WAVES

Experiments in short stories
(1996 – 2005)

Ahila Thillainathan

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ISBN: 978-955-8535-09-7

First Edition: July 2010

Price : Rs. 300/=

All profits, beyond the printing and publishining related costs, will go to the School for the Deaf and Blind, Ratmalana

Dedicated to my siblings

Vanathy, Sujitha and Thayalan

Waves

As waves ride across the sea
Some high, some low...
Turbulent as they crash against the rocks
Or calm as they sweep against the shore,
Before merging back into the ocean...
So do people ride across their life...
Each life living out its own crescendo,
Before the individual ceases to exist.

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1

Not a waste of breath

I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed a waste of breath
A waste of breath the years behind,
In balance with this life, this death.

The words, stared back at her indifferently from a note, in her handwriting. Even in a farewell note, she was not original. She had borrowed Yeats' words, from an old school textbook, to express her last words. She shrugged and looked at the bottle of sleeping pills which she had slowly managed to accumulate in the past few months. All that was left was for her to swallow it all and go into a much welcome sleep and on onto better horizons. Anything was better than this life. Her miserable life.

Grasping the bottle in her hand, she looked around the room, her room where her history was written. The paper cuttings and favourite verses copied in her handwriting stuck all over the space on a wooden board on the wall above her bed. An empty space on the

wall opposite. Posters of her favourite Hollywood actors had once covered that space, albeit briefly.

"If you don't take down those pictures this instant, I'll come and take them down and throw them all in the garbage," her father had threatened.

She glanced at the curtained windows. She turned her head away. There was nothing outside, except indifferent buildings in shades of lustre-less brown. Her glance fell on the square clock that hung defiantly in black against the beige colour of the wall paint. It pointed to 8 p.m. The clock was ironically the only thing that she had obtained, standing firmly on her feet. It was a birthday gift from her parents. She and her parents had gone for a walk along Corniche beach, the day before her birthday and had stopped at an Emsons supermarket on their way back home to buy her birthday gift. She had asked for a wall clock for her room and they were selecting a reasonably priced clock.

"No, not that clock. It has a black background," her father had hissed at her mother who had picked up a square clock.

"Why not? It is a perfectly lovely clock," she had argued, something rebelling within her.

"Why not the blue one? It is very nice," her mother had suggested timidly.

"No. I like this black clock the most and I don't want any other, if I can't have this." She had declared.

"You know your father doesn't like black," her mother had pleaded.

She had stood firm. On that one occasion in her life.

Her father had shrugged his shoulders and allowed her to make her choice of purchase.

She laughed hysterically, recalling the incident. She had stood her ground and demanded what she wanted once in her life. All for a miserable clock she hated. Only because something within had accumulated and she had felt like rebelling that single time.

What had life offered her? Nothing.

Intelligence? She had been a below average student in school.

Beauty? She was plain and unnoticeable as a doormat.

Love? Who would ever love a person like her?

Money? She did not lack basic needs but neither could she spend on little whims.

Special talents? None.

She had aspired to be a poet as she always found poetry inspiring, but she had not advanced beyond a few squiggles, written at her desk in this very room and languishing, unknown to other eyes, in the bottom drawer of the same desk.

She had once, long ago, been interested in learning Bharathanatyam, after watching a performance at the school annual day, but then her mother had told her that her face was not fit for dancing. Her mother did hate her. Even at yesterday's lunch when she had protested over a nondescript issue.

"Will you just shut up and eat? It hurts my eye to even look at you." Tears welled up at her eyes. Why, oh why, did her mother hate her so? Whatever she did or did not do, whatever she said or did not say was a grievous fault in her mother's eye. They used to say only step-mothers could be so. Her father was the same, yet different. He did not care about her, yet he made it a point to remind her that she was a good-for-nothing and of no use to anyone.

Well, she had turned out according to his prediction. She had failed her final school board exams and so she could not enter university, back in her country of birth. She remembered the day she had come home from school with her results. Her mother had started scolding her the minute she saw the results. She had cried in her room the whole day. Her father had come home in the evening.

After tea, he had looked at the results. "Just as I thought. No use haranguing her. Well, that's that for her education. I'm certainly not going to put her through professional courses out here. It costs a fortune and anyway, she does not have any brains in that huge head of hers."

She had always hoped that her parents would miraculously change one day and be more like the parents of classmates in school. They seemed to be loved and cared for. Even Kairunissa, her only friend in school and who was even worse than her at studies, was loved by her family. In many of the numerous conversations over the phone, which was the only means of entertainment in this desert city, she had heard Kairu's mother or father calling out for her or her brothers laughing at her for something or other. There was always music or movies playing in the background. Kairu used to bring her family albums to school from time to time, after a birthday party at home or a holiday visit somewhere. Family holidays. Birthday parties. Fun and laughter. Love. These were exotic foreign words to her ears and she drank in the details eagerly. She had even had a crush on Kairu's elder brother. The brother who always brought in little gifts for his sister, when he visited home during college holidays. One of the reasons she called Kairu frequently, especially when she knew he was home for the holidays, was the hope that this brother would answer the phone and she could hear his voice. She had had many a daydream of Kairu's brother. Pitiful replicas of the

Barbara Cartland novels that she had sneaked into the house without her parent's knowledge. In those dreams, she would transform herself into the beautiful, petite heroine-in-distress and Kairu's brother, the knight in shining armour passionately in love with her, who rescued her from the perils she read about in the latest novel. These dreams were abruptly stopped after Kairu mentioned her brother's girlfriend, a co-student at his college. She had then cried bitterly into her pillows, over a crush who had never known her and with whom she had only spoken to once or twice, and that too to ask to speak to Kairu.

Once school finished, most of her classmates went on to pursue further education. Her father found her a job at the company of one of his friends. She started work as a secretary at a furnishers' office, located on Hamdan Street, hoping that her life would take an interesting turn. It had instead taken an even more monotonous tone. Waking up in the morning. Going to work. Sitting in a tiny room, typing letters and account sheets for the old men who ran the business. Coming home in the afternoon. Having lunch and watching TV till her father came home in the evening. Then, she would go into her room and lock the doors and stay inside the whole night, staring at the walls. A monotonous, uneventful life. Sometimes broken with a dinner invitation at a house of her parents' friends. She always tried skipping these boring parties, where people sat woodenly on sofas and made polite queries about each other's families for the

umpteenth time and then had dinner, commenting on the menu and exchanging recipes. Especially these days. Conversation always turned to marriage and the proposal being finalized by her father.

This marriage proposal was being conducted in the most traditional method. Her father had written to his sister back home in India and she had enlisted the help of their village marriage broker. A groom was subsequently found with the right credentials: the same caste and honourable family. The groom was seen to be a responsible man, capable of looking after a family, having provided for the dowry of his five sisters. He was now ready to start his own family. Further, he happened to be working here in Abu Dhabi as an engineer. He had seen her photograph that his mother had sent him and approved. More formally, he had paid them a visit with some elderly friends for the traditional ceremony of looking at the bride. She had been dressed up in a blue mysore silk saree and gold jewellery and asked to serve coffee to the guests.

After that formal affair, her parents invited the future son-in-law occasionally for dinner and he would come and sit on their sofa woodenly. Her father and he would comment on the weather or the latest cricket match being played in Abu Dhabi or Sharjah. Then they would have dinner and she was always asked to serve his dinner. She obliged though she hated every minute of it. He had

nothing to say to her and he did not seem to be particularly interested in her. It was time to start his family and it did not seem to matter to him who his partner was. As long as it was a female, subscribing to the ethics of his mother and his community, he was satisfied. A female who would bear his children, cook for him and clean his house. That was all his expectation of his wife. He never asked her what she liked, even in simple things like food or movies.

How could she say that she didn't want to marry, at least not this man? She didn't dare speak to her father. He would not accept any refusal of his decisions, as the head of the family. Her mother? She tried broaching the subject. She had reacted harshly.

"What do you mean? You don't want to marry!"

"I don't want to marry now."

"Then, when do you want to marry? When you are forty?"

"Maybe, I don't want to marry at all."

"And do what?"

"I don't know… Work, maybe."

"What work? You know that you got your current job only because your father asked his friend to give you a job for a short while. You can't depend on that."

"Well, I will get another one."

"You get another one? Hah! Any girl smart enough to do that would have done that by now! But you? You have no education! No talents! I was the best student in my class and was going to enter university when my father arranged my marriage. I accepted his decision, without a word, and married your father, didn't I?"

"Maybe I don't want a life of looking after a home and raising children."

"Don't want a life of looking after a home and raising children? What does her highness want to do then?"

"I don't know. I just don't want to marry that man."

"You dare to question your father's decision? Where have we gone wrong in our upbringing? You say that that hard-working, educated man is not up to your standard? What standard do you dare to have? This proposal is too good for you as such. Be grateful that you are getting married. I don't want to hear your nonsense again!"

She saw her future life, decided by her parents, an exact replica of their life. Loveless, boring and monotonous. Her natal home would be replaced with her husband's home, her life enclosed within the four beige-coated walls. Cooking for her husband. Occasionally, for invited guests. Washing and ironing her husband's clothes. Cleaning the house. Going out to the souk with him, every friday, to buy vegetables and other groceries. Bearing his child one day. This was the most repelling aspect of all her aversions. His flabby and tired face from working long hours and his sagging belly of an overfed stomach repelled her.

All her life, she had been waiting for a better future, once she escaped her parent's home. But, this. She couldn't take it. There was something cold in her hand. She looked down. The bottle of pills. With a resolve, she gulped the pills down with mineral water.

***

Malathy sat at her daughter's desk, in the darkening room, staring at the wooden board on the wall. Snippets of poetry and verse adorned it, haphazardly. One struck her.

A girl who wishes to remain unmarried
Should be wedded to independence.

A girl dependent upon others
can never Remain unmarried
- Mahatma Gandhi.

Why did she do it? She had told her that she didn't like Ashok. What was wrong with Ashok? He had an education and a responsible job. The foolish girl. What else had she expected? She didn't want to marry, she had said. Not marry? What nonsense? Every girl eventually got married. What had the little fool expected? Had she wanted to spend all her life in her parent's home, shut up in this room or what? Why had she committed suicide?

Malathy and her husband had come home from a dinner at a friend's house. The corridor light had been left on, as usual. As she had walked across the corridor to their room, she had seen a light through the edges of her door. The girl has not slept yet. What was she doing up so late? She had thought exasperatedly as she went and opened the door. There she was lying on the bed. The lazy girl had gone to sleep without switching off the light.

Her hand had instinctively risen to turn off the switch, when something in her head had made her stop and look again. Something was not right. She went closer. The face was contorted. There was foam in the mouth. An empty bottle stood on the bedside table. She froze,

as she stood watching her daughter. Unable to do anything. Her mind had taken in the details and told her the worst news. She didn't react. She had stood there, looking at her daughter's dead face for a long time until her husband had called out for her. She had switched off the light and closed the door gently and gone to their room. Her husband asked for a cup of water. She went to the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, took out a bottle of mineral water and poured out a glass, all mechanically and from routine. She had handed him his glass of water and then she had calmly told him. She is dead.

Everything happened in a blur after that. Her husband had called the emergency number of the nearby hospital and the police. The room was photographed and sealed. Their statements taken down. Newspaper reporters came to get their statement as well. The funeral arrangements. People coming in and going out of their house each day. Friends, their eyes agog with curiosity and pretentious sympathy.

"But, why did she commit suicide?"

"Was it an affair? Did you force her to marry against her will?"

"Was it a love break?"

"Was she pregnant?"

She looked in stony silence at the interrogators, their souls so greedily searching for scandal. She looked at her husband, his head weighed down by the society's judgment. Accepting the death as a scandal. She wanted them all out of her life. Their pitiful, empty existence. Feeding on other's grief, like vultures feeding off carcasses. She got up and walked into her daughter's bedroom and shut its door. Making sure to lock it. She heard footsteps in the corridor. Someone knocked on the door, calling out her name. She didn't reply. After repeatedly calling out for her, the person went away. She sat at the desk, looking at the wooden board on the wall. Her husband came and called her. She didn't reply. He, too, went away.

After the funeral, her husband returned to his work, his routine resumed. She got up in the morning, made him tea, cooked him his lunch and packed it up for him, served him breakfast, cleaned the house, washed his dirty clothes, ironed the laundered clothes.

