

A Novel

Regi Siriwardena

Among My Souvenirs

By the same author

The End of a Golden String (1989)
Addressing the Other (1992)
Poems and Selected Translations (1993)

Octer: Collected Plays (1995) The Lost Lenore: A tale (1996)

Among My Souvenirs

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For Ranjini

who made me aware that
one could be a reader of popular romantic
fiction and, at the same time,
a mature human being.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Some well-known Sri Lankan public figures of the past are alluded to by name in this book, and the political events and social changes of the last sixty years serve as the context in which the story is enacted. But the characters who figure in that story are fictitious, even when they are involved in actual happenings, and no effort should be expended on trying to identify real-life analogues of them.

In the personal realm, this is not an autobiographical novel. Although, like many other novelists, I have used fragments of personal experience here and there, these have been distributed among several characters and interwoven with imagined events and relationships. I have been particularly concerned to keep the first-person narrator's family situation, early upbringing and attitudes to many things different from mine.

I think an explanation may be needed in respect of the use of the terms *Sinhalese* and *Sinhala* in the narrative. English speakers didn't generally adopt the form *Sinhala* until after 1956. In pre-1956 dialogue, therefore, the characters always speak of *Sinhalese*, while the narrator, writing in 1997, refers to *Sinhala*. Similarly, *Ceylon*, *Ceylonese* were terms generally used by English speakers before 1972.

PROLOGUE, 1997

1

I nearly had a serious accident this afternoon on the escalator of the Liberty Plaza. I had gone there to buy a packet of paper and a ribbon for my computer printer — for the purpose, in fact, of writing this book. I had learnt to use a computer ten years ago, when I was already in my sixties, and now I can't do without it, even to write a simple letter. I once read an article by a British journalist who said he just couldn't write on a computer: his brain needed the feel of a pen between the finger-tips. I wonder what he would think if I told him my brain wouldn't function without the feel of computer keys beneath my fingers. For me now, the pen, and even the typewriter, belong to the stone age.

I bought the paper and the ribbon, and the pretty girl in the shop, as she put them into a plastic bag and handed it to me across the counter, said, 'It's heavy, can you carry it?' (Poor old guy, I could see her thinking, as she looked at me commiseratingly.) I smiled and said, 'No problem,' as I cradled the parcel in my left arm. But she was right, I could feel it weighing me down as I staggered out of the shop. Not for the first time in the last year or two (when I have felt that once simple routine physical operations had become major tasks), I thought of the line in that poetic passage about old age in the Book of Ecclesiastes: 'And the grasshopper shall be a burden.'

But once out of the shop, which was on the first floor, I realised there was a more difficult problem still: how was I to get down to the ground floor with this weight making my unsteady steps even more insecure? I briefly considered three options: to walk down the stairway, to step on to the escalator, or to take the lift, and decided the last was the safest. So, with the burden of that packet of paper (no mere grasshopper) growing every moment more painful, I walked down the corridors twice — and couldn't find the lifts. What I should have done, of course, was to ask somebody; but, as often happens, I had an attack of self-consciousness. So on a sudden impulse, while passing the escalator, I thought I would chance it, and boarded the downward

rolling mechanism. Or, at least, I planted one foot there securely, but the other was a moment too late: I overbalanced and fell. There was I, spreadeagled and face down on the moving escalator, and the thought that flashed through my mind was: 'That's it: the book will never be written.'

There was a crowd on the ground floor at the bottom of the escalator watching a cricket match on the TV in a shop window: Sri Lanka was playing Pakistan. It was my salvation that two of the spectators had seen the accident. As my supine form neared the end of the escalator, my body was lifted off it by four strong arms, which proceeded to set me on my feet. 'Are you alright, Uncle?' one of the two young men asked. Miraculously, yes, there were no bones broken; I had only, as I discovered later, sustained a few bruises. Even the paper and ribbon were intact: they had landed on one of the escalator steps when I let them go as I fell, and had been carried smoothly down.

2

I have been at home for the last half-hour, sitting at the computer and writing the story of my accident. Home is a room on the upper floor of a flat, owned by the landlady who lives downstairs; she is the widow of one of my former journalist colleagues. My room is sparsely furnished: there are only two chairs, on one of which I am now sitting at the table with the computer. The rest of the space is taken up my bed; a chest of drawers which holds my clothes; my CD player and accessories; and a single bookcase, which houses my collection of discs and the remnant of my once larger library. I have cataract in one eye, and my vision has generally diminished in the last few years, so I have given away most of the books I possessed to university and school libraries. From the top of the bookcase a picture of Rani looks smilingly at me: she died five years ago. Our daughter is in England with her husband, and our son, a doctor, is practising in the States. There is no TV in the room because I never watch it; I listen occasionally to some of the music programmes on radio, and I often spend some hours in the evenings with my CDs. Fortunately, my

landlady is virtually deaf, so she never complains that John Coltrane's sax or Dinah Washington's voice is too loud. I have few visitors: only my old friend, Raja, generally drops in on Sunday afternoons to play chess. The contacts I made in my newspaper days have enabled me to serve as a correspondent for some foreign publications, and this has given me enough to meet my few needs.

My experience this afternoon reminds me that my existence can't go on much longer, which is okay by me; but I would rather not end falling down a staircase or knocked down by a vehicle; I would wish to fade out peacefully here, with, if possible, the chocolate-brown tones of Joshua Redman's tenor sax playing 'When the Sun Comes Down' as my last sensations of the world. But first, I should like to finish the task I have undertaken before I am swallowed by the endless silence.

2

I wonder how many of you listen to that programme that goes on the air every week, 'Among My Souvenirs'. If you do, I bet you are, like me, aged or ageing. Who else would want to listen to the old songs anyway? The young are too busy chasing the newest hit that's at the top of the charts. The programme trades on nostalgia, and half the pleasure it brings comes not from the music itself but from the reminiscences it awakens.

You're the top, You're Napoleon brandy, You're the top, You're Mahatma Gandhi.

When I heard that last week, what I remembered was Mark singing it, his tall slim figure swaying drunkenly, making a gesture of mock adoration towards me, on a moonlit Galle Face Green after the annual big school match. Or, last evening, when

Birds do it,
Bees do it,
Even educated fleas do it,
Let's do it,

came over the air, what flashed through my mind instantly was the image of Mark serenading with it pretty, plump Daphne Labrooy at her birthday party, going down on one knee before her in the course of the song, while she wriggled and giggled, half-shy and half-flattered. It was Cole Porter most of the time that Mark performed on such occasions: he loved the wit and the panache of it, so much in keeping with his own spirit.

It was actually halfway through 'Let's Do It' last evening that I decided I would write this story of the people whose lives are bound up with the memories of my boyhood and youth — Mark and Daphne, Wije and Girlie, Marina, Melanie, Rani —, and that I would call it Among My Souvenirs. Not only in recognition of the inspiration that came from the radio programme, but also as a sure selling-point. Readers — at least the older ones — will buy the book, expecting to float through its pages on a warm tide of sentimental memories, and when they find the book isn't like that at all, it will be too late: they can't ask for their money back, can they?

