

MIDDLE OF SILENCE



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International Centre for Ethnic Studies

International Centre for Ethnic Studies
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For
Ammi and Thathi - for the gift of restlessness

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‘One that caters to the intellect, to a cultivated conscience and recognizes in this creative endeavour a search for another dramatic text that of a mirror held to reflect harsh realities.... of the less privileged sections of society’ --- *The Times of India, Bangalore*

‘A play-write who portrays intense human relationships with psychological overtones’ --- *The Asian Age*

‘The play is well constructed and extremely powerful, the dialogues are woven into it rather than standing out as long incantations. Even the subsidiary characters are very real They are three dimensional and make a point through real life situations’ --- *Arundathi Raja, Director Middle of Silence productions in Bangalore and Mumbai.*

‘It is the subversion of the given that makes the play so intriguingly disturbing A play that strives to understand the psyche of the marginalized male and female it is the humaneness with which the characters are treated that makes the play credible and thought provoking’ --- *Sunday Leader*

‘The vital need of honesty in interpersonal communications is of the highest importance the arrival on the theatre scene of the brilliant and brave scriptwriter Ruwanthie is the English theatre fraternity’s own initiative which the local society and its political types ought to identify’ --- *Sunday Observer*

'She appears to have the knack of isolating snapshots from real life and transferring the frozen images into the lines she gives her characters She eloquently conveys the realities of life in Colombo' --- *Sunday Times*

'The portrayal of characters was so good that one goes through all the emotions that the characters themselves experience The play makes us realise that we don't live in an isolated insulated world. It breaks the silence we impose on our selves' --- *Asian Age*

'Middle of Silence is about characters who but for the grace of god as they say; could be you or I This is the real thing. This is how people live and interact and suffer and through it all find some moments when they can be gay' --- *The New Indian Express*

About the Playwright

Ruwanthie de Chickera is a playwright, director and actor. She is a Co-Founder of Stages (Theatre Group). Her plays have been performed in Colombo, Bangalore, Mumbai, London, Manchester and Townsville (Australia).

"Middle of Silence" (originally entitled "The Crutch") was awarded the British Council International New playwriting Award for South Asia in 1997, and the Gratiaen Award for the best English creative writing in Sri Lanka in the year 2002. The play was first performed at The Royal Court Theatre as part of "Choice", a young writers festival in 1998, becoming the first play by a Sri Lankan playwright to be performed at London's West End. The play was produced in Colombo by the Workshop players in 1999 and in Bangalore and Mumbai by Artistes' Repertory Theatre (ART) in 2000.

The Government of Sri Lanka awarded Ruwanthie a Presidential Scholarship in November 1999 to pursue her study in the field of theatre. Subsequent to completing the BA for English (honours) at the University of Colombo, she is reading for her MA in Applied Theatre at the University of Manchester.

She has directed 'CHECKPOINT – *three strangely normal plays*', 'Two times Two is Two', and 'The Absentee' in Sri Lanka.

Ruwanthie was born in 1975.

FOREWORD: *Complex Journeys*

Ruwanthie de Chickera's work, whether as playwright and/or theatre director, marks a significant contribution to Sri Lankan theatre. Every now and then a playwright/director working in the English language theatre of Sri Lanka has come our way to provide a *sustained* shift in playwriting, direction, theatre style. The national and international recognition Ruwanthie has received, with her plays performed in Sri Lanka, England, India and Australia is an index of an evolving talent and craft that is consistently interesting and challenging. Ruwanthie's production of her play *Two Times Two* (2000), a tightly written take and re-take of a son and father, their loneliness, discontent and disconnection, was innovative in structure for Sri Lankan audiences and moving in its double exposition of human relationships. In 2001 Ruwanthie directed three short plays in different styles under the title *Checkpoint*. This production drew importantly, for its title piece, from Augusto Boal's ideas of forum theatre in a timely intervention to introduce a more participatory role for Sri Lankan English theatre audiences. It invited audiences to see the play not as mere consumers but active participants: to a discussion, mediated through the medium of theatre, about how one understands the very real and complicated dramas of Sri Lankan life, its politics and social fabric. In hindsight, *Checkpoint* may prove the production of recent years which took a distinct turn at the crossroads of urban English theatre production in Sri Lanka. If it freed the local audience from inhibition, gave it a voice and agency in dictating the direction and closure of the play, *Checkpoint* would have achieved a really significant breakthrough.

The Middle of Silence has itself won several awards. It won the best new play award for the South Asia region in the International New Play Writing Award sponsored by

the British Council in 1997. It co-won the Gratiaen Trust award for best creative writing in English in Sri Lanka for 2001. The play has been performed in Colombo (in an excellent production by the Workshop Players, directed by Jerome de Silva in 1999), the Royal Court Theatre, London, and the Artistes' Repertory Theatre, Bangalore.

What makes this play so compelling? It presents a harsh world in which damaged and abused characters live, and yet, it also portrays moments of tenderness and personal journeys towards empowerment, however ambivalent they maybe. Nothing is one dimensional and this is the complexity that Ruwanthie skillfully weaves into the situation, characters, dialogue and action of the play. Ajith, a paraplegic following an accident, struggles with his inner demons as he journeys to madness and silence. In the play he is caught in the middle of that journey to silence and the character is portrayed in fierce and uncompromising terms. Even as we sympathize with him for his fate, we draw away from him however, repulsed by his violent abuse of Nandha, his wife, his crutch – a title by which earlier versions of the play was known. Nandha, as the crutch Ajith both loves and hates, needs and rejects, is another character eloquently drawn in the play. Her lines are almost understatement, but her inner strength contradicts her overt obsequiousness. We may lose patience with her for continuously tolerating the abuse of domestic violence, of the verbal taunts and physical punches inflicted on her by Ajith. But we realize that her compassion for him which she is able to demonstrate — in his rare, but nevertheless tangible moments of tenderness and need — celebrates her *humanity*: that as Nireka, the sex-worker says, she is blessed because she can love. And yet, the skill of Ruwanthie's playwriting is such that the audience is never left in doubt that domestic violence has no mitigating circumstances and is a vile form of power-play.

Middle of Silence is a play therefore which challenges us intellectually and emotionally. It forces us to re-think our positions on issues ranging from physical impairment to social welfare, class privilege/prejudice, sexuality, domestic violence and prostitution. It makes us examine how society treats the disabled, the poor, the under class. It subverts the marginalization and ostracism of the sex worker through Nireka who throws a life-line to Nandha. Nireka's lines are imbued with a strong sense of practicality which at the same time carries a vision of life that is generous, tragic, cynical. With her encouragement, Nandha grows in self-confidence. This self-confidence has its visible and material manifestations in her ability to provide for Ajith, furnish their room, dress more daringly. That her growing stature is accompanied by Ajith's descent into silence is a theatrical structure that poses several challenging questions about the gendering of society, of masculinity and patriarchy, and what they are premised on.

Middle of Silence is a deceptively complex play. The characters seem drawn as archetypes in straightforward linear lines, but are nevertheless able to produce ambivalence in us. At best, they force us to critique, and hopefully, want to change the societies we live in by altering our attitudes to disability and impairment, to sex work and women's positions within family structures. It is also a play that is theatrically challenging for actors, for its intensity of mood and situation, its pace and sparseness of stage direction. This leaves the play open for varied interpretations and nuance, an inspiring text and theatrical resource for actors, director, audience and readers alike.

Neloufer de Mel

A shorter version of **Middle of Silence** (then titled "*The Crutch*") was first performed as part of *The 1998 Royal Court Theatre Young Writers' Festival*, at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, London, 3rd November 1998. The cast was as follows:

Ajith
Nandha
Nireka

Daniel Cerqueira
Sumitra Bhagat
Shelly King

Directed by
Designed by
Lighting by
Sound by

Indhu Rubasingham
Keith Khan
Johanna Town
Paul Arditti and Rich Walsh

Middle of Silence was first produced in Sri Lanka by The Workshop Players at the Lionel Wendt Theatre, Colombo on 23rd April 1999. The cast was as follows:

Ajith
Nandha
Nireka
Mr. Dias
Kamini
Ranil
Rohitha

Jehan Aloysius
Nadia Dawood
Tracy Holsinger
Sanith de S Wijeratne
Samantha de S Wijeratne
Krishan Jayaratnam
Timothy Seneviratne

Directed and Designed by Jerome L. de Silva
Sound by Gihan Jayatillake

MIDDLE OF SILENCE

CHARACTERS

- NANDHA** - A lower class girl of 22 years.
- AJITH** - A 35 year old paraplegic of the middle class.
- NIREKA** - A 40 year old street prostitute.
- DIAS** - A lower class business man.
- KAMINI** - Ajith's sister.
- RANIL** - Ajith's brother.
- ROHITHA** - Dias's side kick (non speaking part)
- VOICE OF AJITH'S FATHER.