Then, she went into her daughter's room and locked the door. No-one else was in the house. Even then, she locked the door. She wanted to be alone with the remnants of her daughter. She sat at the desk. She stared at the wooden board or the poetry, she

had found in a drawer of the desk, in her daughter's writing. More often, she simply sat there, staring into space.

What had been in the girl's head all these years? She had often been exasperated at her daughter's apathy and lack of ambition in her studies or other interests. She had moved quietly amidst and out of their lives, without ever revealing her soul. Her daughter had reached out to her, one last time but she had not responded. Tears welled up in her eyes.

Why, oh why, hadn't she understood the girl's despondent heart and given her consolation? What a mother was she to have not known her daughter's needs? She had had no idea how strong this desire for independence was in the little girl's heart. The child had been asking for guidance on the path to independence and she had shut herself in, refusing to hear her plea till it was too late. She looked at her own life, the life her daughter had so loathed and she realized that she despised it as well. The apathy that had irritated her in her daughter was present within her too. The uneventful routine of her married life had drained away all her curiosity and dreams of her childhood. Was it actually the reason why her daughter had lost interest in life? She had not been able to show her daughter a better life, than mere vegetative existence. She owed it to her daughter to be able to prove that one could come out of the burden of a woman's

existence. She had to follow her daughter's dream and show her that her dream of independence was plausible.

Her husband came home late in the evening, to a dark house. He switched on the corridor light and went to his room. He changed his clothes, knocked on her door and went to the living room and switched on the T.V. She came out and made him some tea. Then, she started preparing the *rotis* for his dinner. She sat in silence at the dining table, while he ate his dinner, silently.

"I have decided to work," she announced suddenly, "I can't sit here, all day, doing nothing."

"Where will you work?", he asked astonished, at the determination in his meek wife's voice and the content of her announcement.

"At the drapery shop of your friend. I am sure he will not mind me working there for a few months in her position," she replied calmly but firmly.

"What will others say, if you go for work?", he queried still surprised.

"What will they say?", she retorted sharply.

"That I am unable to support you," he replied, a little annoyed.

"Let them say what they want. I don't care," she replied angrily.

"What is the need to go for work?", he finally inquired meekly.

"I am going mad, sitting here alone in this house. I have to go to work or, you will have a dead wife as well soon." She got up and left the room.

Intimidated by the change in his wife, he didn't protest further.

Malathy started working at the drapery shop, the following week. She learnt to type and slowly got into the routine of office work. She would get up early in the morning and cook breakfast and lunch. Then dressing quickly in her saree, she would take the taxi to her office on Hamdan Street. In the afternoon, she would come home and after a quick lunch, clean the house and do the washing and ironing.

A month passed. She received her first salary. She had decided to go for a diploma course in computer studies, at a nearby institute, in the afternoons. Her husband never asked her about her work or her salary. She never bothered to tell him either. As long as his routine was undisturbed, he did not inquire further.

The one person she spoke to openly was her daughter. She would go into her room, where she had hung a photograph framed in black and garlanded with plastic jasmine flowers. She would light sandalwood incense sticks for her daughter and then communicate with her about all the changes that were taking place in her life. In life, they had lived side by side as strangers. In death, her daughter was closest to her and the reason for her living. Her daughter's life was not a waste of breath.

2

The cuckoo

(Published in Daily News, January 13, 2005)

Hemantha looked at the girl standing in front of him. Disheveled, with puffed and red eyes, she looked much older than her sixteen years. She stood there, tearfully pleading.

They were standing at the crowded bus stand in front of the Medical Faculty of the University of Peradeniya. Hemantha, a second year student, had just finished a long day of lectures and labs and had been looking forward to catching a movie in town with his friends. He was going to meet them at the Katugastota theatre in town. But now this.

"I've told you over and over... He doesn't want to meet you. Can't you get it? The relationship is over. Why don't you have some dignity and move on with your life instead of making a fool of yourself?"

"I cannot just let this relationship go..."

The bus approached.

"Fine! Just don't bother me about it!"

Hemantha stepped onto the last footboard of the bus. Then, he heard her.

"But, I am carrying his child."

His heart missed a beat. As the bus took off, he glanced back. She stood there forlornly, a lost child.

***

Shading his eyes against the afternoon glare, Hemantha searched for his friends among the long queue waiting outside the theatre.

"There you are!" a voice called out, "Nice time you took to get here, *machang*."

He looked towards the source of the voice and located Aruna near the top of the queue, in front of the ticket counter.

"Few more minutes and we'd have gone in. What took you so long? Thought you were going to miss Karishma's dance sequence."

"You know Sri Lankan roads, one can't get anywhere they want to go in time," Hemantha mumbled dispassionately.

The line started moving and they went in quickly to catch their favourite seats in the back row. Aruna sat by his side as *Dil to Pagal Hai* flashed by. His thoughts were still on her.

The first time he had seen her still fresh in his mind. In their freshman year, his gang enjoyed hanging about the bus stand of the girls' school near their boarding place, in their spare time. Standing under the shade of a huge mango tree, in the early afternoon, they would crack jokes and comment on the girls coming out of the school. The day they first saw her was a morning though. They had been waiting for the bus, under their mango tree, to go into town. A cuckoo had been calling out joyfully in the fresh morning air, perched on a branch above. Their bus came and as they waited to board it, she climbed down the steps, neatly dressed in her simple white uniform with her long hair tied in two plaits with black ribbons. They had all whistled at her. To which, she had responded by blushing and running past them quickly into her school. A very sweet and innocent thing.

Aruna had fallen in love with her at first sight. Cutting his lectures, he would hang about her school.

"Why don't you tell her your feelings?", Hemantha had questioned, tiring of Aruna's constant moping.

"I cannot face her refusing me. I would rather die than live that agony," he had tragically declared.

"So you plan to agonize over her without ever knowing the truth? What's with you guys? If you must love, at least have the guts to declare your love!"

"You won't understand. You haven't loved!"

"I haven't loved but I have common sense enough to see that you are going to flunk your first year exams if you don't look sharp. What will you tell your parents then?"

"Leave me alone, will you! I have enough wounds as it is, Don't rub more salt into them."

Eventually though Aruna had mustered up enough courage to pen a letter with the help of his ever-supportive friends. He remembered the silence that had followed after the letter had been delivered and the agony that Aruna had gone through going over every plausible reason for her silence. Finally Hemantha had gone over

to her as she waited for her bus and demanded her answer. She had blushed to the roots. There was giggling from other girls waiting for their buses and sharp, disapproving glances from grown-ups.

Neglecting the twinge of pity he had felt, he had spoken to her quite sharply and given an ultimatum.

"Come to Devon's coffee-shop and give your reply to Aruna tomorrow or else I will turn up at your home and demand a reply in front of your parents."

She had turned up at the coffee shop the next day. Soon after, they had become a couple, Aruna and she.

Cutting her evening tuition classes, she would join them at the movies or coffee shops. The two of them always in their own world. It had sometimes amused him to watch the two of them and the authority she wielded over Aruna, who was entirely at her command. Though, it was sickening at times to see the two mooning off.

A change in the air and he had felt Aruna's reluctance to include her in their group activities. One day, he had announced their break-up.

But this. Was it true? If it were, how could Aruna enjoy a movie by his side and laugh at flimsy Bollywood jokes after ruining a girl's life?

Hemantha managed to get Aruna alone later that night in his room after dinner.

"*Machang*, I met your girl at Med fac."

"Not my girl! My ex!"

Hemantha flinched.

"Anyway, she looks very pathetic... She wants to meet you desperately."

"Girls! They make a scene over everything. And that one just doesn't get it. I have to stoop to the extent of hiding from her to avoid her."

Aruna reached over the side of the bed he was lying on and switched on the radio.

"Yes F.M. or Sirasa?"

"What?" Hemantha turned away from the papers he was abstractedly leafing through at the desk. "Oh, Whatever."

After a few seconds, he asked quietly "Why did you really break up with her?"

"I told you, *Machang*," replied Aruna sitting up on the bed, "My parents absolutely put their foot down on my having a relationship with a girl from the south. They said. "*Putha*, if you must have a girl, she should be from the central regions and our caste. If you dare disobey, don't ever set foot in this house again." Well, I thought, what the hell... a girl I have known for only six months or my parents? The choice was clear. I dropped her. Between you and me, I was getting fed up with her anyway. She was exhausting… always expecting me to be at her beck and call and wanting to meet me every day as I used to when I was trying to catch her attention." He got up and walked towards the window. "A man has got to have his space!"

"Does your breakup have anything to do with the fact she's pregnant?"

Aruna's face changed but only for a moment.

"What the hell! She tell you that? The lies girls will stoop to! What kind of person do you think I am? Someone who takes advantage of poor, innocent girls? Anyway, it is none of your bloody business! To see your concern, one would suspect that you had a thing for her."

Hemantha's hand shot out before he realized. Trembling with anger, he hissed, "Don't you dare speak to me like that!" and walked out of the room.

***

It was around 8 in the morning. Time for the day's lectures to begin at the Faculty of Medicine. Students were hurrying past the entrance. No sign of Aruna. Did he hate her so much that he wouldn't even see her? But why? All those months of proclaiming undying love. And that day when he had taken her to show his room... He had been so gentle. She had felt safe. It was only after when she started becoming sick that she realized something was wrong. She was filled with terror then. How was she to face her parents?

Her strict, conservative parents who did not even know she had a boyfriend. How would they react to her having a baby? She was frightened and turned to him for comfort. But there was no consolation there. Only hardness. He had told her last week after

she had told him about the baby that he did not want to ever see her again. That it was not his choice. His parents had forced him to do it. And left. What was she to do with the thing inside her? What would happen if others found out? What would her parents do?

The hard, metallic railway track glared at her and she realized her feet had taken her to the bridge close to the faculty. In a daze, she walked down the narrow steps leading to the track. The track was damp and dirty. She knelt down and wiped it clean with a handkerchief. Then she elaborately laid her head, face down, on the board as if it were her comfort pillow.

A cuckoo was calling out for its mate in a nearby tree.

***

Hemantha was walking slowly along the winding, tree-lined Galaha road towards the faculty, as the first lecture had been cancelled that day. As he passed the bridge, he paused. The beautiful violet flower he admired was in full bloom on the creeper this morning. He heard the forlorn cry of the cuckoo. He always thought its cry was the saddest call he had ever heard. He hated it when people returned that call for malicious fun. The cuckoo thinking it had found its ideal would coo back joyously, increasing its pitch until the deceiver tiring

of the game left. Then, the cuckoo still hopeful would emit questioning calls, which would increase in panic. Why did people have to be so hurtful and deceiving in love? His heart felt heavy. He heard the distant rumble of a train. He leaned against the bridge looking at the approaching train. Something distracted him. An object on the track below. A person? She. "No!" He shouted. Passers-by turned in surprise to look at him. He ran down the steps as fast as he could, a race against the train.

As he reached the last step gasping, the train roared past him, over her.

***

3

Vani

Amidst the dusty and crowded roads of the town of Jaffna, the street where Vani lived offered an incredible, cool refuge to the hot and dry climate of the place. One almost missed the street, as it was a tiny by-road adjacent to a grocery shop on one of the lesser main roads of the town. Entering the house through the low grill gate, one was pleasantly conscious of a cool and welcoming atmosphere, especially accentuated by the lime trees in the front yard. No fancy shrubs or flowering plants here as was common in most other town houses but simple, plain and more practical green, fruit trees. The house itself was as unpretentious as its yard and street. One entered the front door into a narrow, dark hall with sparse, simple wooden furniture. What attracted one's attention were the walls. Vani had adorned them with her paintings and

sculptures. A clay sculpture of Radha and Krishna proudly claimed its place of honour over the sideboard.

"Vani," her mother began, moulding the patties dough, "Take the tablecloth out and lay the table and go hurry and get dressed! The people are going to walk in any minute!"

Vani peeped into the hall and looked at the wall-clock. It was almost 3 p.m. True enough, there was hardly any time left but the frying of the vadai was only half done.

But the *vadai*?

"Oh, come, come, child, I'll handle the remaining," her mother replied coming to the stove, "Just spread the tablecloth and get ready! You don't want to be in your dirty, old dress when your relatives come now, do you? And, did you iron out the blouse and skirt last night and pleat the saree? Don't tell me you didn't," her mother continued, her voice rising in anger, "If you dare tell me you haven't, I'll think you the most laziest girl in the country!"

Vani took a bowl of water from the kitchen bucket and washed her hands in the sink. She turned to her mother smiling, "*Amma*, I did all the pleating and ironing last night. So, don't fret!"