One

BETHLEHEM, 1936-37

1

I recall the world in which my story begins as belonging to another, almost unbelievably different, antediluvian epoch. When King George V died in 1936, our principal announced at a morning school assembly the sad news that 'our king, a great and good king' had passed away. The only grief my schoolfellows and I felt was when he concluded the assembly and said the customary prayer without declaring a school holiday to mark this day of mourning, in confident expectation of which we had trooped into the hall. His reason, we learnt later, was that he felt a holiday would be celebrated by the boys in ways that were quite unsuitable for such an occasion. In spite of his pretences that the school was a model of the civilised virtues, old Sulla, as we called him, knew his young barbarians only too well. (His nickname had been bestowed on him, I suppose, by some of our predecessors after a Latin lesson: he was actually the Reverend Doctor Frank Christopher Salgado, Bachelor of Arts of the University of London and Doctor of Divinity of the University of Oxford.)

The abdication crisis later that year shook our middle class society as deeply as it did the British. It was never referred to officially in school (no assembly for mourning in that case), and when a boy in my class tried to draw out one of the masters on the subject, he had his ear pulled for his pains. But at home it was the cause of much shocked and indignant conversation between Daddy and Mummy. I was fifteen then, and when, with my burgeoning adolescent romanticism, I tried to defend Edward VIII as an honourable man, Daddy exploded: 'What tommy rot! Only a bloody fool would give up a throne for a woman!' 'And what a woman!' Mummy added. At the Christmas party at home that year, Noel Juriansz, Daddy's great friend, when entreated, as usual, to 'give us a carol', sang, in his powerful tenor voice'

Hark! the herald angels sing, 'Mrs. Simpson pinched our king.'

But by that time George VI was solidly seated on the throne, with his comfortably maternal-looking Queen and two sweet Princesses, to reassure Daddy, Mummy and all their friends that morality and family life had been saved. And although the abdication was a tabooed subject in school, Sulla, in his next prize-day report, mentioned 'the satisfaction of the people of Ceylon that an upright and God-fearing king was again our sovereign'.

Bethlehem College had been founded in the Victorian period by a British bishop, whose life-size portrait, bearded, bespectacled and stern-looking, frowned at everybody walking up the main staircase that led from the front entrance to the classrooms above. There had apparently been a debate between the bishop and the first principal about what the boys of the school should be called — Bethlehemians, Bethlehemists, or Bethlehemites. The bishop opted for the last, because its final syllable seemed to evoke for him the image of a swarm of small darkies, being led on the march to civilisation, so Bethlehemites we became.

Bethlehem College wasn't within the city of Colombo but in a suburb on its outskirts. It had been sited there so that it should have plenty of room for playing fields, since sport was a cornerstone of the Victorian public school ideal that its founders sought to build in this corner of the empire. Waterloo had been won on the playing fields of Eton, and the bishop himself had been in his youth an enthusiastic cricketer and ruggerite. The school motto was *Mens sana in corpore sano*, and the school song that we sang lustily on prize-days and after a victory in the big school match had the lines

Clean in body, keen in mind,
Pure in heart, and bold but kind,
March we staunchly, Bethlehemites,
To the beckoning lofty heights.

I said earlier that nostalgia wasn't for me the object of this exercise, but most of those who went to Bethlehem in the 'thirties would look

back on that period of their lives as a happy time. Certainly so, in contrast with the strains and shocks they have experienced since — 'Sinhala only' in 1956, ethnic riots in 1958 and 1977, youth insurrection in 1971, a massive anti-Tamil pogrom in 1983, another and much bloodier youth insurrection in 1987-89, and the long, senseless, savage war since 1984. Of course, the image of the world of the 'thirties as an Eden before the Fall was dependent on the closed circle of our lives at that time. We hardly knew in the innocence of our boyhood (nor would it have made much difference if we had), when on match-days we waved our flags, striped light blue and dark blue, guzzled our Cadbury's chocolates, or sucked our Elephant House ice-palams, that there were thousands of children of our age or less with distended bellies, dying of malaria in faraway villages. We never saw those places, or if we did, it was only as a fleeting glimpse on the way to Bandarawela, Nuwara Eliya or one of the other hill-country resorts to which our parents took us every year to escape from the tropical heat of April. More immediate to us were the fantasy figures from the magazines (grubby by being passed from hand to hand) that we devoured in the lunch-breaks or even read surreptitiously in class under cover of our desks — the Fat Owl, Billy Bunter, and the monocled Lord Maulverer, eating their scrumptious teas behind the ivy-covered grey stone walls of their public school. Or the intrepid heroes of the books that we got out of the school library — Ralph, Jack and Peterkin, performing their daring exploits among the treacherous natives of darkest Africa or of the coral islands of the Pacific.

- 2

Mark and I had moved year by year up through Bethlehem College together, and by the time we were halfway through the school we were close friends. This was so although we were only schoolfriends in the most literal sense, in that our companionship was confined to school hours. He wasn't one of those boys with whom I played cricket in the evenings. That was because my home was in the same suburb in which Bethlehem was sited, and I walked to school every day, but

Mark lived with his family in the most fashionable residential quarter of the city itself, Cinnamon Gardens, and was dropped every morning at the school gates in a chauffeur-driven car. Mark had once told me that this was against his wishes: he had wanted to travel by bus, but he said his mother wouldn't hear of it. This had already given me some inkling of the social distance between Mark's family and mine; and from some names that Mark occasionally mentioned I gathered that he had other friends, boys who went to our rival school, King's College, and who belonged to that other part of his life to which he returned every evening when the big Buick carried him away from the school gates. But I had no clear idea of where his family stood in the world until something that happened in class forced it on my attention.

There was a Watson Memorial Fourth Form Prize for English, to compete for which the contestants had to sit for a special examination. Towards the end of the school year, 1936, our form master was writing down the names of the boys who were opting to take this exam, which would be held soon after we returned from the Christmas holdays. Having written down six or seven names, including mine, he asked:

'Anybody else?'

Nobody responded. The master said:

'What about you, Watson?'

It was a natural question, since Mark was far and away the best student in English, as in nearly every other subject. Mark said:

'No, sir.'

'Why not?'

Mark murmured, rather shyly:

'My father thought it wouldn't be proper, sir.'

'Oh, I see,' the master said, and dropped the matter. I had often wondered whether there was a connection between Mark and the name J.R.D. Watson which figured on several of the wooden panels in the school hall that displayed the names of winners of the big school prizes, year by year. But I hadn't dared to ask him because I had sensed that Mark disliked talking about his family. But now, during the lunch-break, as we were strolling back from the school tuckshop, I asked Mark:

'Why isn't it proper for you to compete for the English prize?'
Mark seemed disinclined to answer this question, but I pressed him:

'Tell me.'

Mark said, slowly and reluctantly:

'You see, Dave, it's my dad who has donated that prize. Every year he marks the papers himself and chooses the winner.'