Note - All the characters of this play would be, in reality, talking in Sinhala; except Ranil and Kamini, when speaking amongst themselves. They will in these instances converse in a colloquial English.

ProductionNote - The set has been described in intricate detail in order to throw insight on the living conditions of the characters. Whereas some productions have been faithful to detail, others have not, and both types of performances have had their strengths. What is important is that the prologue and the last scene look different from the other scenes played in the house - with significant changes like, there being more paper and a wheelchair.

PROLOGUE

(It is night time. The stage depicts a small, windowless, one roomed house. There are not very many items of furniture, a bed, a chair, a table and some cooking utensils and most importantly - a wheel chair. The floor is completely covered with crushed up balls of paper. A man - Ajith - is sleeping on the bed. He sleeps fitfully and awakes abruptly)

AJITH - Damn!(he feels his bed) Wet. (He tries - but fails - to get the catheter bag that has dislodged itself and fallen to the ground. He speaks to his penis) Stop dripping! She's not cleaning up anymore. Stop dripping damn you! Damn! Damn! (He pounds his legs and then scrambles off the bed on to the floor) Stop following me you shrivelled up pieces of shit. (He takes out a packet of cigarettes and lights one. He lights another and another and another. He doesn't smoke them, but stares at them. He laughs.) Think my brain is dead as well? (He throws the crushed paper balls around the room. Then he stops) Shhhhhhhh mustn't make her angry. Mustn't. (He collects the paper again. He listens. He starts singing the alphabet softly. He stops and listens. Then beats on his chair rhythmically)

You can't wait to get out of this shit hole. (He refers to the furniture) Is this here to remind me? How many here? Four? Was it at once? And this? How many here? Twenty? What will you bring home for me today? Something Special? What's your Special whore? (In a rage he moves to dash an item of furniture in the house) No Ajith. No. Shhhhhhhhhh. They're all laughing at me. All of them. One of these days I'm, going to kill you Nandha. One of these days I'm going to kick you to death..... and dance all over you.

(He hears the sound of someone returning, and scrambles back into his bed and pretends to be asleep. ENTER Nandha. She tiptoes in and sits gently on the other side of the bed. She starts changing her clothes. Blackout)

SCENE ONE

(The stage represents the same poky one roomed house in the previous scene, but with noticeably less furniture. A noted absence is the wheel chair. The floor is also not strewn with paper balls.

The room is in very bad condition. The plaster on the walls is peeling and in some places, the brick is visible. The walls could be two colours, half a dirty white and half a dull green or blue - the impression given that there wasn't enough paint to finish the whole room. In corners and for about two feet from both the ceiling and the floor, there are stains of moss and mould on the walls. There is a sleeping mat on the floor and a covering sheet over it. Instead of pillows are bundled up clothes. A small stool up stage left and two or three pots, a plate, cup, a knife, and a couple of spoons on it. Near the table is a stack of old newspapers and an old broom with a broken handle. Upstage centre, is a chair, with one leg shorter than the other and with the rattan of the chair torn and hanging. There is a lumpy cushion on the seat of the chair, and a thread bare towel draped over it. There is a bowl placed by the chair with half a sheet of newspaper covering it, and another bowl of water and a chipped glass by this. A light wire hangs from the ceiling, but there is no bulb attached to it. In spite of the bleakness of this room, there have been desperate attempts of make it more cheerful and presentable. The attempts are so desperate that the result is garish. Vibrantly colourful pictures from old calendars or even colourful advertisements from daily newspapers have been cut out and pasted on the walls. An old Christmas decoration can hang from the light wire instead of a bulb.

A section of printed cloth has been hung on the wall to give the illusion of window curtains.

Ajith is seated in the chair, rocking it gently like a clock ticking. He stops suddenly and listens intently. He starts rocking again. ENTER Nandha, with a newspaper, half a loaf of bread wrapped up in a news paper, a lump of leaves and two cigarettes. She is dressed in a printed frock a few sizes too small for her. The dress is dirty and there are pins to hold it together. A strip of cloth - torn from the dress she is wearing is tied at the bottom of her stringy plait. She is barefooted and her hair is dishevelled. She tidies her hair before she moves into Ajith's line of vision. She busies herself in silence placing the newspapers on the floor, the leaves and the bread on the table.)

AJITH - Cigarettes.

NANDHA - *(Handing one over to him and showing him the other).* He wouldn't give me more. *(She picks up the bowl by his chair)* Your food. Didn't you hear me say I would leave it here?. *(He lights the cigarette).* We can't do anything with this now. Cockroaches every where. *(She exits to empty the food and re-enters. She brings him some fresh bread, but he doesn't acknowledge her).* You need the energy.

AJITH - For what?

NANDHA - You haven't eaten.....

AJITH - When food got to this stage in my home, we fed it to the crows.

NANDHA - Dias mahattaya¹ gives it to me cheaper than fresh bread. I tried to get you something special today, but

¹ Sir.

Dias mahattaya took all my money from me. He showed me this list of numbers he had written and said we owe him more than..... *(she holds out a list to Ajith who stares blankly at her. She examines his arms).* You are scratching again. This one is bad. You mustn't scratch. *(She unwraps the bundle of leaves from the news paper and crushes it throughout his next speech)*

AJITH - Give me that paper. No fool, the news paper. *(He reads the crushed bit of paper)* Damn. Obituaries. I can't go on like this. Stuck in this bloody pit all day. Waiting for you to bring me three day old newspapers you may pick out of some garbage dump. I'm going mad. Do you know I talk to the rats? It's bloody not much different from talking to you. So tell me, you are in touch with the outside world.... where do we stand in the military offensive? What's happening to the Executive Presidency? What kind of a response have the amendments to the Devolution Proposals met with? Tell me.

NANDHA - You know I don't know.

AJITH - Don't know? Don't know? Don't know anything? Don't you know a thing? *(Shows her the paper)* aren't you even mildly interested? Look at what I am showing you. Read it.

(He stares at her)

NANDHA - Can you raise your arm? *(She raises it for him)* Keep it like that. *(He drops his arm. She applies some crushed leaves on him)*

AJITH - What the hell is this?

NANDHA - It's very good for wounds.

AJITH - What is it? Smells like two day old bile.

NANDHA - It will stop the festering.

AJITH - Some of your bloody village doctor's poison. Take it off.

NANDHA - It will *(He throws the medicine in her face).*
Just

(She picks up the bowl of water and the towel and starts to wash him. First his face, then his neck, arms, shoulders, body and leg. Her actions are both mechanical and tender. He makes it hard for her to wash him. Always straining, or pulling against her. Her proximity to him makes him uncomfortable and he talks more and more aggressively to hide his feelings)

AJITH - You stink. This room stinks. This whole damn neighbourhood stinks. Rotting flesh, food and shit. All around. Rotting and stinking. *(He makes an exaggerated happy gesture)* "Home". Of course you don't notice it. You grew up in a place like this didn't you? A stinking dump. Dump of stink. A stunk of

NANDHA - Please don't start....

AJITH - What? What? Throwing the ugly facts of your life in your ugly face? By the way, has anyone ever told you that? That you're ugly? Ah?

NANDHA - Yes.

AJITH - It's strange. It's really ... People are generally a mix of good and bad. But I try and I try and I try - and I

have all day to meditate on this - I just can't come up with any good points in you. Some times I wonder if this is all a game. A sad joke. That.. that one day, you'll shed all this - all of it; so that nothing will remain to remind me of you. See? And in your place will stand this amazing - OK, let's not get hysterical - not amazing, but... tolerable woman. *(Pause. Then sadly)* I need help. Can you help me? *(She stops and looks at him)* I need help to think of something good in you. *(She goes back to work)* But..... you're ugly, and you smell. You have the brains of an retarded louse, you know nothing of what's going on in the country. *(he shoves her away)* You can't keep up a decent conversation, you have no one who gives one solid shit about you in this whole world!! I would pity you if I didn't despise you so much. Call yourself a wife? Leave me here all day - every bloody day! *(He's very agitated now).* Cigarettes! Where the hell are my cigarettes??

NANDHA - *(Handing him the last one)* That's the last. Should you smoke that now?