She went to the almirah in her parents' bedroom and opened it. Searching among the family valuables, the ancestral jewellery and silverware and their best clothes, she found their only tablecloth under a small pile amongst the shelf of good sarees. She took out the white, starched cotton cloth and fingered the exquisite blue flowers she had hand-embroidered on the corners. Two years ago, she had decided on the tablecloth, for her mother's birthday, because they had not had any proper cloth for the table on the occasions when visitors came in for a meal. The mixture of delight and surprise on her mother's face, when she had received the gift, had been touching.

Ever since that day, the tablecloth had been added to the family treasure chest and only taken out on the most important occasions, like today, for example... her birthday! Vani shook her head. Her birthday! She was 25 years old and still her family and relatives persisted in treating her like a child! And the expense. Their family were in such impoverished circumstances and to think of throwing a party when there were other matters that needed more thought and finances. Vani had tried dissuading her mother. But in this her mother was firmly obstinate.

"What are we supposed to give all the relatives who come to wish you with presents? We can't just give them tea and biscuits!"

"Why not? Who asked them to come in the first place? And, if they want to bring a present along, it's their business. And maybe they might get the hint! *Amma*, Go ahead and have a birthday party for my brother. *Thambi* is only twenty now after all but not for me!"

"What utter rubbish are you talking? Tea and biscuits, indeed, for your aunts and uncles! What an ungrateful child you are! I am sick and tired of your arguments! I don't want to hear a word from you on this subject again!"

Vani had not argued with her mother but within she was still bursting with anger. Aunts and uncles, indeed! Ungrateful for what?! For our more affluent relatives condescending to visit us on our birthdays, with little nondescript presents, and maybe on New Year's day as well. With false smiles and false talk, they came pretending to admire any new handwork of hers when they had absolutely no aesthetic sense. If only their concern was genuine. When her mother had fallen ill at the time of her A/Ls, did any of these so-called kith and kin come to visit or help out? No. Of course not. Who would come to the aid of a poor family, when there was no chance of repayment? Even though Vani had sent out her younger brother with a message asking some of them to help a little but of course they sent out their puny excuses. As her father was out of town then, Vani had had to cook, clean the house, look after her mother

and brother and if she had some time left, only then could she see to her studies. Of course, she failed the exam.

"Vani! Vani! Where are you, child? I told you to put the tablecloth but it is not here. In this house, I am the one who has to do everything!"

Hurriedly, Vani shut the cupboard door and went out with the cloth. Her mother was re-arranging the furniture, placing the four dining chairs besides the two armchairs in the hall. Seeing her, she began, "What?! All this time and you come out with the cloth only now! I thought you were dressing up. Give me the cloth now and go and get dressed immediately!" She continued muttering, "What can I do with this child? Always day-dreaming!"

Taking a towel from her room, Vani rushed to the well. She drew a bucket of water and washed her face and hands quickly, with the cold water, and went back indoors to change. Her friend Malathy was the first to arrive as she finished dressing.

"Happy birthday, Vani!" Placing a gift in her hands, she said, "Well, you know, you look really pretty now. I always told you sarees suit you and especially this colour, blue. What are you going to do with

your hair? I think a French plait would be the perfect finishing touch. Shall I plait it for you?

Without waiting for an answer, she started combing Vani's hair. That was Malathy!

Always following through her thoughts regardless of others' opinions. Though it was kindly meant. Malathy indeed was a cheerful spirit, always bustling about with a smile, chatting and making fresh acquaintances wherever she went. Catching her eye in the long mirror in front of her, Malathy asked, "Doesn't it look nice?" Vani smiled back, "Yes, indeed."

"Vani, here's a packet of marshmallows for you," called out her father returning from the pension office, "Where's Shenthan? Isn't he home yet?"

"Not yet, *Appa*, I thought he was going to bring the marshmallows."

"I was at the shop and saw this packet. Since you like it so much, I bought you one."

Sitting down on an armchair, fanning himself with a paper, he continued, "Bring me some water, will you, *mahal*? This town dust really makes one thirsty."

"Shall I make you some lime juice, *Appa*?"

"No, just get me a *sembu* of water."

She went into the kitchen to get the water.

"Was that Shenthan?" her mother asked, glancing up from her frying, her face red from the heat of the stove.

"*Appa*", she replied pouring out some cool water into a *sembu* from the clay pot.

"Can I help you with something, Aunty?" asked Malathy entering the kitchen.

"Yes, *Pillai*, take out some plates and trays from that cupboard on your right and arrange whatever is ready on them and put them on the dining table? And, Vani, ask *Appa* if he managed to get the letter from the *Grama Sevaka*."

"Here's the water", handing her father the *sembu* and a tumbler.

"*Pillai*, here's your letter of recommendation for your teaching application", her father said as he took the silver tumbler from her,

"The GS was very happy to recommend you, having known you since childhood."

There was a sound of the gate opening. Vani looked to see who was coming. "It's Ganesh *mama* and *mami*," she told her father.

Her father got up and welcomed the visitors, "Come in, come in. You can come in with the shoes on", as they removed their sandals outside the door.

"How is our birthday girl? Where's Shenthan?" they asked as they sat down.

"Vani, call your mother."

"*Amma*, Ganesh *mama* has come," she announced, going into the kitchen.

"Just switch off the stove, Vani, I think we have made enough for now. And the two of you come and sit down," instructed her mother wiping her hands on the dishcloth.
"How are you, *Anna*?" her mother continued going out into the hall.

"How is everyone?" a loud voice demanded at the entrance.

"Nanda *Akka*, come in, come in. Please sit here," her mother welcomed.

"And, how is my brother? He doesn't have to come and look in on his sister these days. After all, I am only a cousin," continued Nanda coming in.

"I am getting too old to move about a lot these days, Nanda," replied Vani's father.

"Well, what will you all drink? Tea, coffee or some lime juice?" Vani's mother asked. "Vani, serve some cake."

For the next hour, Vani's mother was busy fluttering about the guests and relatives turning up, attending to their food and drink, urging them to try out one more savoury or sweet short-eat.

Finally, most of the guests left and there was only Nanda and her husband remaining.

Nanda continued, "Mahes, I found a suitable proposal for Vani."

"Vani, fry some more patties. This tray is almost empty," her mother immediately instructed Vani.

"She is not a child anymore, Mahes. She can hear whatever is said," protested the Aunt.

"Yes, Nanda, but we have brought up our children differently. She's not used to talking grown-up conversation," replied her father.

Vani went into the kitchen with the tray, followed by Malathy.

"A proposal! How exciting!" enthused Malathy.

"Anyway, this boy is in Germany. PR holder," continued her Aunt, munching on a piece of cake.

"What about the family?" asked her father.

"What about it? I am the one who has brought this proposal. Would I propose someone outside our caste?" her Aunt demanded indignantly.

"No, of course, Nanda *Akka*. Father is always like that. Don't mind him!" her mother hastily placated her Aunt.

"For your information, I gave your daughter's horoscope to my trusted marriage broker whom you know conducted my own daughter's wedding and he was the one who suggested this proposal.

And, it turns out that I know this family. I have even seen this boy when he was around eight. A well-mannered and handsome boy."

Malathy burst out giggling, "Eight years old!" Vani glared back.

"That's really great, Nanda *Akka*. But, Germany is so far away, is that ok?"

"What ok? Nonsense. What is far and near in today's world? You can get on a plane and you reach your destination within a day, less time and hassle than even to go to Colombo from here."

"I know but Vani is our only girl and how will she live so far away from us?"

"Vani is a girl after all and one day or another going to move into her husband's house. She can't keep holding onto you forever. After all, she needs someone after you all leave this life. And, she isn't a girl anymore. In a couple of years, finding a husband will be impossible."

Vani gripped the tray she had refilled with patties and walked back into the hall.

"Aunty, I don't plan to get married for now."

"Vani!" her parents admonished.

"What do you plan on doing then?" asked her Aunt sarcastically. Turning to her husband, she continued, "Girls these days have all sorts of fancy notions."

"I'm at the Fine Arts College training in art and home science and Uncle, I plan on becoming a teacher after that."

"Teacher indeed!" her Aunt snorted, "It doesn't pay! Your father is retired and your entire family is living miserably on his pension. What future does your brother have? I suggest something better. Go to the west and not only will you live a rich life but you will be able to support your family."

"After all teaching is universal. You can teach anywhere in the world," her uncle added mildly.
Silently, Vani started collecting the empty cups and plates lying around.

"Nanda, what is this boy's education and profession?" asked her father.

"He finished school here and left for England but ended up in Germany. Has done some technical courses there and is working

as a technician somewhere." She said while taking a piece from the plate her mother extended to her.

"No, Mahes, I am full. I think I have been eating since I arrived," her uncle said, refusing the offer of a patty.

"A technician?"

"My! How high and mighty have we become all of a sudden! What is your daughter's qualification? Studying to paint and sew! And, what was your profession? A government clerk!" burst out Nanda in anger.

"Nanda *Akka*," pleaded her mother.

"After all, even if you got a proposal for an engineer or a doctor, can you afford the dowry? Ten or twenty lakhs! This family does not even want dowry. They have enough money as it is. All they want is a pretty and pleasant bride from a good family."

"The boy earns a lot and he has his own house and car," added her husband.

Unable to remain in the hall any longer, Vani walked back into the kitchen with the cups and plates.

"I have to go now, Vani," said Malathy getting down from her perch on the table. " It's getting late and *Amma* will begin to worry if I am not at home soon."

"Ok, Malathy, thank you for coming and for your present."

"I hope you like the gift. I selected it with special care for you."

"I can hardly wait to open your gift."

"And, I can hardly wait to hear more about your wedding."

"Then you will have to wait a long time because there isn't going to be any wedding anytime now and definitely not to that man in Germany or wherever."

"We'll see soon enough. You are coming to the Nallur *koyil* with me next weekend, aren't you?"

Vani nodded and Malathy left, taking her leave of the elders in the hall. Alone in the kitchen, Vani began washing the plates and cups vigorously, her brows knitted in a frown.
"I have his photo somewhere here, standing in front of his car," said Nanda digging into her bag for the photo. "Ah, here it is and the boy's horoscope. Take a look."

"He is bald."

"How picky you folks are! These days every one of our boys who live in the west go bald young. Something to do with the water there."

"Nanda, the sun is beginning to set. We better get going," her husband interjected.

"Yes, look at the time. Hardly noticed the time, trying to make you see some sense. All I can say is that you would be fools if you let this proposal slip by. Let me know as soon as possible, so that we can proceed. The family is in a hurry to hold their son's wedding and there are many girls waiting to get their hands on a good match."

"Where is Shenthan?," asked her uncle, as they left.

"Yes. Where is that boy? Not good for young boys to be out so late. Vani, why don't you go up to his tuition center and see what is keeping him? Come back quickly" Her father entreated her.

"Yes, father." Vani got her bicycle from where it was parked backdoors, and rode out into the street.

Why did these relatives have to interfere always? Why couldn't her parents be firm, instead of always giving way to these busybodies? Why can't they just let me be? She thought furiously, as she pedaled towards her brother's tuition center. This time, I'll not give way, she firmly resolved as she turned into the open gateway of the center. The usual cycle-packed front was almost empty. That meant the classes were over. Where was that brother of hers? Very much unlike him to be irresponsible.

Leaving her cycle at the front, she walked towards the tiny office at the center of the small building. The proprietor was locking the door, ready to leave for the day.

"Excuse me, when did the Year XII math tuition class finish?"

"All the classes finish around three as it is a weekend. Why?"

"Three? Shenthan hasn't come home yet."

"You know boys, he might be over at the grounds, playing cricket with the others. Don't you worry now, Vani," he said reassuringly, walking towards his bicycle.

I should not panic. I should be calm. She thought as she watched him cycle out of the gate. What should I do now? Bala! Yes, I

should go and ask him. He lives close by. Shenthan might be with him. Anyway, he will surely know where Shenthan is. There must be a logical, harmless reason, she thought as she parked her cycle against the wall decorated with bougainvillea. Opening the latch, she walked up the short gravel path decorated with bright and varied colors of hibiscus.

"Aunty?" she called out.

Bala's mother came out of the house. "Yes, Vani. What are you doing here so late? Is there anything wrong?"

"Is Bala here?"

"Yes. Why?" She turned back towards the house and shouted "Bala."

"Was Shenthan here this afternoon?"

"No, why? Isn't he home yet? Bala! Come here at once!"