'But couldn't he not do that this year, if you compete?'

Mark seemed even more reluctant to answer that question, and sucked at his ice-palam (a three-sided ice on a stick; he had bought one each for him and me) for some moments. Then he said:

'Yes, Dave, I suggested that. But he thought it would be better for me not to sit at all.'

'Why?'

'Even if he doesn't mark the papers and asks one of the masters to do it, he thought the other boys might suspect I had been...'

'What? Favoured?'

'Yes.'

'But everybody knows you're the best in English.'

'Still.'

'But won't you be disappointed?'

'No, not really. With me out of it, you're sure to win, Dave, and I'll be glad.' Then, as if he had realised that might have seemed patronising, he quickly added: 'Of course, you might have won it anyway.'

'Nonsense,' I said firmly. 'So that's your father's name that's on so many panels?'

'Yes,' said Mark, kicking a stone out of the way as if it was an irritation.

'Why Watson Memorial?'

'It's in memory of Grandpa,' Mark said. We were just outside the swimming pool by that time, and he said:

'Shall we go and watch those buggers playing water polo?'

The school team had a match the next day, and since the endof-year exams were over, and we were on the verge of the Christmas holidays, and nothing much was happening in the classrooms, they had been given leave to practise. Without waiting for an answer, he dashed in, and I was left to follow.

When I told Daddy that evening what I had learned about Mark's father, he looked at me with seemingly new respect for my friend, and perhaps by reflected glory, for me. I had already mentioned Mark's name a few times at home, but this was the first time Daddy learnt he was the son of J.R.D. Watson. He repeated the name in a reverential tone:

'J.R.D. Watson? Why didn't you tell me before?'

'Why, is he such a big bug?'

Daddy smiled ironically at my ignorance.

'He's one of the biggest bugs there is, David. That is, among Ceylonese civil servants, at least.'

Daddy was a middling official in the Surveyor-General's department, and he used to speak with a deference mingled perhaps, as I now think, with envy, of the higher luminaries in the bureaucratic firmament. I told him then that Mark's father had wanted him to drop out of the prize competition, and that therefore I had a good chance of winning it. He said, wiping his moustache, fringed with foam from the beer he was drinking:

'Very generous of him, son. But then, J.R.D. Watson is a great gentleman, so everybody says.'

3

Perhaps you will have wondered by now what Mark was — I mean, to what community he and his family belonged. Nothing is more important today, of course, than being identified in that way: it can even be, in some situations (as we saw in 1958, 1977, 1983), a matter of life or death. So what was Mark, who bore the surname Watson? Burgher? Eurasian? Or what?

Here we have one measure of the difference between the world I have been writing about and that in which I am writing now. When I look back, it doesn't seem to me that Mark's being Tamil was in any way important at that time. Even though, as you will come to see, that

identity was to become crucial in determining his destiny, he himself would then have thought of it as one fortuitously acquired and no more fundamental than the shape of his nose or the length of his big toe. But what's identity, anyway? It isn't like the hard shell that a crab produces out of itself, by some inherent necessity of its genes, to inhabit for the rest of its life. I think of it as more like the configuration of debris that a wave leaves, at its outermost mark, on the seashore, which other waves will transform or obliterate in course of time.

So, in recalling that early phase of our lives it didn't strike me as necessary to underline Mark's Tamil-ness. If at that time I had been asked, 'What is he?', it would have seemed more natural to answer, 'He's a tall, dark boy, very clever, reads a lot, is very good in his English and Latin, is a reserve in the cricket eleven, and he's the son of a big civil servant', than to say flat out, 'He's a Tamil.' For that matter, I didn't then even think about the fact that Mark had not only three English Christian names but also an English surname, whereas my names were a hybrid — David Shelton Gunawardene.

It was only many years later that I recognised this circumstance as something worth thinking about. For there were also several boys in the class, who, like many other Sinhalese, bore surnames such as Perera, de Silva, Fernando, Soysa, de Soysa and de Zoysa, which, as I now know, were the legacy of some ancestor who had been baptised by a Portuguese priest. But the Dutch hadn't scattered their surnames among the Sinhalese, nor had the British. On the other hand, among Tamil Christians there was a plentiful crop of Watsons, Wilsons, Hensmans, Matthews, Samuels and the like. Why this difference? Was it that American missionaries in Jaffna, in baptising their converts, supplanted not only their heathen first names but also their surnames with godly Western ones? I don't know, I am not a historian, and I leave it to one of that breed to answer; perhaps he may get a Ph.D out of it.

4

The Christmas vacation was rather dismal, as it often was. Once the orgy of food and drink was over, Daddy grew bored and irritable

because his office was shut (all government offices closed from Christmas Eve to the third of January), and, except when some of his buddies dropped in to play cards, he had nothing to do except to mooch about the house. He took his bad temper out on my small sister and me, and we were even walloped once for making too much noise when he had his afternoon nap. I had finished the two books I had borrowed from the school library within the first four days, and consequently I too was bored except when I played cricket in the evenings. I envied Mark, from whom I had a picture postcard of an upcountry landscape, posted in Nuwara Eliya, on Christmas Eve, with the message: 'It's bitterly cold here, but I am enjoying it — it feels like the English winter we read about in A Christmas Carol.'

1937. I was glad to be back at school in the first fortnight of January, and made my way to Form Five A, where I was to spend the next twelve months. There were several knots of boys standing on the patch of lawn outside the class, waiting for the school appu to come and open the door. I looked for Mark, but he hadn't yet arrived; and then I noticed a new face. It was that of a rather frail-looking boy, a good half-a-head shorter than me. He was standing apart from all the little groups that were chatting or joking, and looked somewhat forlorn.

I went up to him, and said:

'Are you a new boy?'

He said, 'Yes.'

'What's your name?'

'Wijeratne.'

It was only surnames that were used in school, except between close friends: masters called us by our surnames, and so did the boys in addressing each other, unless they used a contraction or a nickname.

'At which school were you earlier?'

'Dharmaloka.'

Dharmaloka? I had to think for a moment or two to locate it, because it didn't belong to that charmed circle of public schools with which we had annual cricket matches. Then I placed it: it was an outstation school, and with a name like that, it had to be Buddhist.

'That's in Galle, isn't it?' I asked the new boy.

'Yes.'

'So how did you come here?'

'My father was teaching at Dharmaloka, but now he has got a job at Sariputta. So we have all shifted to Colombo.'

Sariputta. I had no difficulty in identifying that in my mind. It was a Colombo school, and was called the best Buddhist boys' school in the country, which meant that still, in our eyes, it was way below ours. But it was the only Buddhist school against which Bethlehem had condescended to play cricket. This was, as I realised in later life, a concession to the second-class status, in the eyes of the élite, that its principal had earned for it by building it up both in the classroom and on the playing-field. I have read about him since, and learned that he had a first class in mathematics from a British university, which could have gained him easy passage into the civil service, then the goal of most successful Ceylonese students. But he had sacrificed this opportunity to become Principal of Sariputta at a time when it was still struggling for recognition. Daddy used to speak of him with open animus:

'That blighter, Kaviratne, wears national dress, but he's married to a white woman.'