AJITH - No. But I've got into this habit of doing things I shouldn't. Like marrying you. *(Laughs)* God! *(She removes, cleans out and replaces his catheter bag during this next speech)* "The man who ran away with his neighbour's servant". *(He stares at her and then starts musing gently).* What first attracted me to you Nandha? Remember? Remember that spoilt brat you used to walk to school? Blue shorts, either so big that they ended below his knees, or so tight, they disappeared into his thigh. Remember that little chap? Four times past my gate every day. The two of you. You dragging and he breaking all the plants on the road. I think it was about the third week that you looked at me. But when you did look, I knew that you

knew that I had been there all along. Every day. Then you would look at me secretly. Just when I thought it was too late, that you wouldn't look, you would. So gently. Do you remember me sitting in that old portico? I would wait for you. 7.45 this way, 8.30 back again, 10.45 again and 11.30 every morning. I could never touch you, only look. Did I ever tell you that once, I forgot that it was a Saturday and sat there all morning, waiting for you. That day I thought you were not real. *(Tenderly)* And now I have you here; with me. *(Very gently)* Nandha? Nandha? *(She turns towards him. He stares at her and then bursts out laughing in her face).* But you stink!! *(She turns away, he is laughing helplessly)* Did you forget who you are? *(He subsides gradually)* Nandha? Nandha! NANDHA!! *(She turns to him once more and he collapses laughing again)* What a puppet! What a pathetic puppet! *(He mimics her lifelessly turning from side to side)* No character, no brains, no background, no dignity! *(Pause)* I must say, you make a hellava big difference to this house. Can't you think of one interesting thing to say woman?

NANDHA - I went to see your doctor today. He told me....

AJITH - Aaaaah! So what did he tell you? My doctor who never visits me?

NANDHA - He doesn't because we can't pay him.

AJITH - A doctor who can't cure me is useless to me.

NANDHA - The other problems.. the wounds. He hasn't seen them.

AJITH - It's a waste of time. You are not to go.

NANDHA - But you need him to....

AJITH - *(mocking)* I need him? I need him? Seems like you need him more than I do. So tell me, is he your lover?

NANDHA - He's an old man.

AJITH - So? He probably doesn't get it from his old wife.

NANDHA - These are lies. You know that. You are only hurting yourself.

AJITH - Ah, but you are sooo wrong. I am beyond hurt now Nandha. Far beyond. See? *(He hits his legs)* See? Nothing hurts me now. See? *(he starts beating his legs)*

NANDHA - Stop it. Stop that! God, what are you doing? Stop it please.

AJITH - Why? Why?? Does it hurt you? Does this hurt you? What if I pull this hair out? This toe nail? What if I pull it out? Will it bleed?

NANDHA - Don't...

AJITH - You think it's alive? Does it look alive? Ah?? Why are you crying? Is this hurting you? Why are you crying? Why is it fucking hurting you more than it's hurting me? Tell me, tell me! Why is this not making me scream? *(He screams. He is crying)*

NANDHA - *(She has been trying in vain to stop him and is now on her knees in tears).* Please, oh please.... leave your legs alone. These precious legs. *(She is stroking and*

kissing them) These precious, precious legs... They have been through so much.

AJITH - *(He is staring at her. He speaks almost to himself)* I can see you. I see your fingers move. I am watching your hands stroke me - I know it's me. I am watching the two of us, like watching a movie. Just watching..... *(Nandha tries to move away from him, but he grabs her)* Where are you going? You started it. You have to finish it.

NANDHA - Please.

AJITH - You can't stop just like that. I am a man. I am your husband. I have feelings, strong feelings Nandha. You are my wife.

NANDHA - Please, this never works.

AJITH - That's because you don't try hard enough. You always only half start something. Shall I tell you why? You have no confidence in yourself. You don't think you can do it. Look, I'll make it easier for you, I'll close my eyes and imagine its someone else OK? Now, come on. Do it. Do it! Make me want you.

(Nandha very tentatively touches his face and shoulders)

AJITH - That's right. Yes that's right. Stop shaking like a bloody school girl damn you!

NANDHA - I can't. I can't. You know how this always ends.

AJITH - You will make it work this time.

(He closes his eyes and she caresses him again on his hands and chest)

AJITH - Come on, come on. Don't give me feelings I can't do anything about. Use your brains; your instincts, use them. *(She moves below his waist and on to his legs, massaging them)* Don't stop. Don't stop now. Why did you stop? *(He opens his eyes and sees her still massaging his legs)* Fuck! *(He pushes her away)* Get out of my sight. You make me sick. You are a failure you hear? Failure of a wife. Failure of a woman. Cold blooded ... ugly Cigarette! Get me another cigarette! *(She indicates that they are over)* So what is there for me to do now? Ah? *(Pause)*

NANDHA - This could change. *(Pause)* It's only for a few days.....

AJITH - What the hell are you mumbling about?

NANDHA - I got a job today.

AJITH A job?

NANDHA - Yes. I'll get paid every week. According to the number of hours I work. That means I can bring in more by working harder.

AJITH - What is it?

NANDHA - They also increase your pay once a year. And the work is not hard really. Once you get used to it...

AJITH - What's the job?

NANDHA - Road sweeper

AJITH - What?

NANDHA - Road sweeper. Please don't get angry, please. Listen to me. They said a salary of 400 rupees a week - this is without overtime. We may be able to even save a small amount.

AJITH - So you have worked it all out? Slow down, you might impress me.

NANDHA - Another good thing is that we will get tips from the rich people as well. Soon, we might have enough money to buy a small sewing machine. The last lady I worked for taught me to sew. If I am lucky enough I could give up the sweepers job and make money at home. *(Pause)* What do you think?

AJITH - About what?

NANDHA - Can I have your blessing to take this job? *(Pause)*. Please. You know I have to work.

AJITH - Get yourself a proper job.

NANDHA - It is a proper job.

AJITH - Not for my wife.

NANDHA - It's the only job I've got. We can't survive any longer.

AJITH - And who's fault is that, just tell me? You didn't bring a red cent into this marriage, you wasted all my

money through your brainless budgeting and now you want to drag my name through the mud by becoming a bloody Coolie². I know dignity doesn't come naturally to people like you. But you are now my wife. Fake it.

NANDHA - What dignity is there in falling deeper into debt? In begging for your food?

AJITH - You are my wife. You pick up my shit. This doesn't mean you do this for others. Understand? Now I don't want to talk about this any more.

NANDHA - Just think about what you are saying.

AJITH - No! No. You think! Think hard before you open your mouth again.

(Knocking is heard on the door, and repeated throughout the rest of the dialogue increasing in urgency. A voice can call out "Nandha Akkaa³!" and "Gedera Kowda⁴" from time to time)

AJITH - Who is that?

NANDHA - Ramani.

AJITH - What does she want?

NANDHA - She's the one who told me about the job.

² Manual labourer. Used here in a derogatory way.

³ Akka - Elder sister. Doesn't have to refer to a blood relation.

⁴ Who is at Home?

AJITH - So?

NANDHA - What?

AJITH - What are you staring like an imbecile for? Tell her.

NANDHA - Tell her what?

AJITH - That you're not taking it, fool.

NANDHA - Can't we

AJITH - Answer the damn door woman!

(She leaves to answer the door)

AJITH - *(laughs)* Road sweeper! This is what happens when they are given too much freedom. What the hell.....? Nandha! Nandha!! *(ENTER Nandha)* You are only home in the evenings. And you want to hang around gossiping? Road sweeper! Let's play road sweeper at home shall we? *(he spits on the floor)* There, you can clean that up.

SCENE TWO

(Street scene. There is a mobile kade⁵ on stage. Two men are in conversation by it. Nandha approaches the kade unobserved. She hovers around the periphery and hesitantly fingers the items in the shop)

MR. DIAS - *(craning his neck to see who is lurking about his shop)* Yes miss? Ah you! Brought the money? Then what the hell have you come here for? More cigarettes? Don't raise the devil in me woman! Think I grow tobacco in my backside? Rohitha. Machúng⁶ look at what's crawling around my feet. Aaahh. It's going to start performing now ah? There... watch ah? What about the begging scene? We wait for that no! Aiyo! You must do the begging scene. Here! Don't say I'm the bad person. You have some gall to even show your face. Coming back not only empty handed, but with open palms. Now get out!

NANDHA - Please Dias *Mahattaya*. This is the last time.

MR. DIAS - No, no, no. *Yesterday* was the last time. So was the day before and all the days before that. How much I have done for you. This is what happens to people like us when we go to help people like you. You will never help yourselves. We give, and forgive, and ultimately become the fools. I am not a rich man. I need money as well. Aaaaaah! And I have been waiting to catch you about some

⁵ A small vending cart, selling things like, short eats, cigarettes etc.