"You don't have to keep shouting all the while,"grumbled Bala as he came ambling along. "Oh, hello, Vani *Akka*, happy birthday."
"Bala, where is Shenthan?" she hurriedly asked him.

"Why, isn't he home yet? But he should have done shopping by now!"

"Shopping for marshmallows?" Vani asked with surprise.

"No. To get a gift. He planned to surprise you. Surely, he must have come home by now. All the shops close by five."

"That boy," Vani muttered, "He knows better than to go to that part of town late in the afternoon on a weekend.

"He might have got home while you were out searching."

"Yes. Maybe. I think I will go home."

"Yes, child. Go home. It's getting dark. Shall I send Bala to accompany you home?"

"No, Aunty. I can go alone. See you."

With a heavy heart, she got on her cycle and rode back home through the deserted roads in the darkening evening. She turned into her street. There her father awaited her, his eyes questioning. She looked back.

"He went into the main town, on that part."

"But why?," he exploded.

"Bala says he wanted to get me a gift." Her voice shook.

"A gift? A gift! Who needs a gift? Doesn't that boy know better? Now, we have all lost our peace of mind. That's his gift all right."

"*Appa*, please." Vani said, tears pricking her eyes.

Their mother had lighted the lamps and was standing in front of the doorway, with a worried look on her face.

"Your precious son had gone past the road blocks on a Sunday afternoon, alone, to buy a gift."

"Oh, my God, the Army camps," her mother gasped.

"Yes, the army camps, now what do we do?" her father moaned disconsolately. "Shall I go to the camp now?"

"Not in this dark", her mother replied, "We can't lose you as well in one day."

"The poor boy. What will they do to him? He should never have gone anywhere alone."

Her father went on, "What do we do now?"

"Let's go first thing in the morning, both of us and go to that camp." Her mother decided.

No one slept that night. The longest night they had ever faced together, waiting for the morning, impatiently, yet fearing its arrival. Each immersed in their thoughts, breaking the silence now and then with a moan.

Vani looked at the tired and weary faces of her parents as they set out in the morning for the camp. She prayed fervently that everything would be alright soon and that they would return with her brother soon.

Unable to sit down she paced about in the hall, imagining the scene there: her parents walking into the camp, talking to the Commander in charge, asking for their son. What would they do? Simply hand over Shenthan? She felt she was going mad, running things over and over in her head. She decided to wash the dishes that had been left untouched the previous evening and cook something for her parents and brother. They would certainly be hungry when they

returned. Putting some rice to boil, she cut some vegetables, all the while keeping an ear open for the sound of the gate opening and murmuring a couple of line from the prayer *Kantha Sashti Kavasam.*

Kakka, Kakka, Kanaka Vel Kakka
Nokka, Nokka, Nodiyinil Nokka

Noon came and went and still there was no sign of her family. God, what was happening there? She felt so useless standing there in her house, unable to do anything useful while her home was in turmoil. If it hadn't been for me, *Thambi* would never have gone there.

Why did my birthday ever have to come? Just yesterday morning, he had laughingly wished her a happy birthday and now where was he? What was he doing? What was the army doing to him? God, please protect him. Let no harm come to him. She finished her cooking and resumed her pacing as the afternoon wore on. Panic gripped her heart. Late in the evening, she heard the creak of the gate. She got up from the floor and rushed to the front door, full of hope hurriedly muttering a prayer. The haggard faces of her parents met her. She gripped the doorframe, feeling faint.

"They say they don't know anything. They say they never arrested any boy yesterday."

Her mother broke down crying.

Her father walked in, dragging his feet, defeat in his eyes. She tried desperately to compose herself and made some tea for her parents.

"No, *mahal*, how can I drink anything while he is in there?"

"But you must have the strength to continue fighting for his release. Please have a little to drink and I will get you some rice."

She put a little rice on two plates and brought it to her parents, coercing them to have some food.

Her mother asked if she had had anything to eat. She nodded, lying. After a mouthful, her father put away the plate choking. Her mother did not even touch her plate. Some of the neighbours showed up, having heard of Shenthan's disappearance.

"Can't we ask the Government agent to interfere?" someone asked. "We waited the whole day outside the camp seeking admittance, pleading them to let us see our son and they denied that they ever arrested him. What can the GA do?"

"It might help to apply some political pressure."

"But one needs influence. Who do we know? We are just nobodies. No one would lift a finger to help us." Her father wearily declared. Her mother burst into fresh tears.

"Can't we ask the *Grama Sevaka* to help? And the school? If we can get more people questioning, we could provoke them to releasing Shenthan," suggested Vani.

"Yes. My cousin works at the local newspaper. I could ask him to print this case", another offered generously, "we must take immediate action."

"How about the Tamil politicians? They could use their limited influence", someone else suggested.

"Yes. We could ask the school to send in a petition to some of the MPs."

Fresh hope sprung in everyone's hearts and they waited another long night, impatiently waiting for the dawn. Shenthan's school promised full support in their effort to have him released. A petition for release was signed by the entire school and sent to the Army headquarters, national newspapers and Tamil MPs. The next couple

of weeks, her parents tirelessly visited all the camps around town, asking for news of their son. Vani's mother devoutly went to the temple, praying for her son's release.

Finally, one day, their prayers and efforts were answered as one of the camps admitted to having held Shenthan in custody. They didn't know he was a schoolboy. He had been mistaken for a Tiger. They put forth many excuses and released a bruised Shenthan.

Everyone was only too happy to get back the missing son that they did not question these fake explanations. They only knew too well the futility of it.

Back at home, Vani and her parents revolved around Shenthan, crying and laughing, attending to his needs, hardly able to believe their own eyes that he was back amongst them, whilst he sat silently.

"He's undergone some heavy treatment and is still in shock," Vani's father reassured her mother, "It will take him some time to recover. Let him be."

They left him alone for a couple of weeks, allowing his external wounds to heal and hoping that his internal bruises would mend as well. A month passed and Vani received her letter of appointment from the girl's school nearby. Shenthan still did not seem to emerge

from his blues. He seemed to be all alone; living inside his head, not responding to others around him, a vacant stare fixed on his face. Bala and a few of his friends invited him out for a few games and tried persuading him to return to school but he did not seem to want to go out into the world anymore.

Nanda visited them one day and brought up Vani's marriage once again.

"Nanda, we have just been through hell. I don't think we can think of marriage right now, with Shenthan's condition as it is."

"I think one should think of marriage because of Shenthan's condition." Her aunt firmly declared.

"What do you mean?"

"This place is not suitable for the young. If one gets the opportunity to move out of this place and better, out of the country, one should make use of it. And, Vani has got this wonderful opportunity for a better future. Not only for her but also for Shenthan. Look at him now. He's too frightened to even go out. How long do you think he can exist like this? Going abroad would help him at least. Vani can sponsor him as soon as she is settled there in Germany and eventually, the two of you as well. Think about it."

"Well, there's certainly no harm in meeting the boy's parents. After all, Vani has to be married sometime or other", her mother replied.

Nanda continued, "I showed the boy's parents a photo of Vani and they would like to see her in person this coming Saturday. I decided we should meet at the Nallur *koyil* and introduce each other. What do you say? And, dress her up in a nice Benares silk saree or a Kanchipuram and put some make up on. She seems to have worn down a lot since Shenthan's arrest and people living abroad seem to expect make up these days."

Vani had been listening quietly in the corner. Her father looked at her, "Is this proposal alright with you?" he asked.

"What nonsense! Of course, it is alright with her." Vani's mother replied. "She knows that whatever we do is for the best."

So that Saturday, Vani was dolled up in a soft silk saree and some light jewellery, her hair dressed up and make-up applied for the first time in her life. She submitted unresistingly and was led to the temple as a lamb to a butcher.

The morning *pusai* was in full swing as they entered the temple, leaving their slippers outside. Vani's mother decided to make a special *archchanai* in Vani's name for the success of the proposal. After

the *Aiyyar* gave them the *prasadam*, they went around the temple once, praying and returned to the front, where Nanda awaited them with the bridegroom's family.

"Well, this is our Vani." She was introduced.

"You look thinner and darker than in your photo," commented the prospective mother-in-law.

"Our son is very fair and handsome, you see," added the prospective father-in-law. "We have not seen him since he left as a boy after his O/L. It's over ten years now. How he managed all these years, without anyone to look after him, I don't know. That is why I want to send him a wife, someone to attend to him." The proud mother enthused, "And, he's such a good boy. These days, kids living abroad get all these western ideas of choosing their own partner but our son is so true to his culture. He told me, '*Amma*, I don't care who you choose for my wife. It's perfectly up to you. All I ask is that she be pretty and have long, beautiful hair.' Your hair doesn't seem to be that long and it seems to have thinned." She finished, turning a critical eye on Vani's hair.

Vani tried her best to control herself.

The woman continued, "We don't expect much dowry. These days, people make it a business. A son abroad and they ask for millions from the girl's family. We don't need the money as our son, dutiful that he is sent us enough for all his sisters to get married comfortably. But, we do need a bride who is very beautiful. We'll send you our decision through Nanda," they concluded as they left.

Vani and her mother returned home, feeling utterly humiliated. That night, after their dinner as their parents sat silently, in their own private reveries and worries, Shenthan approached her quietly and said, "Vani *akka*, please don't worry. Those people are fools not to realize your worth. I'll find you a husband who is better matched for you than those petty folks." Her parents looked up with tears in their eyes.

Vani turned to them and said, "*Amma*, *Appa*, please listen to me. I don't need a marriage now, nor to be subjected to all these humiliations, like a cattle in a market. I have just got my teaching job and sooner or later, after I have finished my training period, I could even ask for a transfer to Colombo, where *Thambi* could do some further studies. I can take care of our family. So, please don't bring up the subject of my marriage again."

4

Safe in the city.

The evening slowly settled down to night but the atmosphere still wore its coat of heat and dryness and Vasantha knew it was going to be another oppressive night. There was hardly a breath of fresh air, not a drop of rain for days to assuage the thirst of Mother Earth. With the dust of the city settling heavily everywhere, it was truly one of the worst heat spells Colombo had experienced.

Vasantha looked around her little house, dark and dingy, without a proper roof and only a tin sheet on top of the thin walls to serve as protection from the sun and the rain. Though in reality, she thought wryly, it brought all the heat of Colombo right into the house. It was worse when it rained and she had had to place basins and bowls under leaky and possibly leaky areas of the roof, which were almost everywhere in order to get some sleep without being drenched. More so since the floors became damp at the first sight of rain. So, be it sunny or rainy, it was tough living in that house of hers. What

else could one do in a big city like Colombo? One certainly had to make ends meet. With rent prices rising steeply year by year, it was all one could do to pay the rent and manage to afford basic sustenance.

Her little house, in the innards of Ratmalana, was among the slums of that area. Costing Rs. 2000 each month, it had a small hall and bedroom, a tiny kitchen and bathroom.

Now, the land-owner was thinking of increasing the rent to Rs. 2500 for the coming year. These people, she thought angrily, did not have second thoughts about bleeding a person dry. After all, Vasantha thought contemptuously, what was this little house compared with their spacious home back in Jaffna? Well, THAT was a true home, large, spacious and well-built with heavy, solid wooden doors and the furniture of the best wood. They had had a spacious land surrounding it where they even had a well-tended vegetable patch, which supplied their home needs. There was certainly no shortage of water, for a large well catered to their needs. She thought wistfully of her mother's jealously guarded pride and envy of her neighbors - her beautiful rose bushes. She smiled to herself. They had also owned paddy fields close by, which supplied their daily rice; the surplus bringing them an income. She thought lovingly of the lush, green fields and the wind blowing in

her face as she walked along the narrow path between them. That was life – well-lived. Even the school she taught at had been close by. They had been very comfortable. Her salary together with her father's pension had been more than enough for her parents, herself and her little brother – a happy family of four. They had been happy with their home – their beautiful, ancient house which had been theirs for generations.

Vasantha had truly loved every inch of that grand old house – the steady pillars that supported it, the courtyard in the middle with the rooms and the halls opening onto it and a doorway leading to another smaller courtyard surrounded by the kitchen and store-room. One could always look out, up into the night sky from within and enjoy the beauty of the palatial sky above, from the comfort of an easy chair. Where did one get such comfort these days? Vasantha was truly proud of their home and their land – their precious land was theirs and theirs alone.