'English?'

'Well, he married her in England, but I don't think she's English. She must have been one of those Swiss barmaids who, I'm told, you see in the London pubs.'

Actually, some twenty years ago when Mrs. Kaviratne died, I discovered from one of the newspaper obituaries of her that she was one of the early women graduates from Cambridge, of whom there were then only a sprinkling. But the combination of an English wife and national dress had made Kaviratne the butt of many jokes among middle-class people. One story Daddy enjoyed telling was that Kaviratne had gone with his wife to one of the British-owned department stores in Colombo, and the salesman, after wrapping up Mrs. Kaviratne's purchases, had asked her, 'Shall I give the parcel to the boy, madam?'

Daddy didn't think any more highly of Sariputta: not only was it a Buddhist school but it was sited in Maradana (Daddy, in common with many other middle-class speakers, anglicised this to

'Marandan'), which was a congested and slummy part of the city. I had come to think of Sariputtans rather as the public-school boys in the English school stories I read regarded the 'bounders' from lowerclass schools who occasionally created trouble for them and were drubbed for their pains in the succeeding fight. We, too, had figuratively drubbed Sariputta soundly every year at cricket, and the match was always scheduled for the end of the school cricket season, as an encounter to be treated casually by the team. The year before, when we met Sariputta in the season's last match, Bethlehem had won every previous match of the season, and so had Sariputta, but this latter fact went disregarded by all of us. It was, therefore, a great shock to us when the 'bounders' actually won! Everybody — the team, other boys, old boys and masters — regarded this as a shameful humiliation. It was only partially smoothed over when S.P. Ferdinands, the leading cricket commentator in the country (he was reputed to know Wisden by heart, and could tell you without looking it up who held the record for the seventh-wicket partnership in first-class cricket) declared in his season's-end column that Bethlehem were indisputably the school champions, treating Sariputta's victory as one of those freaks of nature that have to be disregarded. But in spite of this unofficial trophy, Sulla had apparently decided that such a disaster should never be allowed to happen again. The next year, when the cricket season came round, there was no match against Sariputta in the calendar. I wonder what excuse Sulla found to cancel the fixture.

All this may have been at the back of my mind as I heard Wijeratne say his father was going to teach at Sariputta, but what struck me more immediately was the way he spoke English — slowly and deliberately, like an eater picking his way carefully through a difficult piece of fish full of bones. There was something about his accent, too, that reminded me of the mudalali at the top of our road who insisted on speaking to Daddy in English, though clearly he would have been more comfortable in his own tongue. I asked Wijeratne:

'So if your father teaches at Sariputta, why didn't you go there?'
Wijeratne was visibly embarrassed. I noticed then for the first
time a habit that was to become familiar to me in the years to come:
when embarrassed, he blinked his eyes twice or thrice. Then he said,
dropping his voice, as if fearful that other boys would overhear:

'I won a scholarship to Bethlehem.'

Ah, that explained it! At last year's prize-day Sulla had announced that a distinguished old boy who wished to remain anonymous had endowed a scholarship which would be awarded on a competitive examination to one needy student a year, 'so that talented boys whose parents' lack of means would normally preclude them from entering the school might have the opportunity of receiving a Bethlehemite education'. So, Wijeratne must have come out top in the exam. I looked at him with interest, and said:

'What's your best subject?

Not English, surely, I thought. Wijeratne blinked again, and said shyly:

'I think it is maths.'

Just then the appu arrived with his bunch of keys, and almost simultaneously the school bell rang. As we trooped into the classroom, Wijeratne stayed close to me as if he had found a protector he needed. When I picked a desk at which to sit, he quickly settled himself in the adjoining place, and just at that moment Mark walked in hurriedly through the doorway. As he came up to where I was sitting, he looked inquiringly at Wijeratne, and I said:

'New boy.'

Mark nodded, and took the desk just in front of mine. Hard on Mark's heels had come a stout, balding, middle-aged man in glasses, and we stood up to chorus, 'Good morning, sir.' That was Mr. Ohlmus, under whose shepherding as form master of Five A we were to spend the rest of the year.

5

Mr. Ohlmus was a Dutch Burgher, and now, looking back, I realise that his name should have been pronounced in Teutonic fashion, but that wasn't how it was said by anybody in the school, or, for that matter, how he said it himself. I think what must have happened was that the British, when they took over the island, dealt cavalierly with all the names they encountered that their tongues couldn't cope with and anglicised them all for their own comfort.— not only those of the Sinhalese, Tamils and other natives but also those of their predecessors

as colonisers, Portuguese and Dutch. And as always, the ruled mimicked the habits of the rulers. So Mr. Ohlmus had become 'Holums' — so much more decently English-like. There was another Burgher teacher on the staff, a Mr. Raux, who, I now surmise, was a descendant of a Frenchman who had taken service with the Dutch East India Company. But, confronted with his outlandish name, some British civil servant of the nineteenth century must have decided to call him 'Rooks', so that's what our Mr. Raux was called, and called himself.

Mr. Ohlmus's name had undergone another transformation at the hands of the boys: they called him, behind his back, 'Holmung', which was the Sinhala for 'ghost'. (Actually, no English speaker then called it 'Sinhala', that's come in only after 1956.) We didn't speak Sinhala, except to servants at home, or to such other of the lower orders as we might have occasion to address. In our early years in school we had been taught some Sinhala by a teacher, who wasn't even a regular member of the staff, but a 'pundit' who came in for this purpose, and who was something of a figure of fun to us; and anyway, we forgot most of what we had learnt as we progressed to the higher forms. Precisely because that language had an inferior status in our eyes, it was a common source of derisive nicknames. But in Holmung's case the nickname wasn't based on anything more than a chance similarity of sound: few people could have been less ghostlike than the man whose podgy figure and rubicund face now presented themselves to our gaze, with his jovial eyes glinting through his glasses.

Holmung opened the register and marked attendance, reading the names as they were listed, in alphabetical order.

'Abeysekera!' he called.

'Present, sir,' was the response.

Holmung looked at the boy.

'What's your full name, Abeysekera?' he asked.

Abeysekera stood up and mumbled, 'Francis Gerald Abeysekera.'

'Louder, boy!' commanded the master.

Abeysekera obeyed, and Holmung repeated the name after him.

in his hearty, full-throated voice. He then went through this process with every one of the twenty-five boys in the class: it was, we discovered later, an annual ritual that he performed on the first day of a new school year. Since, as I have already said, we were never called in the classroom by anything other than our surnames, the ritual could have served no purpose other than that of enlivening that first day. Holmung seemed to get an especial satisfaction out of savouring on his tongue any particularly unusual name, or any Christian names with more than two barrels, which he echoed with full resonance. So it was with Mark, whose string of names — Alexander Mark Bancroft Watson — seemed to delight him: he repeated them with so much gusto.

Holmung reached the last name in the list.

'Wijeratne!' he called.