⁶ A term that denotes close friendship between men.

thing else. You lied to me about not being able to get a job. I hear you have been turning jobs down. I won't trust you with my mother-in-law's gray hairs. No more. You won't get another cent from me. *(grabs her dress)* If you don't pay up in another week, you won't even have this rag on your back. Get out. It's time you were treated like the mangy lying animal you are. Now get out!

NANDHA - I can't go home. Please. Ajith said.....

MR. DIAS - Ajith said? Ajith said? A man who sends a woman to beg for him has nothing more to say. You tell that cripple of yours to use what's left of him and make some money. No I'll tell him myself. Don't think he's getting the messages I keep sending him. He looks down on us. At least we make an honest living.

NANDHA - Whatever you have to say, tell me. Don't upset him.

MR. DIAS - Upset. Ah OK, upset. No, no. We won't upset him. We'll just tell him what we think of him won't we? If he finds that upsetting ...what to do?

NANDHA - He's not like us. He's weak and sick

MR. DIAS - What nonsense! You think he's the only man who ever lost his legs?

NANDHA - Just two cigarettes. Please. It's the only thing that makes him happy.

MR. DIAS - Why? There's no use from you? Ah I forgot..... *(They both laugh raucously and Nandha runs away)*

SCENE THREE

(Nandha is seated on the pavement under a lamp post. It is late evening. Nireka is watching her. Nireka is a typical low class street prostitute. She is middle aged and overweight. Her clothes are not sexy. She is in an old sari, about six inches too short and a sari blouse a number of sizes too small for her. However, she has very bright, gaudy accessories - bright coloured glass bangles, plastic clip on earrings, or a faded scarf. Though there is nothing sexy about her, her stance and her clothes should leave no doubt that she is a prostitute. She is loud and tired. She wears no make up, is barefooted and chews beetle with her mouth open⁷ so that the red stains spill out)

NIREKA - *(squats down near Nandha and throws her a stick of beetle)* Indha! *(Take it)* Kaapang *(eat)*

(Nandha, suddenly getting her bearings, gets up to go, leaving the beetle on the ground)

NIREKA - Ah ha ha haaaa! Give it and go.

(Nandha walks up to her and hand it over slowly. She turns away then turns back.)

NANDHA - Can I have it back?

Chewing Beetle leaves with tobacco and an intoxicating seed. The beetle stains are red and stain the tongue and mouth a bright red. Usually chewed by men of manual labourers. It is not considered feminine to chew beetle.

NIREKA - It *was* a gift. Now it'll cost you.

NANDHA - I don't have...

NIREKA - You have. You have what I want. This and these.
(*She points at Nandha's mouth and ears*) Sit down and talk to me. Ten minutes. I'm working you know. So everything costs you now. Ten minutes for the beetle.

NANDHA - And if I stay longer ?

NIREKA - You get your little arse picked up. (*Laughs*)
Good god, I was only teasing. Anyway, who will pick you when I'm around? (*laughs*) Won't hurt to smile a bit.
(*Pause*) Problem?

NANDHA -No.

NIREKA - Truth?

NANDHA - Yes.

(*Pause*)

NIREKA - Want to tell me about it?

NANDHA - What?

NIREKA - What's bothering you.

NANDHA - Nothing.

NIREKA - And I'm a virgin. (*Laughs*).

NANDHA - I have to get back home. (*She starts to walk away and turns back again*) Did you mean what you said? About no one wanting to pick me up?

NIREKA - Didn't say that.

NANDHA - You said they would never pick me up with you around.

NIREKA - Does he throw you all over the walls? Or does his mother spit in your tea?

NANDHA - His mother is dead.

NIREKA - But you live with his people.

NANDHA - They threw him out when he married me.

NIREKA -Drinks?

NANDHA - No.

NIREKA - He's 68, hunchbacked and club footed.

NANDHA - 30 and beautiful.

NIREKA - He kicks you around. He has to kick you around.

NANDHA - I have never seen him kick anything.

NIREKA - Is he for sale? (*They both laugh*)

NANDHA - That felt so strange. (*she touches her mouth*)

NIREKA - What?

NANDHA - Laughing. *(She points to the bangles)* They make a lovely noise when you move your hand. And .. what colour are they?.

NIREKA - They change colour. And when you are in a room, you can make patterns on the wall..... or the ceiling - which I do when I want to think of something pretty.

NANDHA - Where did you get them?

NIREKA - I told one of my customers that they looked better on me than on him. Here. Feel them. They are so smooth on the skin. Here. See? Come a little closer child! *(Nandha does not move)* What is this? Aaaah! You don't want to be seen talking to me?

NANDHA - It's not that.

NIREKA - Then what?

NANDHA - *(pause)* It is that . I'm sorry.

NIREKA - Don't be sorry for me. You are the one who looks like you bought for a thousand and sold for a hundred. *(Laughs)*

(Nandha sits down)

NIREKA - On your feet the whole day?

NANDHA - For the past two months.

NIREKA - Now that's one problem I don't have. *(laughs)* Been working?

NANDHA - Looking for work. Walking. Walking. The shops I have been thrown out of.... I always thought if a person really wanted to work - really wanted - there would be work for them.

NIREKA - Ever had a job?

NANDHA - Servant. Looked after an old lady and her grand son.

NIREKA - Can't go back there?

NANDHA - No.

NIREKA - Why?

NANDHA - Ran away.

NIREKA - Ohhhh. *(Knowingly)*

NANDHA - No, no. Got married.

NIREKA - Your man doesn't work?

NANDHA - No. He's... he's not well. I don't know what to do. I can't face him. Not empty handed again.

NIREKA - So? Upto now...? How did you....?

NANDHA - He brought a little money with him. That finished about two weeks ago. Since then, this has been

my life. House to shop to house, begging. I went through garbage and collected cardboard. 30 Rupees for every 10 kilos. But the people collecting in groups... you know how they chase out strangers. The whole day I search and.... *(indicates pile of card board)* guess how much?

NIREKA - Ten rupees?

NANDHA - But according to the bottle-paper man's scales, 8.50.

NIREKA - That's better than nothing at all.

NANDHA - But I give it to my man.

NIREKA - All of it?

NANDHA - Only the paper. It's the only thing I can give him. Oh, god help me. Whose sins are we being punished for? I just don't know where the next meal is coming from. I just don't know....

NIREKA - Aiyo! I recognise the tune.

NANDHA - What?

NIREKA - It's a drowning woman's song you're singing. I know. I was singing it.....what?...some 15 years ago. I still recognise the tune.

NANDHA - Why are you looking at me like that?

NIREKA - I'm looking at me - in you, so many, many years ago. I had forgotten. Almost. Look at me. Do you see yourself?

NANDHA - Of course not. I'm going home.

NIREKA - Then go! Am I the one who is keeping you here by force? Am I tying you to the lamp post? Am I? I think home is the last place you want to be.

(Pause)

NANDHA - Were you really like me? When you chose to be...to become like this?

NIREKA - I never chose. I don't even understand that word anymore. I am here today because, because I was once a girl like you. Never had a choice.

NANDHA - We have nothing in common.

NIREKA - *(Laughs)* Yes. We have nothing. And we have it in common.

NANDHA - I am married.

NIREKA - You are desperate. You don't have to tell him. Say you got a night job at a hotel. You're a woman, you know how to keep a secret. It's not all bad. Anything between 50 and 200 each time depending on the job. You search the whole day for paper that's worth 10 rupees. See that building over there? 10% to the land lord for a small room. The bed touches three walls. Bucket of water outside. You pay extra if you need things like a light or sheets. You're lucky. You have a life and a husband to go back to when you decide to give it up. Once you earn enough money.

NANDHA - I couldn't.

NIREKA - Why?

NANDHA - Look at me. Men won't come to me. I know.

NIREKA - I know. Men will. They will come.

NANDHA - My husband.....we have never..

NIREKA - What?

NANDHA - He doesn't want me. No man wants me.

NIREKA - Madness. You have what they need. We all do. That little space between your legs. What do you think it's there for? Let me tell you a story. One of the girls died recently. She was very popular with the men. When she was around, we would all have bad business. She didn't have any arms or any legs.

NANDHA - A cripple?

NIREKA - Just four stubs - this long. We would dress her up and keep her here. They would pick up, take her away and return her when they finished. She was the most popular. Every woman knows how to please a man. Just a matter of spreading your legs... or stumps. Who knows? You may even learn to satisfy your husband.

NANDHA - Can I have the beetle?

NIREKA - Did you stay all this while only for the beetle?

NANDHA - Yes. *(She doesn't leave)* Can I....

NIREKA - *(Knowingly)* What?