The war had always been around them and among them. It slowly turned their field to neglected wastelands of weed; the well-tended vegetable patch was upturned to give way to a safety bunker. Times became hard, food sources perished and they became dependent on the village store for their needs. Prices escalated and they were barely able to manage. School was more often closed than not and

the salary was mostly delayed in arriving. So was her father's pension. Her little brother was growing up fast, studying amidst poverty and soon was out of school. With the increasingly alarming reports of missing boys and girls, their parents panicked and decided to send them to the relative safety of the city.

Vasantha had been reluctant at first to leave home. She felt it would be better to live and die, if need be, in their own home rather than go to a strange city, and face the ills of that new world, where she did not know even the language. Considering her brother's future, she was finally persuaded. He did need a sound higher education and a good job. So they both set off down south. That was how Vasantha ended up in that tiny house amongst the shanties and was enlisted as a displaced teacher in a nearby Tamil school.

Vasantha broke from her reverie and dismally looked around the house. It was now quite dark. She got up wearily and set about closing the windows in a vain effort to ward off mosquitoes that were swarming the house. She switched on the dim bulb in the hall and looked at the small table-clock. It was almost seven. She shook her head angrily. Where was that brother of hers? He should know better than to wander the streets of Colombo, being a Tamil! He had set out after breakfast and not returned yet, even for lunch, having taken hundred rupees. That had become his routine; he had

turned into a good-for-nothing loafer and fallen into the company of the neighborhood 'unemployed set', who took to the streets. Whenever she had sounded him on the subject, he would get annoyed and walk off in a huff or else laugh at her saying she had a phobia of Colombo. He would arrogantly declare he had no problem whatsoever, being able to speak Sinhala fluently, his gang consisting mostly of Sinhala friends.

Her brow darkened and she frowned into the darkness. Was it a mistake they had made, coming down here in the first place? Her brother had become quite unmanageable. Instead of finding a small job and attending one of those computer centers to learn something useful, he would pester her to find a way to send him abroad. Most of his friends had either gone abroad, entered university or were working. He insisted that going abroad was the only life for any Tamil. He could then earn lots of money, send home some of it; besides he could have a good university education, he would argue. How was she ever to raise that much money, 20 lakhs or so, for some agency, with her meagre salary? He slowly became disillusioned and took to roaming the streets with his unruly friends. Sometimes, he would demand her hard-earned savings to buy his flashy clothes.

She did not mind giving her brother money but she thought with a pang, did he ever once think of getting his sister something, anything?

A sister who went to teach in the same few, well-worn, threadbare sarees and who never thought of buying herself a new one. A sister who lived for him and him alone, who had left her hopes and dreams long behind in time. She chided herself. He would certainly think of her if he earned some money.

In a way, she felt pity for him. What else could he do? Any work he applied for was refused him on the grounds that he was either not fluent in English, had not enough qualifications or had no work experience. To gain any professional qualification, one did require money. They did not have any rich relations to fund his studies either. Maybe what he said was true – a Tamil did not have a future in Sri Lanka. She worried that her brother was going to ruin before her eyes. She had no-one to consult and no-one would be bothered about her affairs. She longed for the comfort of her parents but they were far away in troubled Jaffna, old and frail, barely making ends meet. Would she be able to see them ever again? The letters between them were few and far between. How could she ever write to them of her growing problem when their only relief was in their thought that their children were safe?

If only he found a job, he would certainly settle down and grow up. The bottom line was that he was a Tamil and therefore people were afraid to give him a job. How could they guarantee that he

was an innocent in today's world with all the incidents and terror mounting in Colombo?!

Poor boy! She wished she could have a better world to show him, for him to live in but their plight seem to have been writ beforehand, their fate determined; as if they had been born to a curse and left to beg.

Vasantha shook herself out of her gloom and decided to get dinner ready instead of fretting. Her brother would be famished when he came home and would be very disagreeable indeed if he did not find his food on the table.

She went into the tiny, dark kitchen and looked about, deciding on what to make for dinner. There was a quarter of a packet of soya meat, some *parippu*, a potato and some onions. That could make tomorrow's lunch, she thought. She must not forget to stop at the market on her way home from school. Vasantha finally decided on *pittu* and *vendhaya kulambu*. She took a coconut, cracked it open and filled one half with water to prevent it from going bad. She sat down and scraped the other half slowly, the snowy, white flakes falling from the blades of the scraper. She thought about her mother and suddenly longed to be back home in their kitchen – she scraping the coconut for the *sambol* and her mother making *thosai*; chatting about everything that happened that day in school, home

and neighborhood while her father sat dozing over his book in the hall; her brother studying by a small kerosene lamp, his ears half-cocked and listening to their chatter until severely reprimanded by their father. She chuckled. Then they would all eat together and later on in the night, listen to the BBC. This would be followed by a discourse on the path the country was taking till they dropped off to sleep. More often than not, this peaceful routine was sure to be interrupted by the noise of a shell. This had always terrorized her. They would all wait in the darkness as the sounds approached nearer and nearer till their father decided it was time for them to go into their bunker.

Each time she went down that bunker was a nerve-wrecking experience, squirming down that hole into that dark, narrow underground shelter which felt like being buried alive; that suffocating feeling within the narrow confines of the earth with barely enough space to stretch and waiting, not knowing whether the next breath would be the last or not.

Once, the shrill sharp whistle-like noise had sounded when she was on the way to school. The people on the road rushed into the nearest houses. She also rushed into one, along with a couple of school children. They all ducked under any available hiding place – under beds, tables and what not. She lay down under the table, trembling, trying to shut out the noise with her hands pressed against

her ears. After some time, the shelling subsided and they all breathed a sigh of relief, having lived through one more attack. In a short while, everyone decided to go their way and she and the children resumed their walk to school but apparently the helis had not finished with them, for they returned within a couple of minutes and resumed the shelling. Vasantha and the children were caught in the middle of a path where there was only a ruined house and overgrown trees for shelter. They did not have time to run to the next nearest house. So they rushed to the safety of the ruined walls and wedged themselves between the trees and the walls in the darkest corner, hoping they would not be seen on the outside. They waited, praying, as the noise increased and it was pure torture to listen to that death knell. Suddenly, there was an ear-shattering noise and something whizzed past Vasantha. They were stunned and only realized after a few moments that the house opposite had been bombed. They trembled and waited apprehensively, the next would be their hiding place but the heli seemed satisfied and flew off. Vasantha collected herself and tried to calm her nerves.

One of the children shrieked. She quickly turned to look at them. The child beside her moved and there was blood on the wall where she had been leaning, the blood flowing from her shoulder. The child did not know her arm had been ripped off by shrapnel; she had been stunned by the incisive cut. The pain would follow soon. Vasantha shuddered at the recollection of the child, the bewildered

child with the blood flowing down her shoulder, knowing not her predicament.

A shiver ran down her spine and she looked around her dismal surroundings. She often did this. Vasantha had never got used to the house, nor its surroundings. Every time she broke from her reveries, she felt completely alienated in her surroundings and could never place herself, like a person awakened from a deep sleep.

She felt uneasy today. Her brother had always laughed at her premonitions and scolded her for giving vent to her imagination and paranoia and causing herself undue misery.

Vasantha decided to finish cooking dinner and got up with the plate of scraped coconut, with determination. She took a bowl and measured out some red, rice flour, added a little hot water from the flask and a pinch of salt. Then she mixed it till the mixture became fine and then folded in the scraped coconut. She lit the little kerosene stove and on it placed her steamer, which she had improvised using a saucepan half-filled with water with a strainer above. She filled the strainer with the *pittu* mixture and closed it with the saucepan lid. Then, she got the onions for the curry and was proceeding to clean them when she heard an authoritative knock on the door.

She got up hesitantly. It was not her brother's knock. Fear gripped her heart. The neighborhood was filled with drunkards and she was a lone woman in the house. The knocking persisted and a voice boomed in Sinhala asking her to open the door! She moved towards the hall with misgiving. Her foot caught in the wooden scraper and she tripped and fell. She heard more voices and became frightened as she realized there were lots of people around the house. What was this? Was it a routine police check or some looting gang? The door burst open and army officers rushed into the house. She was dragged out of the house while others searched the house, throwing things about.

Vasantha was terrified. She opened her mouth to say in the few Sinhala words she knew, "*Mama* school teacher. *Mata* police report *thienava*," but she was not heard. They thrust her into the truck and drove off into the dark night.

The following morning, an article appeared in the front page of the newspapers: "A 25 year-old man was arrested yesterday on suspicion with regard to the recent bombing incident. This suspect is said to have been seen on the site several times during the past few weeks and had been reported to the police by witnesses. The sister, a teacher, also believed to be an accomplice, was arrested yesterday night."

A week after, at Vasantha's school, the news had spread like wild fire and a few senior teachers had assembled in the principal's room to discuss the measures to be taken. They were all indignant about the arrest. Everyone knew the quiet and well-brought up girl and her struggle raising her brother. Most of them were for taking up the case and going on a strike to bail out Vasantha. One teacher, who had been quiet throughout suddenly spoke up, "Who can guarantee that Vasantha's brother was not involved in the bombing incident? Times as they are now, we could all be arrested as well on suspicion of being in league with them! It is better for a Tamil to move as quietly and fast away from another Tamil than get involved." Fear spread around the faces of those gathered. As it was, the army had been to the school twice and questioned all the teachers. Well, maybe, it was better to let things settle on their own. After all, they had their own families and children to look after, without getting involved. They silently turned and left with bowed heads.

In a village, among the barren fields, in a house half-destroyed by shells, an old couple sat huddled in a corner, eating their only meal of the day, thinking about their two children safe in the big city.

5

The mango tree

"Look at all those mangoes… so many of them and yet we can't have even one!" exclaimed Nirosha.

"If we were to aim and throw stones, we'll be able to hit one," said Dharshini.

"Yeah and have them fall to the other side of the wall!" snorted Divya.

The three were gathered in their favorite place in school " the tiny balcony outside their classroom on the first floor. As the others in class preferred the more popular canteen and corridors to hang out during breaks, this quiet and peaceful alcove under the shades of the mango tree was their exclusive hideaway.

Nirosha persisted, "It is really most unfair. All those beautiful, luscious green mangoes, ripening and falling onto the earth without anyone

noticing... At least the next door people should collect them and give them to people who might put them to use."

"Well, you can't have them so why care about whether others are taking advantage or not?" questioned Divya impatiently.

"Come on, don't be such a spoilsport, why don't we make an attempt to get at least one mango?" pleaded Dharshini. "We could even climb over this balcony railing onto those concrete supporters reaching up to the compound wall and climb onto the tree," she continued excitedly.

"Who's going to be the acrobat?" interjected Nirosha laughing, "Who's going to balance on those beams and walk across to the tree let alone climb it?"

"That is a problem," conceded Dharshini, "If only we could get across the beam, then of course there would be no problem in climbing the tree," she added, "I have had enough experience in climbing the trees in my grandma's place."

"As if you would climb a tree in front of the whole school!" Divya exclaimed.

"Well, why can't I? Who's to see us? We are after all in our secluded balcony." asked Dharshini.

"Common sense, my dear Dharsh!" said Divya, "How about the 2nd and 3rd floor classrooms overlooking this tree?"

"Ok, ok, I give up. No mangoes for us," sighed Dharshini.

"Well, if you really wanted them so badly, the wisest move would be to ask the next door people to give us one or two," said Divya.

Dharshini shook her head, "We don't even know those people and who's to tell what sort of people they are ... why go into unnecessary trouble?"

Nirosha said, "That house seems so empty and withdrawn, as if there was no one living in it."

"Yeah, "Dharshini nodded, "I never saw anybody walk into or out of that house since the day I came to this school."

"This is their backyard most likely," said Divya.

"Well, people do go into their backyards, especially when they have lots of fruit trees in it," argued Nirosha.

"Yes and have you noticed there has never been anyone calling or shouting out to anyone ... not even a child's voice. Every house is bound to have a child in it" said Dharshini.

"And what about those houses filled with grownup people, unmarried, old or childless?" queried Divya, with a twinkle in her eyes.

Dharshini shrugged. "All I say is that house looks strange, I can feel it in my bones."

"Yes the house gives me the creeps, too," agreed Nirosha. "Maybe it's haunted."

"Oh, come on, get real! Don't tell me you guys believe in ghosts, do you?", asked Divya still laughing.

The others did not respond to her mirth and Divya realized that they were quite serious after all. She protested "But there is no such thing as ghosts!"

"Why not?" asked Nirosha petulantly, "If there is life and there is a soul attached to the living, what happens to the soul after the life is gone?"