The new boy stood up and murmured diffidently:

'Harischandra Wijeratne.'

'What's that? Say that again.'

Wijeratne did so.

'Harris what?' asked Holmung.

'Harischandra, sir,' said my neighbour, now more bashfully than before. The name fell strangely on our ears after all the Donalds and Georges and Peters.

Holmung looked down at his register.

'It says here that your name is K.A.H. Wijeratne. What do K and A stand for?'

Wijeratne twisted in shame, blinked agitatedly, and finally brought himself to say:

'Kandemula Arachchige, sir.'

Holmung's brow was furrowed.

'What kind of a name is that?'

Wijeratne blinked again, and said,

'It is a ge-name, sir.'

'Gay? It doesn't sound particularly jolly to me.

There was a burst of laughter from the class, amidst which Wijeratne sat down in confusion. I too had never heard a name like that before, and it was not till years later that I was able to ask Wijeratne

to unravel the mystery for me. It turned out that ge-names were clannames that every Sinhalese once possessed: most anglicised Christian families had dropped them, but Buddhists retained the tradition.

In calling the register Holmung had articulated the Sinhala and Tamil names as they were spelt in English. Just as 'Wijeratne', as said by him, seemed to contain the English name of a common rodent, so he rendered my own surname, Gunawardene, as 'Gunawardne', with the third syllable pronounced like the English word for a military conflict. But this didn't sound odd to me because that was exactly how I had been taught to say my own name; and when somebody, like the mudalali at the top of the road, said it in native fashion, the sounds seemed to me vulgar and a violation of my self.

6

Yesterday (you will remember it's the old man of 1997 who's writing) I had to visit that suburb where I spent my childhood and adolescence and went to school. The occasion was that a granddaughter of an old schoolfriend, Hugh Bartholomeusz, was marrying, and the reception was at the big hotel by the seaside in that suburb. I usually dread these occasions, and try to wriggle out of them if I can, because few things are as boring to me as a gathering of old men, fortuitously associated in their schooldays, reminiscing about old times. But Hugh, who has long been a successful surgeon, was very attentive and kind last year when my sister was dying of cancer, and I couldn't possibly stay away without being thought ungrateful.

The evening went very much as I had expected. There was only one other survivor from my year in school who had turned up, but there were others, a year or two younger and therefore belonging to the same 'thirties generation of old Bethlehemites. We sat around in a group, and the talk, after the champagne and wedding cake, turned on the standard topics: old school anecdotes, cricketing chit-chat, corruption scandals and grousing about the government. During a lull in the conversation, my old classmate, Gerald Abeysekera, now entirely bald and bulgy in the belly, turned to me and said:

'Dave, have you any idea whether Wijeratne is still around?'

'No,' I answered. 'Since he went away after the tragedy, I haven't set eyes on him?'

'Or heard from him?'

'No. Nor heard of him, even.'

'Do you think he can be dead?'

'That's possible, of course. But it's just as possible that he's still living but doesn't want to contact anybody.'

Shortly after that exchange, Gerald got up to visit the toilet, and I took advantage of the opportunity to thank my host, wish the new couple, and slip away as unobtrusively as I could. I had arrived at the hotel in a taxi (I no longer drive, and had sold my car two years earlier when I felt my eyesight weakening), but instead of picking up a taxi outside the hotel I now walked a short way. The landscape was changed almost beyond recognition from my schooldays' memories of it: the marks of the tourist industry had proliferated across it like a cancerous growth. I passed the girls' school where I had my first schooling before I went to Bethlehem, and I remembered Silverine, the girl next door with whom I used to walk to school and back daily - an idyllic friendship, it now seemed, free of the tensions and storms of later relationships. Opposite the school was the reputedly haunted house, stories of which used to intrigue and frighten us in our childhood. It was empty even at that time, and I once persuaded Silverine to dare the adventure of walking through its garden to the path at the back of the house. After a lot of coaxing, she agreed, and hand in hand (with my heart going pit-a-pat, I must confess) we got as far as the porch, then she shrieked and ran back: I was never able to persuade her again. Poor Silverine! she died in childbirth in her twenties. When I passed it yesterday the house was still empty and abandoned, a gaunt, decaying ruin, silhouetted against the twilight sky; two windows were hanging at crazy angles, their panes fallen, and the whole building looked as if it had been designed as an emblem of the ravages wrought by time on the world of my childhood and youth. I reached the spot where a smaller road branched off Hotel Road. That lesser road used to be called Frederick Avenue when I knew it years ago, but approaching it now, I saw that its nameboard

read 'Lumbini Mawatha'. It was only the location that enabled me to identify the house I was looking for, which stood at the intersection of the two roads. It was, I thought, the same house, still standing after sixty years, but its form and appearance had been drastically changed by alterations. It was now a tourist restaurant. There was a garish neon sign outside, a burst of rock music came blasting across the road, and a fat, middle-aged tourist in shorts, with his arm round a dark, young Sri Lankan girl, her sweet-looking face partly marred by a gash of crimson lipstick, emerged from the restaurant onto the road as I stood there, 'So this is where it all began,' I thought.

7

It began, in fact, the very next day after the beginning of the school year when Wijeratne made his appearance as a new boy. Holmung had given us the booklist for the new year on that first day. 'The school bookshop will have all of it,' he told us. 'Don't make the mistake of buying secondhand books. They may be cheap, but they are dirty, and how do you know who has used them before? It's like wearing secondhand clothes. Caldera,' he said to one of the boys in the front row, 'would you like to wear somebody else's dirty underpants?'

'No, sir,' Caldera responded fervently.

'Then don't buy secondhand books. You might get a skin disease, and all the money your parents have saved on buying them will go on doctors' bills.'

The next morning, however, I was sitting in class, waiting for the first bell to ring, when Wijeratne walked in, carrying a pile of books. I looked curiously at them as he put them down on the desk.

'New books,' he said. 'I just bought them.'

They certainly didn't look new, even the covers were soiled and stained.

'You mean they're new old books?' I said.

'Yes. I told my father what Mr. Ohlmus said. But he said many boys at Sariputta use secondhand books, but they do not get skin diseases.'

'Where did you get them?' I asked.

'At a shop close by. They sell secondhand books.'

'I haven't seen any secondhand bookshop here.'

'I will take you and show you, Dave. During the lunch interval?'

I opened the book on the top of the pile: it was Pendlebury's Arithmetic. On the flyleaf was the name of the previous owner, and a scrawled drawing — two circles with a straight line between them, which I knew was the schoolboy hieroglyphic for the penis and testicles, and below the straight line a kind of ellipse, whose meaning I could guess.

I hadn't taken Holmung's warning seriously, but I didn't relish the idea of buying secondhand books: part of the pleasure of a new school year was the possession of a set of new books, clean and neat and shiny. Anyway, my parents could afford them, as Wijeratne's probably couldn't. I was looking through the other books he had bought (they were all equally soiled, ink-stained and scrawled over), when he said something that riveted my attention.

'They sell exercise books also. Two cents cheaper.'