NANDHA - Can I touch the bangles?

NIREKA - The...? These? Of course. Here put them on.
(She takes them off and gives them to her)

NANDHA - Shaaaa. They are so pretty.

NIREKA - *(In a strong sinhala accent)* Brand new, second hand.

NANDHA - Are they precious?

NIREKA - Glass. Do you want to wear them?

NANDHA - You're giving them to me?

NIREKA - For a while. When you come back next time.....

NANDHA - I won't.

(Pause)

NIREKA - You know where to find me.

NANDHA - You always-always stay here?

NIREKA - Always-always. *(Pause. Exit Nandha)* Dogs always come to lamp posts!

SCENE FOUR

(Ajith and Nandha's home. Lights up slowly. Ajith is seated on the ground. He is staring at his legs. There is a pile of old newspapers next to him and a lot of crushed paper balls around him. He tears off a newspaper page and balances it on his legs. He blows on the paper to make it move. He takes the paper off and blows on his leg. Slowly. And again. He smiles suddenly, remembering something. The smile grows and bursts out in a little laugh).

AJITH - Ha! Ant medicine. Terrible, disgusting ant medicine. *(He shakes his head, laughing and recreating a scene from his childhood)* There's amma ⁸ blowing and blowing on the wound. And me screaming and crying, and she's putting more medicine, but blowing and blowing on the wound. And It's not even hurting me, but I am screaming because I know it's supposed to hurt. *(Pause)* It is supposed to hurt.

(He places the paper back on his legs and watches it. He tears it up in frustration, balls it up and throws it away. He repeats this procedure of tearing, balling and throwing away the paper until there is a pile of paper surrounding him. He suddenly starts covering himself with the paper balls. He stares at the paper around his legs).

AJITH - Can't see everything, but can hear everything. I know you move. In the morning, when I get up, you have moved.

(He lights up a cigarette in frustration. He does not smoke it, but stares at the burning tip. He brings it down slowly and stubs it in his leg)

AJITH - Burn me! Damn you. Burn me.

(He hears a rustle. He crushes the cigarette and stares excitedly at his legs, thinking that they have moved and rustled the paper. He hears the same sound again, but it is not from the paper around him. He looks around panicking. He stifles a cry of fear)

AJITH - Don't come near me. Don't. I'll kill you. You little shits. I will kick you to death. I will kick. I will kick. *(He hears the rustling noise again)* Stay away!

(He starts throwing the balled up bits of paper in the direction of the noise. He hears the sound from another place and throws paper in that direction too. The rustling gets louder and louder and he gets more and more agitated. ENTER Nandha.)

AJITH - Keep them away from me! I don't want to see them. *(Nandha looks in the corner)* What do they look like? How big are they?

NANDHA - They....

AJITH - Shhhhhhh! They hear everything. They know the way I breathe. We are masters of this silence. We listen. To each other.

(She squats by him)

⁸ Mummy.

NANDHA - They don't come when I'm here. You know that.

AJITH - They are getting angrier. They are all over the place.

NANDHA - *(She moves around the room pretending to search)* They are not here.

AJITH - Are you laughing at me?

NANDHA - They must have gone.

AJITH - Gone? Gone? You think they just dropped in for a visit? *(Pause)* What is that?

NANDHA - What?

AJITH - That noise. There, when you move..

NANDHA - *(Showing him the bangles)* They make a noise in the wind and they make patterns on the walls. I thought it would be nice for you...

AJITH - It won't work here.

NANDHA - *(Tying it to the Christmas decoration).* But you can watch the patterns on the wall or the ceiling.....

AJITH - There's no light in here fool, and no breeze. It will die in this room; like everything else you bring.

(Nandha starts to clean up the mess)

AJITH - Are you mad? Put it back. All of it. Everything has a place. Those of us who *live* here know that. *(Pause. Nandha replaces the rubbish and picks up the bowl of water to wash him. He maps out all her movements)* Step, step, step, step, stop, turn, look at me. Step, step, pick up bowl. Step, step, deep breath..... *(shouts)* Leap into the air, triple twist and belly dance!! *(Pause)* Just a thought.

(She starts to wash him).

AJITH - When I was a in school, I read this book on the torture methods of the second world war. There was one where they would tie the prisoner up so that he couldn't move, at all. Then, every minute a drop of water would fall on the very same spot on his head. Every minute. The exact spot. In a few days he went completely mad. Because he knew exactly what was going to happen, but he could do nothing to stop it, or even change the spot slightly. He couldn't even move his head an inch. I laughed when I read that story. Couldn't believe that some one could go mad with boredom. Because of not being able to change routine. *(Pause)* I just thought of something. What if all this, all this is just to make me believe that story? What if, had I believed straight away, none of this would have happened? *(Looking at her)* What is it? You were going to say something? What was it?

NANDHA - *(Hesitantly)* I wanted to I was.....

AJITH - What?

NANDHA - What's a second world war?

(Pause. Ajith stares at her).

AJITH - Cigarettes.

(She hands him two)

AJITH - Paper.

NANDHA - *(Hesitating)* If I collect upto ten kilos a day, I could.....

AJITH - Paper.

(Nandha hands him a pile of paper. Silence. He tears up the paper and balls it up and squeezes it viciously)

AJITH - I think they knew. They knew which drop. We know if the next drop is the one that will send us mad.

(He lights up a cigarette and staring at Nandha snuffs it out into his leg. She cannot watch, but he holds her gaze.)

AJITH - You know what I live for? That moment when the tip burns through the skin. *(He touches the tip to his leg)* when I can feel the skin dissolving into smoke. Ssssssss *(Pause)*. What about you? Don't you ever want to feel that? That moment of piercing? Do you want to feel it? If you want it really badly, I must force myself to give it to you. Would you like that? *(He grabs her hand, stares at her for a long moment and pushes her away).*

(Nandha sits at his feet and watches him in silence and the silence grows until it is unbearable)

AJITH - Me, a room full of rats and you. *(He makes a big happy gesture)* Let's play a game.

NANDHA - *(She tries to get up)* Please...

AJITH - *(He catches hold of her arm roughly)*. Let's play a game. Simple. Guess my thoughts. I think. You guess. OK? So, me a room full of rats and you. I would rather be with....? You, or a with the rats? Stuck in this room with YOU, or the RATS?

(Silence)

AJITH - *(Very tiredly and softly)* I just want to get up and leave. That's all.

SCENE FIVE

(Enter Kamini from the wings. She is in an old dirty house coat. She walks into the apron light. She talks loudly to a character in the audience)

KAMINI - Hi Auntie! How? Haven't seen you for some time. Been busy as hell. Hectic day today also. And I keep getting these headaches all the time. *Aiyo*⁹, real curse men! Splitting headaches. Doctor's always telling that I have to get into specs. I'm as blind as a bat *men*¹⁰. But just can't fit in the trip to the opticians. Need more hours in the day aunty..... Yes they are asleep. Thank god. I gave them a huge-big meal so hopefully they won't get up till tomorrow..... You're telling me! For once Auntie, just once, I have a free evening. And the thing is I don't know what to do with myself. *Thatha's*¹¹ also slowly, slowly recovering..... No just old age I think aunty. What to do? That's part of life *no*? With him and the kids and work.... aney, I have my day cut out. But then, mustn't grumble. Count the blessings. And we have blessings to count no Auntie? Touch wood. Just see the misery all over will you. I have to go now men. OK, see you then. Bye! *Aney*¹² thanks for the Pizzas Auntie. Children of course gobbled like anything. I'll return the dishes tomorrow. See you ok? Bye. *(She notices Nandha hovering nearby.*

⁹ Word that denotes a variety of emotion from anger, to annoyance, to sympathy to humour. Used very frequently.

¹⁰ Tag word.

¹¹ Thatha - Daddy

¹² Tag Word like "men"

Ignores her at first then gets uncomfortable, and calls to her) Yes? What is it? Today no money. Come on Friday! *(to herself)* These beggars! They are the giddy limit. Here! What do you want!? Don't hang around there. Go!

(ENTER Ranil)

RANIL - What are you shouting about Akka?

KAMINI - Did I wake you up? Sorry. No *men*, look at that woman will you? For the past fifteen minutes standing and staring and staring. Won't come forward, won't go away even.

RANIL - See ah? She's trying to intimidate you. That's an old trick. She'll now wait until you pay her to go away.

KAMINI - The things these people think of. *Aney* give her some money *men*. She's making me really nervous. She looks mental. But don't give her too much - she'll keep coming back otherwise.

RANIL - Nowadays if you don't give a beggar more than two rupees, they return it. Don't you know that? *(Searching his pockets)* Do you have any small money?