"Well, I believe there is only one life. This life. I don't really believe in all this hype about life after death, of re-incarnation or even of hell and heaven ... There's no such thing. A person lives, he dies. That is all there is to his life," Divya expounded.

"So, how do you explain the existence of a human life?" demanded Nirosha.

"That is all scientific. The process of evolution in time, nothing to do with God or anyone else for that matter," answered Divya.

"Then, how came the first cell to exist?", Nirosha asked patiently.

Divya threw up her arms "I'm no scientist, Nirshoa, just an ordinary student and all I say is that the little I read about the scientific evolution seems to make more sense to me than all the religious views!"

Nirosha shrugged and continued, I guess everyone is entitled to their own views. It is a democratic country, after all. As for me, I believe in ghosts and I've had experience with that!"

"And, what were your out-of-the-world experiences?" asked Divya sarcastically.

"Well, I've had many but if you really want to know," said Nirosha, annoyed a little at Divya's sarcasm, "Once, I had this experience. Around four of five years ago, my aunt had an accident and died on the spot. The accident had happened while she was on her way to our house for her annual visit. Well, just one week after her death, this incident occurred in our house. There was some construction work going on in the house behind ours and the workers had encamped on the site itself. What with reports of theft in the news and all, father thought it best to be on alert, especially since the back door was not very well-built. It had a simple door lock and could be broken easily. That room was used for storing odds and ends so father had the door barricaded each night with heavy things and always placed a tumbler on top so that if anyone did try to force their way from outside, we'd be awoken instantly. My room was the room closest to the store-room. And that particular night, after father barricaded the door as usual, we all went to bed. Then suddenly, in the middle of the night, I heard a loud crash. My first impulse was to scream "Amma! Appa!" my first thought was "The thieves have broken into the house". My parents came rushing to my room. I was too scared to move so I just sat on my bed, in fear. They switched on the light and they discovered me sitting on the bed, wide-eyed and a picture of Goddess Saraswathie beside my bed on the floor..."

Divya burst out laughing, "So it was the picture that had crashed and not the door!"

"No", said Nirosha, "it was not the door but the weird thing was that the picture was lying on the floor. It had never ever fallen before, even once."

"Oh, come now, Nirosha," said Divya, "It could have been the wind or even a rat or something else which knocked off the picture!"

"You should know the dimensions and placements of the objects in my room before you make a judgment!" said Nirosha impatiently.

"Ok, Ok, let's have all the dimensions," said Divya.

"Well," continued Nirosha, "In my room, there is my bed in the middle and my cupboard at its head towards the wall, a good distance away ... nearly 2-3 arm lengths away"

"Arm lengths!" mouthed Divya at Dharshini but Dharshini was rapt in attention. Nirosha continued, ignoring Divya, "And on top of the cupboard, there are framed pictures of Lord Vishnu and another of Goddess Saraswathie to one side and a mirror to the other. Now, this picture was towards the right of the cupboard and, should it fall, it should have fallen directly down and onto the right side of my

bed but it had fallen, actually leaped through the air, covered a good distance and fallen to the left side of my bed right just beside where I was sleeping".

"It could have been the inclination at falling that allowed it to fall through the distance, like in a javelin throw, you can cover more distance at an angle poised around 45," laughed Divya.

"Granted," said Nirosha triumphantly, "like a javelin through the air... then who was it that threw it? A javelin does not cover the distance of its own accord!"

"Well...," hesitated Divya, "Well ... it could have been a rat which triggered the push."

"It couldn't have been" insisted Nirosha "because if a rat pushed the picture down, then the numerous bottles and tins in front of the picture should have fallen as well. Don't say the bottles were heavy and inert and therefore resisted the fall because they weren't. They were just powder tins, scent bottles and creams, all light weight and half-empty!"

"Ouch," said Divya, "That sure does give us something to think about... But, given the incident was unusual, how came you to relate the incident to supernatural forces and especially your aunt?"

"As I said earlier, my aunt had died the week before and we didn't immediately connect her death with the incident. We just laughed and restored the picture and went back to bed. It was one o'clock. After that incident, we felt a strange sort of atmosphere in the house – a feeling of heaviness in the air, something tense and hot, and that feeling continued throughout the next day. We weren't able to laugh freely. It was as if there was some pressure in the house and on us. And the next night, there was a loud bang again. My parents rushed to my room again and switched on the light. This time there was nothing fallen in my room. Father checked the store-room and it was precisely the same way he had left it. Mother went and switched on the kitchen light so that if there were anyone prowling about, they'd know we were all awake. And there was a large, heavy saucepan near the doorway, a good distance away from where it had been on top of the cupboard. It too seemed to have been flung out. There was a grilled window in the kitchen opening onto the back where we had a clothes line and that line was jerking with a force, rapidly and abnormally, there was no wind outside at least not enough to produce that motion and that jerking was truly abnormal!" Nirosha shivered. "After that we had no doubts about it being my anut, we talked about her and mother told me not to be afraid, after all my aunt would never hurt me and she had come only because she had wanted to see us before she left."

"And after that … what happened afterwards?" Dharshini asked eagerly.

"Nothing, "said Nirosha, "I guess my aunt just wanted us to acknowledge her visit. She never came back."

They were all silent.

"Can one talk to the dead?" asked Dharshini anxiously.

Divya rolled her eyes. Nirosha answered seriously, "I don't know if one can really talk with the spirits or not but there is certainly something like calling up a spirit. Once, my sister and her friend decided to test a method they had heard of. My sister's friend instructed us to bring a glass filled with water and she took out a white sheet of paper and placed it on the table with the glass on top of the paper, right in the middle. We had also shut the windows and darkened the room to have some effect. Then she took a pencil and brought it above the paper. She asked us whom we wanted to call. We certainly had no idea! She decided to test the myth of the devil's number. So she wrote the numbers 666 on the paper for fun. We waited, half-laughing, half-scared. Then all of a sudden, the water in the glass started trembling and the tremors began increasingly slowly. The air seemed to be both cold and tense all of

a sudden. We were really scared. My sister decided that we were going too far and quickly grabbed the glass and threw the water out of the window and tore up the paper before she burnt it. The room was then back to normal and were we relieved!"

Dharshini asked softly, "Do you really thing one can call up any spirit? Do you really think it works?"

Divya answered, "Well, I don't know if it works or not but this method of calling up a spirit is quite famous over the world. People use an Ouija board or some such name."

Dharshini exclaimed excitedly, "Then, shall we try it? Shall we?" Divya and Nirosha looked at each other and said "Well…"

Dharshini went on, her eyes burning brightly with excitement, "Please let us try once, just once, I want to speak to my mother."

Divya sharply drew her breath in and shook her head at Nirosha. Nirosha was at a loss on what to do. She hesitated, "Well, if you really want to …"

"No!" Divya interrupted "No, we are not going to try any hocus pocus experiment. These things are just stories people make up

to give a good story on a rainy day. It won't work and I won't have you pinning your hopes on things that don't exist and then end up being depressed! It won't work, Dharsh!"

Dharshini shot an angry glance at her, "How will we know it doesn't work if we don't even try it once? You don't have to join us if you don't want to!" She turned to Nirosha, with tears in her eyes, "It's my mother, for God's sake, that I want to speak to ... my mother!"

Divya felt a catch in her throat. She looked at Nirosha pleadingly. Nirosha nodded slowly at her, as if coming to a decision. She turned to Dharshini and she spoke softly, "Look here, Dharshi, try to understand. Your mother is dead and gone for over a year and most likely she is now in her next stage of life. It wouldn't be right to call her back now, would it?"

Dharshini started crying, "I want to speak to my mother, please..." she sobbed.

Nirosha put her hand across Dharshini's shoulder and tried to comfort her. "Dharshi Dharshi, please don't cry. You must learn to face it one day and I feel it is time you tried to face the facts. She is dead. Her soul has left this life. And when a soul goes away from a body, it only has links and memories of that life for a short span of

time. The moment it steps into the threshold of a new life, the former memories are erased. The period-in-waiting, the time it takes a soul to forget its recent ties is surely pure hell when it aches for its loved ones and is unable to communicate with them or even console them in their grief and suffering. Once the soul crosses that span, its past is the past. And the good souls will pass that stage quicker, have less of that tortuous hell. Your mother is a good soul, Dharshi, she would sure have gone on in no time and most likely she would have been born somewhere or other by now. If not, she is certainly on that stage ready to be born again. If you call up her spirit now, she would have to come back to that hell. It would be pure torture for your mother's soul. Dharshi, it would be unfair by us to make her undergo that torture, wouldn't it? Let her be, Dharshi, let her be. Let God take care of her and of you."

Dharshini cried heartbrokenly, Nirosha felt it best to let her cry on and give vent to her pent-up sorrows. She felt saddened and wished she could give some light, some gladness to her friend's darkened world. Divya watched uncomfortably, the tears pricking her eyes, not knowing what to say or how to console her friend. How does one indeed console a friend who has lost his or her mother or father or husband or wife or child? And especially when the friend lost her mother at such a young age? Dharshini's mother had died of a tumour suddenly and unexpectedly.

The family had discovered the fact only when she collapsed at Dharshini's 16th Birthday party and had been rushed to the hospital. She was diagnosed as having the illness two days later and died soon after, having not survived the operation. Slowly, Dharshini quietened down and her sobs reduced.

Divya said gently, "The break is nearly over. We'd better get back to class..."

Nirosha nodded and the three of them quietly went into their classroom. The rest of the day did not bode well for the trio and they were immersed in their own, private thoughts.

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As Dharshini's van pulled up in front of her home, she got out slowly and disinterestedly. She walked slowly to the front door and as she reached the steps, she quickly raised her head – a flicker of hope and interest quickly flitted across her eyes then quickly vanished into the dark caverns of gloom and disinterest. She walked with heavy steps, got out her key and opened the door. It was dark inside, the curtains drawn and the air musty and stale. The whole house was quiet and lonely. The day servant must have left at noon after cleaning the house and putting out the lunch (her lunch) on the dining table and the dinner in the fridge. Her father ate lunch and most dinners at his office. He always came home late in the night and often left even before she

wokeup. She rarely got to see him and in those rare moments, they hardly exchanged more than a few words. It was almost as if she didn't exist, for her father. He hardly cared about her, no, he did not care about her at all, she thought drearily. And so it was for her sister. She had married and gone on to her own separate house and had hardly any time to visit her. She walked quickly to her room and threw her bag on the floor and fell down on the bed. Her gloomy thoughts slowly drifted into sleep.

She woke up with a jerk. She felt as if some had called her. She ran out into the hall, calling, "Amma..."

Everything was dark. The food was untouched on the table. The door to her mother's favourite room was slightly ajar. She walked slowly to the door and opened the door slightly her voicetrembled as she questioned, "Amma...?" She walked into the room. It was almost dark in there. She could faintly see the pictures on the walls, her mother's favourite collection of photos – of them, of her sister and her in various dancing poses. It had been her mother's special wish that they learn Bharathanatyam and she had proudly had their photos taken during their joint *Arangetram*.

She walked over to her mother's favourite chair and sat down on the floor beside it, looking at the chair. The tears were rushing out fast. She buried her head in her mother's cushion and cried.

She sat in the dark crying, till her tears dried and she sat on in the dark listlessly, her thoughts slowly going blank... She sat on in the dark, empty room that had been her mother's.

***

The deadline for their exam applications was drawing close. Worried, Divya and Nirosha discussed about their friend Dharshini who had not come to school for nearly a month. Divya asked Nirosha, "what is she thinking of doing, not applying for the exams and not coming to classes? Is she going to drop out of school or what?" Nirosha shrugged "I really don't know. I tried calling her home but noone answered. I even called her sister's house but she was not very polite, quite rude actually, and she sort of avoided my questions. She just told me that Dharshi was not in good health and had been sent to her anut's place in the countryside to get better. She wouldn't tell me what was wrong with her and was going to put the phone down but I somehow managed to tell her about the exam closing date and that she better apply soon. And, you know what she said, she just said 'Ok, I'll let Dharshi know about it,' and rudely cut the phone. I really don't know what's going on in their house! They are really strange people!" Divya replied, "I can't make heads or tails of it either but I sure don't like the sound of it! Dharsh was becoming more and more withdrawn of late and quite different from her normal attitude. Whenever I used to ask her about the exams and whether she had finished preparing, she would reply

in a high and mighty way - that she was in top shape and all ready toget an 'A'. But all of a sudden on another day, she would be lamenting that she was not able to study a single thing and that she was surely going to fail! If I as much as offered to help her with a subject or even advice her on how to go about the exam preparation, she would just clam up and say, quite rudely too, that she was ready and only needed to do the finishing touches! She was certainly becoming quite weird! And there was this queer feeling I used to get that there was something detached about her as if her eyes looked at you, separated from her thoughts and herself! I would sometimes turn around to find her staring at me and then I used to get this sudden frightening sensation when I realized she was not there in her thoughts. She looked a stranger almost. It was certainly creepy, don't you think?"