'Really?' I said.

'Yes. You come and see.'

That was worth following up. An ice-palam or a slab of chocolate was five cents. I did a quick calculation. We needed ten exercise books to start with: twenty cents added to my pocket-money meant four more ice-palams or chocolates. A moment's doubt crossed my mind.

'The exercise books aren't secondhand, no?'

'No.' Wijeratne smiled at my fears. 'Here, see.' He brought out a batch of exercise books from the bottom of his pile. 'Just like any other exercise books.'

'Alright. I'll come.'

8

Mark joined Wijeratne and me in the expedition to the secondhand bookshop during the lunch-break ('just for the walk,'-he said), and Wije (we began to call him that on the way) led us towards the intersection of Hotel Road and Frederick Avenue. As we approached the house, I saw a shiny painted sign hanging on the trellised frontage: it read 'Secondhand Schoolbooks in Good Condition', and below, in smaller letters, 'And all school requirements.' I noticed that 'requirements' was spelt wrong, but I also realised the shop must have been newly opened: the sign certainly hadn't been there when I passed that way during the Christmas holidays.

We mounted the steps to the veranda and entered through the open door. There was a girl sitting at a desk with her back to the entrance, stooped over a book in which she was writing, with a pile before her of what were evidently bills. At the sound of our footsteps she swung round, and then stood up. She was fair, and had an oval face which ended in a pointed chin; she was thin, and wore her hair long in two pigtails; she must have been around fifteen. That much I had time to observe before she turned round and disappeared behind a curtain calling softly, 'Pappa!', as she went in.

Owing to my straitlaced upbringing, I had only recently begun to feel the first stirrings of adolescent sexuality. Since my childhood idyll with Silverine, I had never really been close to any girl because my parents discouraged even casual friendships with the other sex — Mummy with puritanical severity, and Daddy with joking that was, I suppose, meant to be funny but only made me abnormally shy. But for a year or so now nature had begun to assert itself. I had become aware of these beings with whom contact was forbidden as enchanting and alluring creations, but my wishes had still gone no further than daydreams on the one hand and wetdreams on the other. Sometimes, on the way home from school, I would, by accident, find myself walking behind a schoolgirl, and my eyes would fix themselves on the bared spaces of her arms and legs, her hair and the nape of her neck, while my thoughts busied themselves with the hope that she was pretty — only sometimes to be cruelly disillusioned when I did have a full view of her face. But even when the face was attractive enough, what could I do? I didn't have the audacity of some of my schoolfellows who boasted of having progressed from a look to a smile to conversation to — could one believe it? — handholding! So the pretty faces glimpsed on the street or in the garden of a house as I passed by became only additions to the archives of my daydreams, sometimes figures in my masturbation fantasies.

So now, in that instant before the girl on the veranda swung round at the sound of our footsteps, I had hoped she might be good to look at. And in fact her face, as she revealed it in turning, was (I said to myself) 'quite nice'; but when she stood up, and even more, as she walked away, I decided she was excessively thin; her arms seemed bony, and her legs — what I could see of them between the hem of the white school uniform she was wearing and her bare feet — were spindly. But what jolted me out of any daydream I might have woven around her was her call of 'Pappa' as she disappeared. Not *Papa*, mind you, but *Pappa*. Most of my friends, I am sure, would have been mystified by this term, but I happened to know what it meant.

Once, when Daddy was taking our whole family to the pictures in his car, he wanted to say something to a clerk of his. He stopped at a dingy-looking little house by the street, and there was a small boy sitting on the doorstep blowing into a balloon. 'Is your father at home?' Daddy asked. 'Pappa!' the small boy called, and ran in. When we were on our way again, I asked Daddy, 'What was that *Pappa*?' 'It's what half-past six fellows call their fathers,' Daddy said. *Half-past six* was a favourite expression of his to describe people of lower status. 'But why?' I asked. 'I think it comes from the Portuguese,' he said: I didn't quite understand why the 'half-past six' people should say it in Portuguese. But now when the girl in the shop selling secondhand books said 'Pappa', I could place her: she was half-past six, and therefore, quite apart from her bony arms and spindly legs, not fit to be cast as the heroine in one of my fantasies.

An old man peeped out from behind the curtain, looked at us, and said, 'Come in, come in!' and parted his lips in a smile that exposed the gaps in his teeth. He was in trousers, but, as we went in, I noticed that the ends of his trouser-legs were frayed, as were the cuffs of his shirt. The inner room into which he took us must have been originally the sitting room of the house, but now three of the walls were lined, waist-high, with bookshelves. I suppose I can call them that, but they were really made up of simple unpainted planks, with blocks of wood, also unpainted, holding up each shelf. Besides these, the only furniture in the room was a small glassfronted cupboard, which held, I noticed, the other 'school requirements', such as rulers, pencils and erasers,

announced on the board outside, and an old-style almirah with a closed door that had a large flower pattern inlaid.

I asked the old man for exercise books — six single-ruled, three square-ruled, and one unruled — and he unlocked the almirah and brought out what I wanted. As I fished in my pocket for the money to pay for them, he said, 'You don't want any text-books?'

'I've already bought my text-books,' I said, though this wasn't true; Daddy was going to buy them on the way back from office at a shop where he would get a discount.

'Next time you come here. I will give them to you at less than half the new price.'

A fresh thought struck me. 'Do you also buy books?' I asked.

'Yes, of course. Any schoolbooks I will buy.'

'Can I bring you my last year's books?'

Certainly.'

That was a great idea. Daddy and Mummy wouldn't bother about what I did with my old books: they could go to swell my tuckshop fund.

While the old man and I were talking, Mark had been looking into the glassfronted cupboard; and he now asked, 'Can I buy that pencilcutter in the shape of a globe?' (Could Mark really want that? I wondered, or did he feel an obligation to buy something because of the poverty-stricken atmosphere of the shop?) The old man took Mark's money and mine, went back to the almirah, and rummaged in a drawer. Then he called, 'Girlie!'

The girl on the veranda came in. 'Putha, can you get me two five-cent pieces for this ten?' her father said.

Girlie (could that really be her name, I wondered, or was it only a petname?) disappeared silently through a rear door towards the back of the house, and came back a few moments later with the change. As we left, the old man said to Wije, 'Thank you for bringing your friends.'

Wije blinked twice or thrice, looked as if he wanted to say something, but was evidently at a loss for words, and only beamed beatifically.

That afternoon, Holmung was discussing a prose passage with us during the English period. 'The country bumpkin,' he read, 'found himself ill at ease in this fashionable and elegant drawing room.' 'What's a bumpkin?' he asked. 'Cooray, can you say?'

Cooray had evidently not been attending, and had heard the word only indistinctly. 'A kind of fruit, sir.' He paused, and added: 'What Cinderella's fairy godmother turned into a coach.'

The class dissolved into laughter, and Holmung walked up to Cooray and tweaked his ear, barking, 'Idiot!' He turned back to the class, and asked, 'Can anybody say? Yes, you, Watson?'

