of fortune screeches and cracks.

If Paramar were to donate some money to the temple, then Kulanthaivelar would donate to the school building fund. If Paramar fed the poor, Kulanthaivelar would give food to everyone present at the annual meeting of the sports club.

When money was collected for the building fund of the Pillaiyar temple at the Kondarvil junction, Kulanthaivelar asked for the amount Paramar had donated and then gave Rs. 500/- more than that amount.

Paramar did not seem to do social service just for the sake of showing off or with a competitive attitude. But to Kulanthaivelar, he appeared to be a rival. He thought Paramar's

activities were all planned to undermine him.

Kulanthaivelar did not sleep since the day Paramar's daughter got married. He succeeded in getting a trained teacher as a bride for his son, Nadarasan, and with that he began his rule.

His daughter-in-law was a teacher at Vasavilan Central, and Nadarasan drove her to school in the mornings and home in the afternoons, again which exercise raised the status of Kulanthaivelar's family in the village, where very few people owned cars.

Either his wife or his child growing in her womb brought luck to Nadarasan. He got a job in Oman the very next year. No one knew what kind of job a farmer was doing in Omar where agriculture was not a culture, but money poured in every month.

Nadarasan visited his village to see his first born. Among other things, Kulanthaivelar mentioned to his son one of his unfulfilled ambitions, to which he gave the green light without a word. Kulanthaivelar became so excited and grew big like a mountain. What he got from his son was permission to put up a new house. That is going to be the largest house in Kondarvil. It was the father's ambition, not the son's.

Kulanthaivelar laid the foundation for his ambition on an auspicious day, and the building of the house progressed rather speedily, until July 1983 when the work almost came to a stop due to communal violence. Even if he had the money, building materials were hard to get. Although he moved like a hare to wield his influence to obtain materials, the building was only able to progress at a tortoise speed.



Apart from that, there arose an urgent need to protect the building materials. The house was located near Palaly Street and it had a parapet wall all around. It had strong twin iron gates. Yet, cement packets were stolen one day following which a security guard was employed. A temporary shed was erected on one corner of the compound especially for the guard so that he could watch vigilantly day and night.

Time flew. Three years have gone by without the knowledge of Kulanthaivelar. He was so busy with the building of the new house that he forgot to count the time, and at last he got his reward for all his untiring efforts. The house was completed to his satisfaction. As far as he was concerned, it was an achievement almost equal to the Americans conquering Mars.

Kulanthaivelar would go round and round the house. Its majestic appearance mesmerized him. Of course, it was not an ordinary house. It was a marble palace like that of the Pandavars.

\* \* \* \* \*

The priest consulted the Tamil calendar and said that 10:00 a.m. on Wednesday of the following week was ideal to perform the house warming ceremony. Kulanthaivelar was happy and said that he was extending the priest the first invitation. The local priest is usually the one who performs the ceremony, which most importantly includes the exorcising of evil spirits and the invoking of the blessings of the gods, following which milk rice will be cooked.

The priest gladly accepted the invitation and Kulanthaivelar returned home floating on air.

The very next day he sent a couple of his nearest relatives into the village to invite people for the housewarming ceremony. He also hired ten cooks from Alaveddy, a village famous for good cooks and on their recommendations, sent his assistants to Chunnakam and Chavakachcheri markets to purchase groceries, and another couple of men to Poonakari to buy rice.

Everything went smoothly as planned. Kulanthaivelar wished everyone would speak highly of the house and the housewarming ceremony.

On Monday morning about 10:00 a.m., quite unexpectedly, zooming aircrafts began bombarding the peninsula. Kondarvil also came under attack.

After the planes ceased flying overhead, Kulanthaivelar rushed to his new house. He was able to see from afar a crowd of people near his house.

Kulanthaivelar's heart almost stopped beating.

The house was bombed and part of it was erased down to the floor. Scattered tiles, shattered roofs, cement bricks reduced to rubble, broken beams, lacerated doors, ruptured frames ... oh, no ... he could not see them anymore.