"Poor kid! I do feel sorry for her. She's really finding it hard to cope up with the loss of her mother. I do hope she is alright!" answered Nirosha.

"I do hope she has not completely gone nuts!" exclaimed Divya. "It would be terrifying indeed to lose one's mind. I'd prefer to die than go insane!"

"There is but a thin line between sanity and insanity and I don't thing it is very hard to cross that line especially since that line is invisible and the distance to that line varies for each individual.

Some lose their touch with the present and reality sooner than others. I think that most humans have a certain percentage of madness in them! The whole damned world is insane, if you ask me…" said Nirosha fiercely.

"That means we are crazy too," said Divya

"Yes. We are and the happy and sad fact is that no-one really knows when they go crazy. They are happy in their delusion that they are sane, actually, everyone believes in their own normalcy and sanity. I guess it's better that way, one need not be troubled by the disturbing fact and one can go on with their insane lives" said Nirosha.

"But I do pity Dharsh if she is slowly going mad. You know what I mean… it must be a slow, tortuous route when you start losing your rational thinking faculties and connection with the real world slowly and painfully…" Divya said.

Nirosha said fervently, "God … I hope not! She dose not deserve to go…"

Divya and Nirosha felt subdued and uneasy as they stood outside their Physics lab, in the 3rd floor balcony. Divya looked at the mango tree in front, blankly, then it suddenly struck her that the mangoes seemed closer to where they were standing, than it had been that day

when Dharsh had wanted some.

If they reached out a little with a stick or something, they could get the mangoes on the closest branch. She looked around the balcony and found an old, unused broom. She took the broom and told Nirosha that they should try their luck. Nirosha grinned and got ready to grab the branch as Divya pushed it down.

"One … two … three … now!!" exclaimed Divya, as she pushed with all her might.

Nirosha stood on her toes and reached out and grabbed the branch closest. She ended up with a few mangoes and lots of leaves. The two excitedly turned with their treasure into the room. They got a scare. And, Nirosha dropped the mangoes onto the floor.

There, in the doorway, watching them both was Dharshini. She had a smile on her face as she looked at them, but, what a smile… a shiver ran up the spine of the two.

It was a smile quite ghastly and eerie. Dharshini seemed changed. She had put on more weight, sort of bloated up. Her face was puffed and there was something different in her expression – something strange and blank! Dharshini had changed.

Divya shook herself to get a grip on her mind and smiled brightly at Dharshini, "Hi! It's time you were back! It's certainly been a long time! Where have you been? And have you applied for the exams?" she asked rapidly.

Dharshini shook her head, "No, I'm not going to do the exams this time. I'm not prepared".

Nirosha asked gently, "So, what are your plans?"

Dharshini looked confused for a bit then repeated, "I'm not doing the exam this time. I was not well."

Divya asked, "Did you come to meet the principal about taking the exam next time?"

Dharshini said, "Aunty wanted to talk to the principal about my not taking the exam. She's downstairs in the principal's room with my sisters."

Nirosha asked, "So, you are living with your aunt these days?"

Dharshini answered, "Yes, I'll be going to my aunt's place now. They sent me up to meet you both and say bye."

Nirosha softly said, "We'll come with you downstairs to the office... come ..."

The three of them made their way downstairs, quietly past the crowded corridors, past the bright chatter that filled the passage.

Dharshini's aunt and sister were coming out of the office. They motioned to Dharshini that they were ready to leave. Dharshini turned to them and said "Bye". Divya and Nirosha felt a catch in their throat. They said "Bye". Nirosha added softly, "Take care, Dharshi!"

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6

One foolish mistake

"And now for the winner of the National Under 19 Skiing championships – Anna Carlsson."

Anna raced to the podium, cheered by the audience and thrilled to the core. Not yet 15, her talent was obvious to any onlooker... She was certain to bring laurels to the nation in this art of skiing. Each person in the audience, watched and rejoiced as the red-haired beauty raced up to collect her trophy – the first and major step in the ladder of renowned fame. Coach Pete Lundstrom felt a sense of déjà vu, as he watched his protégée stride proudly to her victory. She raised her cup high up in the air and threw him a look filled with pride and joy. A shiver ran up his spine – the same smile, the same red hair, the same quiet and healthy beauty. That was in fact why he had chosen her as a protégée, instinctively. Quite eerie in fact, when he thought about it The moment his eyes fell on her as the group of new skiers came down the slope in a bunch, as he spied the red hair in plaits, that cheerful spirit amongst the drab skiers – the moment froze and he

remembered her. The other redhead who had been the world's darling in skiing around twenty years ago and being a beauty had inevitably captured the eyes of each and every press camera. The girl he had fallen for, the girl who had married another, the girl who had moved away to Sri Lanka to settle down quietly with her husband, the girl now a middle aged woman who still kept in touch. Whatever time, age and other affections intruded on each other, their friendship was always steady with warmth and genuine love and affection.

She should have married him. Natasha made a big mistake in marrying that insipid fool, Wilcox, who buried her in that eastern continent.

It was a warm summer afternoon and the heat spared not an inch of Colombo. One couldn't just go out. Oh, no. A sure sunstroke. Natasha felt irritated, irritated with the oppressive weather, not a breath of cool air, not a single refreshing shower. The trees were still, very still outside. Inside their cool, quiet and small home with the marble floors and lots of greens, it was certainly cooler than the outside but still one could feel the outside atmosphere in their bones and it did get into their spirits. She just felt irritated not only with the weather, but felt inclined to be irritated with her whole life.

Her day-to-day events, quiet and uneventful, all oppressed her for the heavy decision she was turning over in her mind.

Was it the right decision? Would things be better? After all, what had she to lose? She did love her husband, the insipid fool, though he irritated her with his bland remarks and lifestyle. But still, this had been her decision. She would tell Pete to terminate their relationship of thirty years. He was almost her second husband, but only almost. It was a true friendship which had withstood bad weather and storm and was a real comfort to her. But then, she was her husband's and she would do what was best for him. She decided to call Pete and tell him of her decision. Thoughtfully, she walked into the dining hall, past the polished wooden table and over to the phone on the sideboard beside the basket of fruits.

Her husband came in through the inner room. Their eyes met and his bored into hers. Something stirred within. She ignored him and walked up to the phone. He asked her abruptly, "Who are you calling?" She answered flippantly, "Pete". He asked quickly, "Why?" She had seen the quick bat of his eyelid and the tiny displeasure in his eye, the lips pressed firmly in his impassive face. She was irritated and replied in the same manner, "Oh… Why?... Because I haven't talked to him for ages and I must simply talk with the poor darling. He'd be sure to miss me." He clenched his hands by his sides. She saw it and laughed out loud into his face and turned the phone, dialled the numbers and waited for the phone to be lifted on the other side, which was very quick as if Pete knew she would call then.

She was touched as always at the understanding they shared and was angry, for a moment, with her husband for forcing her to make this decision This triggered her vengeful side and she pleasantly inquired about him and soon they were in the midst of an animated chat. With her husband beside her by the sideboard.

He watched, his heart burning within, this red haired woman of 44 year who was the only love of his life, this woman then a beautiful girl with long red hair in plaits, now chopped off to shoulder length. The straight red hair that he had fallen for the first time he set eyes on her. This woman, then a slim, innocent girl now turned into this plump, taunting woman that he still couldn't get out of his mind. He knew he was foolish over her and that she knew his weakness and tormented him the more for it. But, he couldn't help it. He had always regretted that he hadn't been up to her standard and he knew her standard – Coach Lundstrom, who she simply loved and chatted for hours over the phone and would insist on going out with him alone, whenever they went back home for their rare vacations.

But then he stood and watched this plump woman and he hated her… for having made his life, one foolish mistake.

He hated her as she shook her head in laughter and his hand went unconsciously to the apple basket and closed on the knife, firmly. He moved closer. He placed the knife quietly by her arm.

She felt his presence very close and she felt the same feeling she had ever since as a girl she had fallen for him. She couldn't place the reason why. She just loved him because she loved him and it drove her mad that he was always jealous of her talking to other men and distrusting her.

At first, she had put it to his extreme love and had been proud of it but over the years, the pride dissolved to mere annoyance and she flirted outrageously with all the men they came across in their lives but especially more so with her trusted friend, Pete, because she knew her husband regarded him with the highest suspicion and doubt.

She wanted to tell him she cared for no other but always the jealous, burning look in his eyes irritated her and made her act opposite to what she had initially intended. She had decided she would give up this contact with Pete, for of late she had begun to pity her husband. He was too old now to ever change and to suffer anxieties of such nature. She wanted to console him. That was why she had made the call but that one look from him drover het to simper joyfully with Pete, while he stood by.

She just wished he would move away from the room so that she could tell Pete about her decision.

She ignored her husband who had placed the knife by her hand and stood at her arm. She just went on talking and laughing the more.

Inside his head, everything was a riot. Outside, his face remained impassive but his eyes burnt with pure hatred. Finally he could not take it any longer and just grabbed the knife and drove it into her back. The unsuspecting woman cried out. He felt a queer feeling of satisfaction. He just stabbed her more and more, uncontrollably until she fell to the ground.

Then he let the knife drop as he stood there over her, a wild gleam of satisfaction in his eye.

The fallen receiver continued its echoing of Pete's "Hello.. Nat.. Are you there?" until it turned into a continuous beep.

7

All for a cup of coffee

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" she asked as they waited for the others by the Kangaroo at Café 3 a.n . at the University of Stockholm. She had walked through the cold air from Lappis, without any breakfast, to be in time for their group meeting.

"I am not in the mood for it but you go ahead," her course-mate replied.

She hesitated for a split second but the thought of a hot cup of Classic coffee with milk and sugar, enticed her. She went to the counter.

"One coffee, please", and handed a 20 kroner note.

The cashier counted out some coins and handed it to her.

"Thank you," she said and put all the coins into her bag without looking at them. That was her usual wont. She felt it showed a lack of trust in humans if she re-counted change in front of them.

She waited for a couple of seconds before she realized that it was supposed to be self-service. Then she noticed the coffee cups and the coffee machine. She walked over, took a cup and placed it under the tap. She noticed a button and pressed it confidently. Nothing happened. She pressed it again. She now noticed a slot for coins. What was that for? She felt it would be better to ask the man than make a fool of herself, standing there. She realized that the café was crowded.

She went back, "Er.. Excuse me. How am I supposed to operate that thing?"

"Use the coffee coin. I gave you one!"

"Oh, yes.. the coffee coin."

She must have put it in with her change. She dug into her bag pockets. Miscellaneous items came up. Bits of paper, pens, travel card even her mobile, but no coins. She dug deeper and brought out a 1 kroner coin. She tried again and brought out more 1 kroner coins. Was the coffee coin an ordinary coin or was it of special

mint? She was too embarrassed to ask again. She felt the eyes of everyone in the café bore through her back.

"No," she told herself, "it doesn't matter if anyone is watching, if at all they are." She decided to try her 1 kroner coin and put it in the slot, hoping that it was the coin, but it fell out. She fumbled for a few seconds in her bag and realized it was futile until and unless she emptied the entire pocket. Should she leave without her coffee?

She went back to the man.

"I can't find my coin. Can I have another?," she asked handing him 7 kroners.

"That's okay.. I will give you another one." He handed her a fresh coin.

It was a tiny, copper token coin.

She went triumphantly and put in the coin with a majestic air and pressed the button.

Now for some milk. She noticed some milk cartons on a wooden table nearby. She took one. It was empty. So were the other two on the table. She paused and then decided that it was enough time that she had made a spectacle of herself and walked away with her cup of plain coffee, trying to keep her head held high.

8

To tempt fate

She woke up with a start as a beam of sunlight penetrated the room and disturbed her uneasy sleep through a chink in the thick drapery over the window. She quickly looked at the clock on the bedside table. It was already 7.30 a.m. She had overslept. Rahul would be angry. Not angry that she had overslept but for not having his cup of coffee, thick and steaming at about 7 a.m with his morning papers as soon as he returned from his morning walk. His belief was that it stimulated him for the day ahead, and made him feel fresh and ready for anything.