KAMINI - How do you like that? She saw you checking the pockets and she's coming. One thing, brazen one this is. I don't think you should give her a red cent. We are sinning when we encourage people like her to beg. Just look at that. Can you see anything wrong? Absurd no? Perfectly healthy. *Aney*, I don't know. This is the curse of our people.

(ENTER Nandha)

RANIL - (*Giving Nandha some money*) Now please leave and don't bother us again. Do you hear? People like you only ruin our country. Use those god given limbs or yours and earn some honest money.

(*Nandha doesn't move off, instead stares at them and the coins in her hand*)

KAMINI - My word! I can't believe it. You were right. There! Watch ah! She's going to return it.

RANIL - Just see their cheek! (*To Nandha*) What? You got what you came here for - now go! If that's not enough, give it and get out.

KAMINI - This woman is making me nervous Ranil. She looks really.... Here, come, let's go in.

RANIL - What the hell! This is our house. (*To Nandha*) Don't you understand Sinhala? I told you to get out.

NANDHA - *Mahattaya* I didn't come here for this.

RANIL - What? What did you come here for then? Food? Clothes? What else? You think we're running some bloody almsgiving here? You think we have nothing to do with the money we earn than give it away to beggars? You people don't know the value of money. That's the problem here.

KAMINI - Ranil - What are you lowering yourself to her standard for *men*? Fighting like some kind of thug. Just come in side will you? She can't stay out here forever.

RANIL - That's a hellava thing to say. Why the hell should I give in *men*?

KAMINI - Because otherwise what to do? Make a fool of yourself arguing and arguuing with this woman? All the neighbours must be wondering why you're standing out in open and shouting at a beggar. What if she starts scolding in filth or something *men*? You don't know these people. There is some bread left over from last night. I'll bring that. Anyway I was going to give it to the crows. (*EXIT Kamini*)

RANIL - Go outside the gate and wait till madam brings you something to eat. And in future if you step inside our garden I'll set the dogs on you.

NANDHA - *Mahattaya*, I came here for another reason. I..... I.....

RANIL - What woman what? I can't read your mind. You're just wasting my time. (*He begins to leave*)

NANDHA - (*Starts crying*) I'm the woman..... I'm the woman your brother married..... Ajith (*She breaks down unable to continue*)

RANIL - What?

NANDHA - I have not come here to insult you *mahattaya*. I have come because. we are desperate.... we have no money, no food. He is He's not used to this sort of life. He'ssick. I can't look after him on my own anymore. He

RANIL - I don't know what you are talking about. I don't have a brother....

NANDHA - You do! You have a brother. And he's sick. He lives in a room this size sir. He hasn't seen a proper meal in two weeks.....

RANIL - I am asking you for the very last time to leave this premises. I never want to see your face, ever again, do you hear? If you ever come back, I will turn you over to the police. *(He starts to leave)*

NANDHA - *(ENTER Kamini)* He talks to the rats that aren't there, to forget the pain in his stomach. He is - he is burning his legs because he hates them so much.... he is ... he is...

KAMINI - What is she saying Ranil? What is she shouting about?

RANIL - Come in. Come in and shut the door.

NANDHA - He talks about you Madam. You used to feed him when he was in hospital.

KAMINI - My god Ranil, what is she saying? Who is she?

NANDHA - I am Nandha - I am Ajith's wife.

RANIL - Come in Kamini!

NANDHA - He's sick madam. I would not come to you unless we had no where else to go. He is really.....

RANIL - Come in! Damn You!!

NANDHA - You can't turn your back on him. He's your brother.

RANIL - No! No! He's not our brother. He can never be our brother and your husband at the same time. And he chose you over us. He turned his back on us.

KAMINI - Oh my God!

NANDHA - He needed some one to love him.

RANIL - What bloody audacity you have to talk like that! We did everything for Ajith after his accident. We...we paid all his medical bills, kept him in the best nursing homes, looked after him, we... we..... is this what he told you ah? We bathed him, fed him, found him a respectable girl. Then what? He broke off the engagement for no reason. We still put up with him....found him a job, did every thing. We were.. we were even prepared to look after him for the rest of his life. And how does he repay us? ah? How? Ah? By disgracing us. By eloping with don't you ever, ever, tell us, or anyone else that we ill-treated Ajith.

KAMINI - Stop shouting Ranil - people are stopping and looking. They mustn't see ... her. Please go. Please leave us.

RANIL - Yes. Get out - get out of our lives. And you tell Ajith that I said.....

NANDHA - He doesn't know I came. He would never allow it. He's too proud.

RANIL - Proud? Proud? Where was his pride when he was living off us? Where was his pride when he married a

bloody beggar woman? *Aney* Get out! I know my brother. He sent you here. He's a leech and you, you are his fangs. Before we know it we'll be supporting both of you. That mother's son was always a damn loser. Never kept a job, never settled down, never. You tell that husband of yours, and tell the bugger from me - say that I

VOICE OF FATHER - Kamini? Ranil! What is happening out there?

KAMINI - My god its Thatha. Please get out. Leave now!

NANDHA - Madam, he's so thin, madam.

KAMINI - Haven't you done enough damage to this family? People are only just beginning to forget.

VOICE - Kamini!

KAMINI - Coming Thatha! Go please go! If my father sees you - he is a very sick old man. He's never recovered from the shock of Ajith..... If he sees you - he may..... he may..... Do you want a death on your heads as well? Just go. Please just Go!!

SCENE SIX

(Ajith and Nandha's home. Late evening. Ajith has fallen asleep in his chair. A short pole is clenched in his hand. The floor is now covered with balled up bits of paper. ENTER Nandha. She has a loaf of bread and some papers with her. At first she doesn't know Ajith is sleeping)

NANDHA – I am sorry I got late..... Please don't be angry. Look I brought you *(She sees now that he is sleeping and moves towards him. She watches him and lightly touches his hair and almost touches his face. She sits on the floor by his chair and caresses and kisses his legs tenderly, and finally rests her cheek on them. She starts a mock conversation with him)*

NANDHA – How was your day? My poor precious. Are they still hurting? Hmmmm yes? Tired. Very, tired, so, very. But what is all that when I am here with you? *(She laughs)* Shall I get you something to eat? OK. *(Pause)* I must tell you about this woman I pass everyday. She sits outside the market. She has no eyes, only skin stretched from her eyebrows to her cheeks. The story is that she was blinded by her man. Today she had a baby with her. Somebody had sold her a tiny baby. She was squeezing it. It was screaming so loud, it wasn't making a noise. She will kill it with her love. *(Pause)* Sometimes I wonder why you married me. *(Laughs shyly)*. No I am not. Not really. *(She laughs, and starts humming a song and the song turns into a sob)*. Talk to me. I need to hear you talk...

(The chair moves and Ajith wakes up with a start. Pole poised, ready to strike)

AJITH – Aaaaaaugh! Stay away! Don't! Don't!!

NANDHA – I....

AJITH – Food. Give it to ... the food. Give it to me.

NANDHA – What?

AJITH – One of these days they are going to kill me. They're closer. There! You heard it. You turned your head. Don't pretend you didn't hear it. They're not scared. Not anymore. They know I can't chase them. Who told them? *(he's crumbling up the food).*

NANDHA – That's all the food...

AJITH – Would you fucking rather they ate me? Shhhhhh. No noise. No noise. Today I felt one of them on my stomach. It had run all the way up my legs and I hadn't felt a thing. One day I'll look down and see one of them eating through my foot. Is that what you want? They will come for me. God I hate them. They wait for me to fall asleep. I am not imagining it. My whole life is in this tomb. I know every noise. Every silence. The screaming noise in silence...

(Silence)

NANDHA – Will you not eat at all? *(Pause – Ajith is looking about intently. She makes desperate attempts at a conversation)* There was a woman with thistiny baby..... *(pause)* The rats will not come back..... *(Pause)* How was your day?

AJITH – What ?

NANDHA - *(Hesitantly)* How was your day?

AJITH - What do you mean, how was my day? What a bloody stupid question.

NANDHA - I am sorry..... I was just

AJITH - You were just pretending that we have something to talk about. Well ironically, my day was not as maddeningly dull as usual. I finally got to meet your famous "Mr. Bloody Dias *mahattaya*.

NANDHA - He came here?

AJITH - No I met him while taking a walk. Fool. Of course he came here. With his little following of mongrels.

NANDHA - What did he come here for? Did he hurt you?

AJITH - Hurt me? Hurt me? That gutter dog? Less than a year ago I would have hired his type to clean out our cess pits. You think he can hurt me? Bloody upstart *mudalali*¹³. Couldn't you fall in debt to a respectable man? Doesn't even own a proper shop. A cart!