Mark said, 'A rustic, sir. Somebody from the village who is unpolished and — er — crude.'

'Yes, that's it.'

A voice behind me whispered, 'Like Wijeratne.'

I turned my head. It was fat Felsinger — 'Felsie-bada', as we called him, smiling broadly at his own remark. I couldn't tell whether Wije had heard it or not, and since Holmung was going on, all I could do was to frown at Felsinger.

But there was a sequel next morning. I was sitting in class before the first bell rang, and so were several other boys, chatting or horsing around. Wije was there too, and I was telling him I would go back to the shop some time with my old books and we could have a feed at the tuckshop with the proceeds, when Felsinger interrupted me from the seat behind us.

'Dave, you want to hear a new song I've learnt?'

'I don't mind,' I said indifferently.

Felsinger called out to the rest of the class: 'Come and listen to this new song!'

As a small knot of boys gathered round us, Felsinger started singing, to the tune of 'Simple Simon met a pieman':

Wije Bumpkin picked a pumpkin For selling at the fair.
Said Wije Bumpkin to the pumpkin, 'But what's there I can wear?'

There were a few titters, but nobody actually laughed. I glanced at Wije, who was blinking furiously, flushed in the face.

'That's bloody mean, Felsie —' I started to say, but Wije's tormentor had already broken into the second verse:

Said the pumpkin to Wije Bumpkin, 'But who the hell will care?' —

'Stop it! Stop it, you bastard!' a voice roared.

It was Mark, who had come up behind us. I had never heard Mark use the word 'bastard' before, and in fact, he looked angrier than I had ever known him to be. I had noticed over the years that whenever he lost his temper, his pupils danced in his eyes: now, I could have thought they were jitterbugging.

Mark had been made a school prefect at the end of the previous year; but even without that, the moral authority he generally commanded as well as his explosion of rage would have silenced Felsinger. The cluster of boys melted away, and Mark gently touched Wije on the shoulder before moving into his seat.

If Wije had looked to me up to that moment as his chosen protector, he switched then and there, I think, to Mark. It's from that incident that I date the fervent devotion with which he followed Mark, and which was to have such fateful consequences years later. But at the time I could only feel grateful for Mark's intervention, because nasty as Felsinger's behaviour was, I couldn't have stopped him myself.

10

That week I sat for the two papers for the Watson Memorial Prize, and as Mark had expected, I won it. The satisfaction of winning the prize was tempered by knowing I had won only by Mark's default, but the occasion marked a milestone in my growing up: it was the first time I had got into 'longs'. On prize-day, when I arrived at the school hall, Mark (who was due to receive the form prize) was waiting outside with a couple of other prefects.

'Oh ho! Longs, tie and all! Where to catch?' he said, poking me in the ribs. Mark, like the other prefects, was in the regulation school tie. He handed me a letter.

'Dad wanted me to give you this.'

The letter, in a large, straight, angular hand, said:

Dear David.

It is my practice each year to entertain to lunch the winner of the Watson Memorial Prize. I hope you will give me and my wife the pleasure of having you as our guest. Would Saturday, this weekend, suit you? If so, we shall look forward to seeing you at my home in Rosmead Place.

May I say how impressed I was by your papers at the prize examination, and especially by your essay on 'Other People's Follies'? I shall tell you more about it when I meet you.

Yours sincerely J.R.D. Watson

'Is Saturday okay?' Mark asked.

'Yes. Should I write to your father and thank him?'

'No need to be so formal about it; I'll tell him you're coming.'

'Are you sure that's alright, Mark?'

'Yes, of course. Anyway, Mum and Dad are in the hall, they'll probably speak to you after the show's over. I thought of asking Wije too. Poor chap, he needs cheering up after Felsie behaving like a bloody arse.'

'Oh that's nice of you, Mark.'

The prize that was handed to me by the Bishop of Colombo as chief guest was a copy of Shakespeare's *Complete Works*. It was bound in red leather, and stamped with the school crest — an emblem of the Nativity, with two angels hovering over the Child in the manger, surrounded by the school motto in Gothic lettering, *Mens sana in corpore sano*. As I write, I can see the book, still there in my bookcase, the only one surviving across sixty years.

After the speeches and the prize distribution, we sang the school song, and as everybody started moving out, Mark grabbed my arm and escorted me to where his father and mother were waiting. Mr. Watson was a large, tall, imposing figure, his wife small and dainty, still goodlooking in her forties. They both shook hands with me, and Mr. Watson said,

'Mark tells me Saturday is alright.'

'Yes, thank you, Mr. Watson.'

It may seem strange that while of all his classmates, at any rate, I was the closest to Mark, I had never been to his home: I had not, for instance, attended any of his birthday parties, as I had those of one or two boys who lived nearer home. That Mark had never invited me was, I think, due to a kind of excessive fear of swank. Mark must have been so conscious of the fact that his family stood way above mine, both in wealth and in position, that, just as he was reluctant to talk about them, he was unwilling to ask me home lest it might seem a kind of showing-off. I guessed that the rule was now being broken only because Mr. Watson was entertaining me in accordance with his usual custom in respect of the Watson Memorial.

Before Saturday came, Wije and I had agreed he would come to my place in the morning and we would take the bus (actually, we would have to change from one bus to another to get to Eye Hospital junction). It was a hot day, and we had a fair distance to walk from the bus stop to the house in Rosmead Place. By the time we got there, I was mopping my face and neck and thinking uncomfortably that I wouldn't be looking my best. But I was only in shirt and longs; Wije was decked out in a coat and tie for the occasion, and must have found the heat even stickier. The coat seemed to fit him, but the trousers looked a little baggy.

'Have you worn longs before?' I asked him.

Wije was silent for a moment, then said, 'N-no. I will tell you something, but you must not tell Mark.'

'Of course not.'

'This is my father's suit. He thought I should wear it.'

We found the house — a large, two-storeyed house set a good distance away from the street. I rang the bell at the gate, and in a few moments Mark came running up and opened it.

'Ah, the honoured guests!' he said. 'Come in, come in.'

We walked up the drive, flanked on both sides by smooth lawns, on one of which a barebodied gardener was operating a sprinkler. I glimpsed a tennis court at the far end of the garden behind the house.

'You play tennis, Mark?' I asked him.

'Sometimes. But it's Dad's favourite game. He won the Ceylon title once when he was young.'

Mark took us in through the veranda and sitting room, saying: 'Dad isn't back yet from office, you know Saturday is a halfday. So we'll go to my own room upstairs.'

While passing through the sitting room, which seemed enormous to me, I noticed a curious object, with a huge horn dwarfing the box-like base with a turntable below it. It made me think of a man with a head that was too large for his body.

'What's that?' I asked Mark.

'A gramophone.'

'Of course I know it's a gramophone, you ass, but I've never seen one with such a huge horn.'

'Yes, I call it the sacred cow with the monstrous horn, but it's really an EMG handmade gramophone. Dad brought it back the last time he was in London. He says you have to order it, and then they start building it for you.'