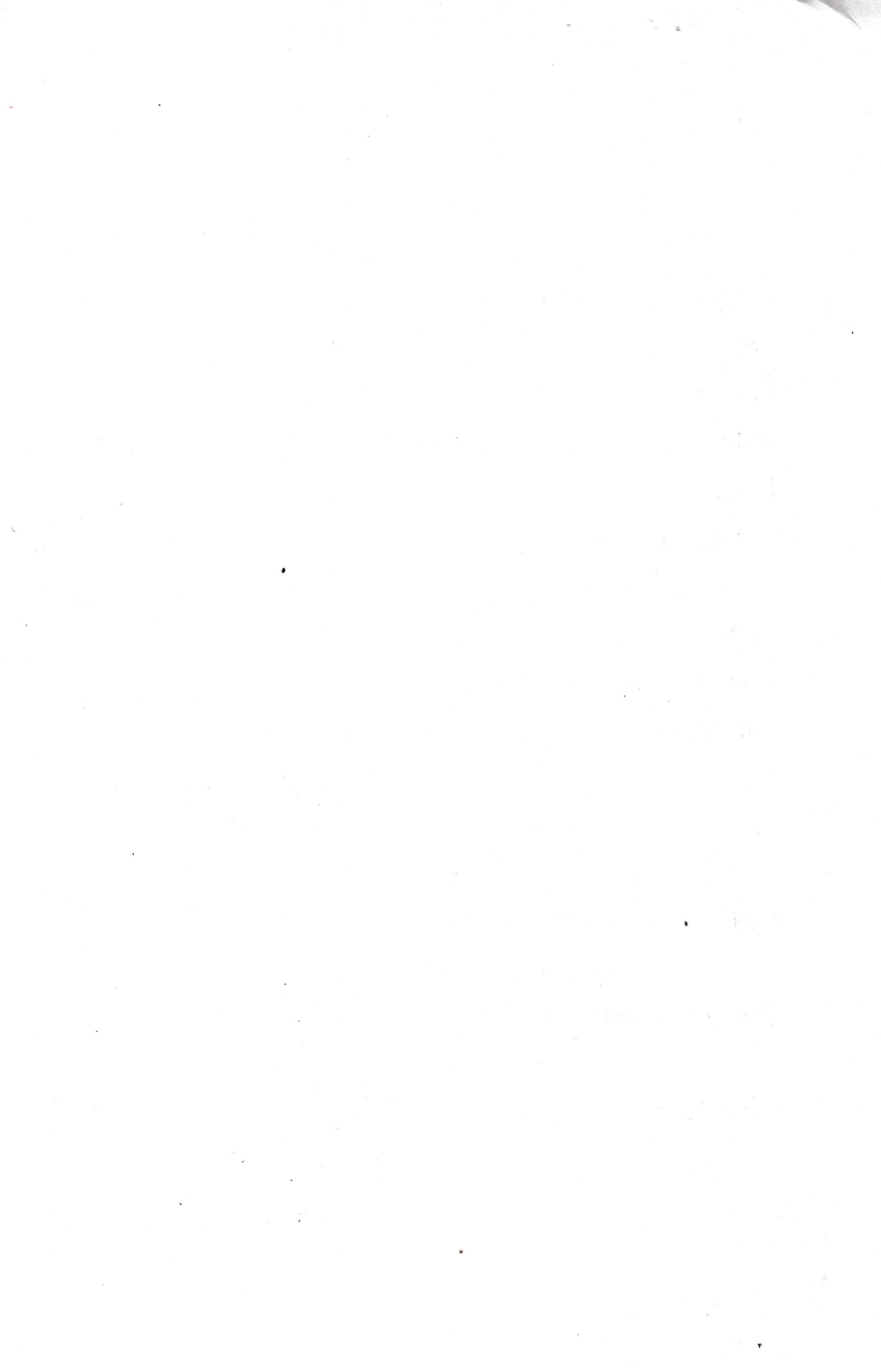
People were looking at him pathetically. Head down, he headed pensively toward his old house — his home.

There was another bomb awaiting him that evening. It hit not the house, but his head this time!

It was the news that Paramar had been named Justice of the Peace by the government.

**Glossary of Tamil Words  
used in this anthology**

<b>akka</b>	- older sister
<b>appa</b>	- father
<b>appiah</b>	- paternal grandfather
<b>Ealam</b>	- Tamil name for Sri Lanka
<b>karma</b>	- any act or deed
<b>karma palan</b>	- fruit of any act or deed done, underlining the principle of cause and effect
<b>lakh</b>	- one hundred thousand
<b>marma</b>	- father-in-law/uncle
<b>Pandavar</b>	- usually referred to as Pancha Pandavar meaning the five great kings of the Pandu dynasty of Mahabharata, an epic of ancient India
<b>thali</b>	- talisman attached to a chain worn around the neck of the bride by the groom
<b>Thevaram and Thiruvagasam</b>	- devotional hymns in praise of Lord Siva
<b>vanakkam</b>	- a salutary word







**Vinayagar (Vina) Kandavanam**, a Tamil Canadian, hails from Nunavil, Chavakachcheri in the District of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. Having distinguished himself both academically and otherwise at the University of Madras, India, he took to teaching, a career he pursued for thirty years in Sri Lanka, Lesotho and in the Republic of South Africa.

He has written three Geography books which were approved by the Sri Lankan Ministry of Education for use in schools and several work-books in Geography, Tamil Language and Literature.

Vina is a poet and a writer and has authored twenty books, many of which are anthologies of his poems. He was the founding member of two literary circles in Sri Lanka, one in Matale in the Central Province and the other in Jaffna in the Northern Province, the latter of which elected him as its president eight times. He is chiefly responsible for popularizing poetry amongst the ordinary Tamil population in Sri Lanka.

Vina is also a dramatist and holds a diploma in the teaching of Drama and Theatre. After completing the diploma course at the University of Sri Lanka with merit pass, he became the first teacher of Drama and Theatre at the G.C.E. Advanced Level in the Tamil region. His specialty is children's plays, some of which have won prizes at all Island contests conducted by the Ministry of Education.

Unable to return to his country of birth due to the army taking over his residence in Kurumbasiddy, Tellippalai, he moved to Canada from the Republic of South Africa in November 1988. In March 1989 he joined Upper Canada College as a staff member where he has been working since then.

Writing is Vina's hobby, and undaunted by the destruction of his valuables and unpublished works by the army in Sri Lanka, he continues to write in Canada and appears regularly in most of the Tamil weeklies and magazines. His writings are varied and unique in that they also highlight the natural beauty, the life and problems of Canadians while most immigrant writers are chiefly concerned with problems of their own countries.

He is the president of the Tamil Writers' Association of Canada and patron of many cultural and students' associations.

He is a winner of the Editor's Award in a poetry competition organized by the National Library of Poetry (U.S.A.) for his poem 'A Dancing Tree' which is included in the compilation 'Beyond the Horizon'. The National Library of Poetry has also produced an album of some of his English poetry entitled 'Visions'.

He married Thavamany in 1964 and they have two children, Varny and Varanan.

*- Donna Plester*