NANDHA - What did he say?

AJITH - What could he say? *(laughs)* He bowed and scraped. Reminded me a bit of you. You? What were you doing the whole day?

¹³ Shop Keeper.

NANDHA - Looking for work.

AJITH - That won't do. Not anymore. I have been too easy with you. I want to know exactly what you have been doing from the time you stepped out in the morning. You are having a bloody carnival aren't you? Leave me in this pit all day and expect to get away without an explanation. How do I know what the hell goes on once you leave the house?

NANDHA - Today in the morning I just went from shop to house to shop to house, looking for a job..... then I met Dias *mahattaya*.

AJITH - And then? What did you do after that? You met Dias in the afternoon. He told me that. What did you do after that?

NANDHA - I I kept going to shops.....

AJITH - Too late for shops to be open.

NANDHA - I met a friend.

AJITH - A friend?

NANDHA - Yes a girl from my village.

AJITH - What is she doing in Colombo?

NANDHA - She's working.

AJITH - Where?

NANDHA - In a hotel.

AJITH - And who would let you into a hotel? You are lying to me. You are hiding something. I can see it in your face. Tell me! where were you? Tell me the truth!

NANDHA - I just told you.....

AJITH - Are you mocking me? Taking me for a fool? Now tell me. Where were you?

NANDHA - Please don't ask me. Don't make me please.

AJITH - Not one word more other than the truth. Tell me!

NANDHA - I went to see your family. Don't hit me please. I couldn't face you without money again. I thought that that if I told them how

AJITH - Who did you speak to?

NANDHA - Your Brother and sister.

AJITH - My father?

NANDHA - I didn't speak to him.

AJITH - What did you ask them for?

NANDHA - Nothing. I was willing to take what ever they gave me.

AJITH - What did they give you?

NANDHA - Five Rupees. They thought I was a beggar.

AJITH - You told them who you were?

NANDHA - Yes. They didn't give me anything more.

AJITH - Tell me exactly - word for word - what you told them about me. If you lie - and I know when you are lying - I'll break every bone in your body.

NANDHA - I told them you were sick and weak and lonely
.....

AJITH- And?

NANDHA - They said they didn't care. *(She starts crying)* I tried to tell them how we love each other, that we chose this life and that they should be happy for you. But they said they didn't have a brother, that you were dead. They told me never to come back. They want nothing to do with us. Ever.

AJITH - What time did you...

NANDHA - About 3.

AJITH - Were the kids in the garden?

NANDHA - No, there was only your sister...

AJITH - In her pink house coat, gossiping with old Mrs. Perera over the wall. Just after her afternoon nap. She lives in that disgusting old house coat. There's a two year old mango stain down the front. Some things never ...change.

(Ajith moves away from her. He is backing her and struggling to restrain his emotions. Nandha goes to him. She is upset that she upset him)

NANDHA - I'm sorry . They didn't say it that way. They didn't. They were very upset. Especially your sister. She would have been different if your brother had not been there. He was the one who wouldn't let her speak. Anyway it was me that they wanted to hurt. If you went, if they saw you, they would have acted differently. They would have taken you back. You have to believe me. I was there. Please don't be upset

AJITH – I am not upset. I am laughing. Laughing because you told them that I am happy. That I married you for..... for LOVE?? *(laughs)* that I chose this screwed up life *(he is laughing hysterically)*. They must be gloating. What is wrong with me? They laughed at me. They tied me up like an animal and laughed and poked me and when I shouted at them they laughed at me.

NANDHA – Who? What are you...

AJITH – shhhhhh! No noise. They don't like noise. They attack. *(pause)* Hear that? They are coming back. Shhh. *(No noise then we hear a rustling)* My god they are coming back! Listen don't you hear.

NANDHA – No I don't hear. I don't hear anything.

(Ajith screams as Dias and Rohitha burst in to the room. Nandha doesn't see them all through this section)

AJITH – Stay away! Don't Don't.

NANDHA – They are not here. *(She goes to the corner and pretends to see rats)* There. I saw one running away.....

(Some of the things that Dias says to Ajith, Ajith says along with Dias. Nandha doesn't realise what he is talking about. As he gets progressively more confusing to her, she withdraws to a corner of the room and watches his ravings)

DIAS - Aaaah! Just my luck to get you at home. So, this is where the great, big Ajith *Mahattaya* lives. God! It fucking stinks.

AJITH &
DIAS - Is that you that's stinking?

DIAS - Is that your shit? Rohitha, can you believe it? His shit smells. I never thought your shit would smell.

AJITH &
DIAS - What's the matter cripple?

NANDHA - Don't say that...

DIAS - Have you lost your tongue as well? Or don't you understand Sinhala? *(In a very strong Sinhala accent)* No Problem Sir. *Api Experts! (We are experts).* We know the law sonna! One, two three pour, pive. *(Sings)* A,B,C,E,E, ep,Gee, edge, I, A, K elamelapee.

(Ajith laughs)

DIAS - What, Dog!! You are laughing at me? I'll give you something to laugh at. Your woman. She's a real nuisance. Always asking for a fuck. Can't you do anything about

that cripple?

AJITH &
DIAS – Cripple. Cripple.

NANDHA – Stop it, don't say that.

AJITH – I am not! I am not a cripple!

DIAS - Aaaah! Don't only sing. Dance for us freak. What's the matter? Don't you feel like dancing? What else don't you feel like doing?

AJITH – Leave me. Please go.

DIAS – Run! Run! Run you cripple!

AJITH &
DIAS - Run! RUN!!

(Exit Dias and Rohitha)

AJITH &
NANDHA – Please stop it.

Silence

NANDHA – Please stop it.

Silence

AJITH – They untied me and told me to run.

NANDHA – They didn't. They're not here. We leave food out, they don't eat it.

AJITH – You are one of them.

NANDHA – (*Coming to him*) how can you say ...

AJITH - (*Slaps her*) Don't touch me bitch! Where the fuck were you when this happened? Where were you? Making a fool of yourself and me by begging from my own family. Have you no pride? Shut up!! This is your fault. All this. This whole screwed up life we are living. You hear me? If I hadn't married you..... You know I could have married a proper woman? A beautiful, educated, cultured woman. She wanted me. The way I am. And I gave her up for you. You ugly foolish

NANDHA - I am your wife.....

AJITH - Wife? Wife? (*He laughs maniacally*) How are you my wife? Do you feed me? Do you talk to me? Do you screw me? And you think you are my wife? Did you tell my family that?..... They said I had nothing below my waist. That I was not a man. But you know the problem? You don't do anything for me. It's not a handicap. You just don't turn me on. You're too pathetic. You will face me when I am speaking to you woman! Remember who you are - where you came from you low down slut. You will never be anything else to me. Cigarettes? Didn't you hear me? I asked you where the cigarettes were?

NANDHA - Don't hit me

AJITH - I asked you a question. Come here. Come here. Who told you to go to my family? Ah? Who told you? (*He hits her again*) Now how much did you get from them? (*He starts beating her*) Answer me! Answer me!

NANDHA - Oh God! Nothing! I told you nothing!

AJITH - I'll cut out that lying tongue of yours! Where's the money you are hiding? They would have given something. They would have.

NANDHA - Stop. Please stop!

AJITH - Or what? You will leave me? And who will have you slut? Who will take you? Only a fool like me. (*She breaks away from him and he falls to the floor.*)

AJITH - Come here. Come here damn you! You will listen to me. (*Nandha goes to him and he beats her again*) You are a filthy liar! They still love me. They do! They do! Now will you listen to me? Now do you understand? You will never disgrace me like that again. Not you or any other of your gutter community. I need food. I need cigarettes. You're my wife and you will give them to me you hear? Shut your stinking mouth woman! Shut up or I will kill you! (*She breaks away again*) Come back. Nandha! Nandha! Come back! I am ordering you.

NANDHA - I am sorry. I'm sorry.

AJITH - (*She returns to him again and he beats her yet again*) Not sorry enough. This is the only language you will understand. What am I saying now? Now? Lazy, foolish, useless . I despise you. You trapped me into this marriage. You'll pay. I'll beat you when I want. It's time you were taught some respect. I'll beat the life out of you everyday until you give me the life I want. You understand? Wife?

SCENE SEVEN

(Under the lamp post. Nireka and Namdha are squatting under the lamp post chewing beetle. There are some changes in Nandha's clothing, but they are minimal. There are bigger changes in her walk and talk- a subtle kind of confidence. Her confidence comes more from being able to relax around someone, not so much from any massive sexual confidence in herself)

NANDHA - You never told me how she died.