Whenever she could, she always liked to take that dawn walk with him, very stimulating indeed. They both liked to share the moment together as they watched the sun lazily rising from his drugged sleep and stretching his arms slowly, while mother earth fondly watched the birth of a new day and nature, the nurse, quietly went about her work awakening and changing coats of shades on the trees, putting forth the flowers of the day and gently nudging the little birds who stir sleepily in their wakeful sleep. That was the moment they cherished. With one mind, they felt the beauty and calm of God's creations.

These days though she could not join him often as she would have wished due to the overload of her office work which had come with the promotion she received. She had had to bring the work home to keep up with the pace. So that walks were often omitted in her agenda but she usually managed the cup of coffee.

It was not as if Rahul demanded his cup of coffee. Many a time he had quietly surprised her with breakfast when she had overslept. It was that she knew intuitively that he would be a bit disappointed if he at least didn't see her face, cheerful, bustling about their home as he returned from his sojourns with Mother Nature. Rahul, she had certainly grown to love him moreand more with each passing day.

She got up in a hurry and rushed downstairs. He would be sitting at the kitchen table with the papers.

The whole house was quiet, almost still and empty. Something within her stirred. She ran faster and opened the kitchen door. All was dark, quiet, still and bare. She let out a sharp cry of and quickly held onto the doorframe to prevent herself from collapsing.

There had been no need for her to make coffee. For there was no one there, with the morning papers, to drink the hot,

steaming coffee not then and never again for the rest of her life for Rahul had died in a car accident a fortnight ago.

Around noon, the office car came around to pick her baggage. Some of her close colleagues also came for the send-off. No one knew what to say or do. So they just clumsily moved about the house. She came down quietly, collected and calm and bade goodbye to all those gathered and got into the car. The car slowly went out of the gate. She turned for a last glimpse of the house where she had lived for the past two years. Two years -- her brief span of married life had been only two years.

Two beautiful years which had flowed as a beautiful piece of music flows and now, the music stopped and she was left alone to live her life.

All her defenses broke and all the sorrow and pain welled up within her burst their dams and she cried, lost to the entire world.

Finally, she came to her senses and realized that the car had stopped. She looked up and saw the driver seated uneasily in his seat wondering what to do. He was deeply distressed that his young boss had had to lose her husband so early.

She motioned for the car to continue on its way to the airport. He finally found the courage to inquire if he could bring her anything to drink - a hot cup of coffee, for instance.

She vehemently opposed the suggestion. He was really astonished by her strong opposition and decided to drive on wordlessly.

She tried forcing herself to lock her feelings out but all she could feel was dismal loneliness. A life to be faced alone. Suddenly, something jarred into her memory, some words she had uttered in her innocent youth.

She had once stated that she would rather lead a single life than ever get married. She had been an independent spirited girl who had believed marriage to be a shackle for women. The state where they gave up their individual views, likes and dislikes for that of their husband's. She was not ready to make a sacrifice especially of this kind. Moreover she had never been a homely person. She hated all forms of household chores - sweeping, stitching and darning, cooking etc. She just detested it and detested the fact that women invariably resigned themselves to their families' needs.

That had been her strong view and friends would jest that they would just wait and see who her husband would be and how she changed in a period of ten years' time with a couple of kids to manage. To all

of which she had strongly denied that she would ever marry.

Until she met Rahul. Somehow she was attracted by his quiet, strong personality as he was by her and their friendship slowly blossomed into love and then onto marriage.

And life had been perfect - a great job overseas. A beautiful home with servants, she had had no need to cook or clean. More than that a happy, contented life.

Both had complemented each other and therefore had had no need for conversion, no need for a sacrifice of views. They just added to each others' strengths and the little adjustments they had had to make had been hardly felt by both.

They had lived the perfect idyllic married life. Rahul and she, until his funeral.

Even in that pain, she felt the bitter twist of fate, she had wanted to live her life alone. Now she had been left to live her life alone, after a happy married life of two years. She smiled bitterly as these thoughts ran through her heavy mind. She had tempted fate by her strong convictions.
The cars sped over the dunes to her destination.

9

The Birthday Wish

She went to bed with an air of expectancy and impatience for the next day to begin. She had never felt so much excitement over her birthday since she was a kid. This birthday was special. This year was special. She had fallen in love and she was loved, in return. It was her dream year and every day in that year was special. So, her birthday, which was a special day in itself had to be a memorable one.

Anjali had always considered birthdays special. She had always liked her birthdays – a day, she felt, was in honour of her life on earth. Dramatic perhaps but she liked it when family, friends and relatives wished her on that day. She loved it when something unique was done on that day. Not a materialistic person, she didn't care about the shop-bought gifts or the fake celebrations but ones that came from the heart – a lovely note, a beautiful wish, a fresh flower, a surprise activity.

Anything that made her feel glad to be alive.

This year, she didn't expect anything except the one thing which she felt mattered most to her in life. A heartfelt wish from the one she loved. As she went to sleep, the last thoughts on her mind was how he would wish her. Would he call her at the stroke of midnight and tell her how much he loved her? Or would he come by to her office first thing in the morning and wish her? She was so impatient for the day to begin and she fell asleep.

It was around six when she woke up. Her immediate reaction was to reach out for her mobile phone. Had he sent her a birthday sms at midnight and which she had not heard arrive in her sleep? There were a few birthday wishes from her close friends. Somehow, they didn't evoke happiness in her as they usually did. She felt a slight twinge of disappointment but brushed it away thinking that he would call when she got to work.

Her family wished her as they always did and she accepted the wishes with her thoughts racing ahead to the time when he would wish her. She impatiently got ready for work and left home. Her colleagues wished her at work and she saw that they had put together a small tea party for her. She went through the formalities but her mind was no longer in the day. She wondered why he hadn't called her, let alone wish her. He always called her to hear her voice each morning – to

start off his day with an energy boost, he said. Was everything alright with him?

Anjali finally decided to call him in the afternoon. She was now more concerned about him than his missing wish. The phone rang for a long time but no-one picked up. Alarmed, she rang his mobile phone repeatedly. She finally sent a SMS asking him to call her urgently. She waited - her mind in a tormented state. He finally called. He said that he had had a tough day at work with back to back meetings and had not been able to call earlier. She was both relieved and disappointed. He asked if she would come with him after work and help him out with selecting a gift for his sister. She agreed and kept the phone.

Was it a trick, she thought? Was he aware of her birthday or was he planning it all so that he would wish her when she least expected it?

She met him at the department store and when he saw her, she saw his face light up and smile – the smile that she so loved. "Hi. Exactly whom I needed to see." He whispered close to her. "How was your day, darling?" he asked. She replied, "Just another busy day at work." Anjali continued, "Where do we go from here?"

"Well, you know my sister likes costume jewellery. It would be great if you could pick out something nice at Stone and String, perhaps." She wondered, "Is he really planning a trick on me or is

he really unaware?" They went to the jewellery store and she walked around with him checking out bracelets, earrings and necklaces. Then, she saw a displayed necklace that she liked very much. A simple and elegant silver necklace with exquisite rose buds and pearls strung around and matching earrings. She turned to him and said, "I like that." "Do try it on", he encouraged, "and helped her put them on." He looked at her and said, "It looks lovely. Yes, I will buy it." He turned to the shop assistant. 'Please prepare the bill." She moved her hand to remove the necklace when he stopped her. "Please leave it on you a while."

She smiled and agreed. He paid for the purchase and they went down to the café to have a soft drink. As they waited for their drink, he looked into her eyes and smiled lovingly, "You know how beautiful you look. The necklace suits you perfectly. I want you to have it so much but I don't have any money left to get my sister another gift."

Her smile died on her lips. So, he really wasn't aware that it was her birthday. It was no trick, no surprise planned but the simple fact that he didn't remember her birthday. The necklace burned on her neck. She wanted to remove it that instant. She reached up to remove it. "Why? What's up? Your mood seems to have changed." He queried.

"Just remembered that I told my mother that I would be coming home early to help her with the dinner preparation. Some relatives are coming over for dinner."

"Sorry about having delayed you. Thanks for coming shopping with me." He said as she handed the necklace in its box back to him. They paid for the drink and went to the entrance. "Shall I drop you home?" he asked. "No, that's ok," she replied, "I will take a three-wheeler. Bye."

She hastily got into the first three-wheeler and left before tears started welling up. She swore to herself that she shouldn't cry and that it was no big deal. He forgot her birthday. So what? The important thing was that he loved her. Birthday wishes didn't matter. A voice in her said, "Well, if he really loved you, would he have forgotten your birthday in the first place? It would have been a special day for him."

Her phone rang. It was him. She picked up the phone. "Yes?" she mustered a question. "Is there anything wrong, love? You didn't look well now. Is everything fine at home and work?" "Yes." She replied, her voice threatening to break up. "Are you crying, darling? What is wrong? Have I done something to hurt you?" he persisted. She bit her lip and then responded in a very low voice, "You forgot my birthday." A gasp at the other end. Then, his apology which sounded genuinely regretful. He apologized for having forgotten the date in his busy work schedule and promised that such an oversight would never happen in the future. Then, he wished her a happy birthday. She accepted the wish mechanically and went home to the family birthday dinner, determined to at least enjoy what was left of the day.

10

The Gaze

Voice (cheerful and chirpy):

I love to paint. Especially landscapes. I can sit for hours under the open sky and paint to my heart's content. I love colors, its various hues: the blues of the skies, lakes and seas, the greens of the fields, leaves of trees, shrubs and grasslands, the browns of the tree trunks, sand on the beach, the whites of the clouds and the froth of the waves, the multi-colored hues of flowers in bloom… I am lost in the beauty around me when I sit outside, with my brush. Well, I love to sit outside even when I am not painting. I just feel tranquil in the lap of Mother Nature. How wonderful it is to be alive to experience the beauty of nature's creations. (Pause)

My mother urges me to hold an exhibition of my paintings. But I…

(A little less cheerful and becoming agitated and more rushed)

I don't do portraits though. I can't bring my hand to draw the outline of a human face. I did try. Honest I did. I forced myself in fact. I only got as far as the outline. I couldn't get around to the mouth and the eyes. I got so agitated that I had to give up. I have never been able to focus on a human face. They agitate me so much. Especially the eyes. They remind me of a pair of eyes that has terrified me since I was a child. The eyes of my stalker. I have looked up suddenly, with the familiar tingling on my back which always warns me of the presence of those eyes. Sure enough, when I look up, I see them looking at me: mockingly, condescendingly. My mother tells me that I have to be strong. That I have to fight back. She asks me what those eyes can do except gaze at me. I have tried to fight back. I have told myself: What can those eyes do? But they continue to terrify me with equal intensity. I can't hold an exhibition of my paintings with those eyes looking, can I? I don't want to hold an exhibition with those eyes looking.

What is terrifying is that those eyes turn up everywhere, everywhere I go in the world. Even in the most ordinary places where you would think you would be relatively safe: the bookshop, the corner grocery store, everywhere. The fear within has gradually increased and now, each time I venture out, I have to overcome my terror. My mother has to prod me to go out. I only feel safe indoors. Even now, I have come to the library only because I wanted to get a book I wanted to read so badly and my mother refused to get it for me. She said I had

to go out and get what I wanted.

I feel my hair on my arm rise and the tingling on my back now. No. Not here as well.

Where are those hateful eyes? There they are, in that corner by the history shelf, looking straight at me, remorselessly. What do those eyes see in me?

(Tone changes. Hard tone)

Struggling. To move. Moving grotesquely. Pity the creature. Living in this world. Burden. On the family. A sore. For the rest. Why venture out? Struggling. Bothering others. Disturbing.

(Voice tearfully)

The eyes that ceaselessly pin me down. Is there no escape for me? Can't I ever be free to go about in this world? Without being gaped at? With my dignity intact? My paintings don't make sense, when I see those eyes. And painting was my ray of hope. I am helpless against those eyes that forcefully bind me.

(Voice strained)

I don't paint these days. I can't face those eyes. I can't paint with those eyes watching me. The only way I can escape those eyes is to stay within. My safe haven. I have no option. I can't go out.

(Voice wistful)

Sometime though, my paintings find me. In my dreams. I envision a beautiful summer's day, with green fields and blue skies and the wind blowing in my face. I am free.