NIREKA - Don't know if she died. Really.

NANDHA - What's this you say now?

NIREKA - *(Nireka starts to de-louse her)* She had this little cart. Her man made it for her. About this big. She would balance on it, like this. Sometimes she falls out and yells like hell for someone to put her back in. He would pull her along. You could hear the cart - *kara kara kara kara kara* - on the pavement, and everyone would say "Ah there's Wattala coming".

NANDHA - Wattala is the name of a village.

NIREKA - It's her village, she says. She didn't know anything else about her. She didn't know her name, so we called her Wattala. Every time when he brought her, *kara kara kara kara kara KARA KARA.....* And she's here. And Every time someone took her - *KARA Kara kara kara kara kara* into the darkness. It was like her own song. Sometimes the boys would call her *kata kata* for fun.

NANDHA - So she has a big mouth?

NIREKA - No one could ever win a fight with her. She would scream filth. And all the people on the road would stop and watch - this armless, legless stump in a cart screaming and cursing. And she enjoyed it. And was there any point in fighting with her? No! Because she was performing, with all her heart and all her guts, she was performing. *(Pause)* One day the cart was never heard again.

NANDHA - Dead?

NIREKA - She waited long enough. Who knows? Maybe she's reborn a snake - no arms and no legs, but not a freak anymore.

NANDHA - What kept them coming back for her?

NIREKA - Oh I don't know. Maybe a kind of helplessness-like what you have.

NANDHA -Me?

NIREKA - What's this look of surprise for? You know how popular you are. It's that look you always have, every man feels like he's the first.

NANDHA - What look?

NIREKA - That one. The one you have now. It makes men want you.

NANDHA - No it doesn't.

NIREKA - You're trying to teach me to suck ...eggs?

NANDHA - Not my man. Not my own husband - the only one who doesn't have to pay.

NIREKA - Still beating you?

NANDHA - No. He doesn't touch me. *(Pause)* He doesn't..... even..... touch me.

NIREKA - Think he knows?

NANDHA - He knows.

NIREKA - You told him?

NANDHA - No. But I know he knows. I can see it in his eyes. The way he doesn't look at me.

NIREKA - You are imagining.

NANDHA - I can't imagine it Nireka. I wash this man. I carry him, I dress him. I know him like I know my self. He can't pretend to me. Not with his whole body, all the time. Those days he was always straining against me. So tight all the time. He would pull down with his body, be as heavy as he could. Make it difficult for me to carry him. He is still tight, but not heavy. He's not trying to be heavy.

NIREKA - I don't know about this heavy tight shit. All I know is that if he knew he would beat the shit out of you.

NANDHA - Yes. That's what I thought also. Maybe he just doesn't care .

NIREKA - But now you know it's not your fault.

NANDHA - It's not his fault.

NIREKA - It's yours? It's yours, is that what you are saying? It's your fault. Aney! Get out!

NANDHA - I am ugly.

NIREKA - You are ugly. You are stealing all my men from me. What does that make me?

NANDHA - These men are sick . When ever I am in that stinking room with a sweaty, ... *(pause)* Do you ever look at their faces?

NIREKA - Sometimes. There are only two types. Those that fold their clothes and those that don't.

NANDHA - I am more scared of the ones that fold the clothes. They don't talk.

NIREKA - You want them to talk to you?

NANDHA - I will burn in hell for this.... How could I do this to him?

NIREKA - Seems like you're doing it for him. *(pause)*

(Silence. Nireka stares at Nandha)

NIREKA - There is nothing wrong with you, silly bitch.

NANDHA You call me bitch, but you don't mean it in a dirty way. He calls me wife and he makes me feel so filthy.

The things he says to me. The way – the dirty way he shouts at me and laughs at me and..... every minute of the day. Whatever I do. I was so scared the first time.... The first time I took a man. I was so scared that he would start laughing at me the way my man does.

NIREKA - Will you leave him?

NANDHA - What can I make out of my life if I do? Who is going to want to have anything to do with a prostitute? What can I do...

NIREKA - (*cutting in*) Other than become a madame?

NANDHA - Also....

NIREKA - (*cutting in*)..... in spite of all this shit you still love him. This is why we women will never raise our heads from this hell. (*She hits Nandha*) Stupid bitch.

NANDHA - Why did you do that?

NIREKA - I don't know. But when I did, I understood why he hits you. I wanted to hit you. I want to hit you now, and protect you as well. If you were all I had, I would hate you. (*Pause*) It's too much love.

NANDHA - He gave up his family for me Nireka – for me.

NIREKA - Too much love.

NANDHA - Even the woman he was going to marry. After the accident, even after the accident, she still wanted to marry him. He was the one who broke it up. To marry me.

NIREKA - Do you ever look at his face?

NANDHA - He's my husband.

NIREKA - His eyes. Do you ever look at them? (*Pause*) Do you?

NANDHA - No.

NIREKA - Why?

NANDHA - I can't.

NIREKA - Why?

NANDHA - Because....

NIREKA - (*Fiercely*) Because there's nothing in them. No feeling.

NANDHA - (*Shouting*). No! No there is! There is such feeling!

NIREKA - You're a fool!

NANDHA - There is such hatred! Raw hatred. I don't look at his eyes because..... (*Pause*) Sometimes.... sometimes I feel like he's trying to kick me. Nireka akka this is the man I ... (fuck other men for).

(*Pause*)

NIREKA - All this for him? You are blessed. You can still love.

NANDHA - It's a curse. My curse.

NIREKA - His curse. You are killing him.

NANDHA - You don't understand. He hates me. He doesn't care what I do, because he doesn't want me for himself.

NIREKA - He wants you. Even if it is now only because other men want you, he wants you.

SCENE EIGHT

(Ajith and Nandha's house. It is night time, and should resemble the prologue scene. Ajith is in his wheel chair, motionless. He hears something and scrambles back into bed. ENTER Nandha. She has a bag with her. She sits on the edge of the bed for a while looking at Ajith. She lies down slowly and then suddenly sits up, feeling the bed.)

NANDHA - Wet.

(She flicks on the light switch on the wall and the lights come up. There are changes in the room. There is a naked bulb hanging from light wire. The Christmas decoration and the bangles are gone. The bed takes the place of a sleeping mat. There is a clock on the little table and a small mirror, that has been turned face down. There are some bright plastic flowers stuck behind the pretend curtains. The floor is strewn with paper.

Nandha is in a different dress. It is better fitting, but it is not pretty. Her lips are red from chewing beetle and there are small plastic flowers in her hair.

Nandha picks up the fallen catheter bag. Ajith sits up and she helps him on to the wheel chair.)

NANDHA - Can put it out to dry tomorrow.

(Ajith sits motionless in the wheel chair. Nandha stares at him, then moves to the table. She picks up the bowl of water, turns around, and turns back to the table, noticing something strange. She turns the mirror the right way up,

looks at Ajith and then looks at herself for a long while in the mirror. She places it face up and turns to Ajith. She starts to wash him.)

AJITH - This is the morning's routine.

(As she is washing him, her actions change. They become deliberately sexual. This disconcerts him and he tries to push her away. She forces his hand over her body. They wrestle. He begins to panic. She holds his gaze. They continue struggling in silence, until she stops and just looks at him. He starts to cry. She moves away.)

AJITH - They all know now. All of them. And they laugh at me. *(Pause)* Oh God! Where do I look? Where do I look? Everything here is to remind me. *(Refers to furniture)* You bring, these home like medals. Are you going to leave me? Who will have you whore?! Sorry, sorry. Don't be angry, please don't be angry. Nandha, don't leave me. I'll be good, I'll clean up, I won't drip. *(Pause)* Nandha talk to me. Tell me what you are thinking. Tell me you have nothing to say. Talk to me! Talk to me! You know I hate the silence. Don't punish me like this. You know I am afraid of the silence. You know what happens in the silence. You know. Why don't you talk to me? Say something. I hate this silence. ... *(He closes his eyes starts singing the alphabet to himself, beating time on his legs. Nandha stares at him, then she picks up her bag, puts the mirror into it, and walks to the door. He sings louder and more desperately. As she backs away from him, she steps on her bangles, broken and twisted around a dirty rag. She pick it up.)*

AJITH - *(To the rhythm of the song)* I'm. Not. Afraid. Of. Them. Anymore. I'm. Killing. Them now. *(He continues with the song)*

(She stares at him, and walks back to the table. He stops singing and looks at her. She picks up a cigarette packet and turns to him.)

NANDHA - Cigarette?

THE END



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