'What's so special about it? Why the huge horn?'

'It's supposed to make a big difference to the sound. You ask Dad, he'll play it for you.'

Mark's room was decorated with pictures of female filmstars on one wall — Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Claudette Colbert, Norma Shearer in her Juliet cap, Dorothy Lamour in a sarong from *The Hurricane*. I envied Mark: I wouldn't have been allowed to put up pictures of female stars in my room. On the facing wall were four pictures of men. I looked hard at them, they weren't any filmstars I could recognise.

'Who are those?' I asked.

'Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Fats Waller. Four great jazzmen.'

I looked again at the pictures. 'Negroes?' I asked, with a certain wonder.

'Yes, American. They play the best jazz; after all, they made it. Would you like to hear some of it?'

In those days I was terribly ignorant about music: I knew the pop songs of the day I heard on the radio, and I knew the records Daddy used to play on his portable gramophone. Strauss waltzes most of the time, or, when he was drinking, 'Danny Boy' and 'Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair'. Beer always made him sentimental.

'I don't know jazz,' I said, 'except for short bits I've heard on the radio; they always make me switch off.' (The fact I had just learned from Mark, that jazz was created by 'Negroes', didn't make me think any more favourably of it.)

'Why so?' Mark asked.

'Well, there seems to be no tune in it, only a lot of noise.'

'Let's see whether I can find something you will like.' He flipped through the records that were arranged on one side of his bookcase, and went to a table that held a record player hitched to a radio.

'Aren't you going to play it on that thing downstairs?'

'On that? It's a sacred cow, I told you, I don't touch it. Dad plays his Beethoven and Mozart on it. He would think my kind of music would pollute it.'

He put the record on. I don't remember now my impressions of it with any clarity, except that I didn't like it.

'By one of them?' I asked when the music finished, pointing to the pictures on the wall.

'No, not at all,' he said. 'That was Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. Did you like it?'

I shook my head. 'Too jazzy.'

Today, when I realise Gershwin diluted jazz for white American middle-class audiences, and, in *Rhapsody in Blue*, dressed it up to make it sound as much like symphonic music as possible, I wonder how inane I must have seemed to Mark. But perhaps Mark himself at sixteen wasn't as discriminating as he later become. Feeling probably that Wije was being left out of the conversation, Mark turned to him.

'What did you think, Wije? Did you like it?'

'Yes. I liked it.'

'Oh good. I'll play you some more Gershwin then, and Dave can plug his ears if he wants to.'

I wondered whether Wije's answer was genuine, or he had just wanted to please Mark. But Mark seemed to take him at his word, and went on:

'This one is a song from a musical.'

'What do you mean, musical?' I asked.

'A play with music in it. Like opera. But it's only called opera when it's sung by fat sopranos and tenors, and then you listen to it on Dad's monstrous horn. This is different.'

He told us briefly the story of *Porgy and Bess*, and played 'I Love You, Porgy'. This time I really hated the music, it didn't sound to me like a song at all. Wije said at the end,

'That was nice.'

I was glad when a servant came to the door to say the master was back and we were wanted downstairs; otherwise, I am sure we would have had more Gershwin.

11

Mr. and Mrs. Watson were in the sitting room as we came in. They shook hands with me, and Mark introduced Wije, saying:

'This is Wijeratne. He joined college only this term.'

After we sat down, Mr. Watson said to Wije:

'Where were you before you came to Bethlehem?'

'At Dharmaloka, sir.'

'And what made you join Bethlehem?

Wije was blinking away agitatedly to find himself the object of attention, but I could see he was also pleased. He said:

'I won a scholarship.'

'Oh!' said Mr. Watson, looking at him with apparently heightened interest. 'Then you must be a very good student. And what did you do best in at the scholarship exam?'

'I think in maths, sir. It is the subject I like best.

'Then you must be cleverer than me, because I was hopeless at

maths. Well, well! I'm sure by this time next year you'll be carrying off the maths prize. There is a maths prize for Form Five, isn't there, Mark?'

'Oh yes, Dad.'

'Well, there's something for you to aim at.'

Suddenly a startlingly new thought took possession of me. When Mark said he was inviting Wije too to lunch, I had accepted his explanation that he wanted to 'cheer him up'. But now, with Mr. Watson taking an avuncular interest in Wije, the invitation appeared to me in a different light. Wije's scholarship, as the Principal had announced, had been endowed by an 'old boy who wished to remain anonymous': was that old boy Mr. Watson himself? Had he wanted to meet at the same time two boys who had benefited from his generosity? After all, since Mark had never invited me home before, it was unlikely he would have asked Wije of his own free will. But I had no time to pursue these thoughts because Mr. Watson had turned to me.

'I told you, Dave — isn't that your name? — I liked your essay very much. You were the only boy who chose that subject, "Other People's Follies". The others all wrote on standard subjects like "The Prospects for World Peace" or "Is Ceylon Ready for Self-Government?".

'That's why I didn't choose them, Mr. Watson. Because they were standard.'

'Yes, very good. Now tell me, is Mrs. Atapattu a real person?'

I had started my essay by saying, 'When old Mrs. Atapattu comes to see my mother, the conversation is bound to be interesting', and had gone on to describe how Mrs. Atapattu would gossip about the foibles and follies of her neighbours, out of which she got a great deal of enjoyment.

I answered Mr. Watson's question with, 'No. I just imagined that there might be such a person.'

'Yes, of course there are. So you created the character, Dave. You certainly have the gift of imagination. Why, you might even become a novelist in time.'

'Thank you, Mr. Watson.'

A servant came in with a tray of drinks, and while these were being served, Mr. Watson turned to his wife, and said:

'Is Marina joining us?'

'Yes, I think so. She was changing when I came down.'

• Mr. Watson turned back to Wije, evidently wanting to maintain a parity of attention between the two of us. 'If you were at Dharmaloka, you must have lived in Galle.'

'Yes, sir.'

'I used to know it when I was stationed there as a young civil servant. It was a pretty little town then. How is it now?'

'Still nice,' Wije said with some enthusiasm in his voice. 'I like living there better than Colombo.'

'Ah! I used to love walking on the ramparts.' He turned to his wife. 'Remember, Doreen, that trip we took to Galle in our first year of marriage?'

'Yes, how could I forget? It was a lovely place.'

Just then the heavens opened, a great light shone on me, and a choir of angels started singing 'Hallelujah!'

12

At least, that was how it seemed to me at the time, but what actually happened was that the door of the sitting-room opened, and Marina, Mark's sister, came in. But how can I describe her as she was then, the first time I saw her?

I can, of course, itemise her looks: even after the passage of sixty years, I can close my eyes and recapture the image of her: tall, like her father and brother (but where Mark was slim, she was rounded and full-bodied); unusually long, slanting eyes and straight hair that fell in two cascades below her shoulders; a skin that was bright and clear and golden-brown... I could go on, but it's hopeless, no catalogue of features could possibly explain the shattering effect of her first apparition on me. Nor can it answer the question: was she really as exceptionally beautiful as I thought her, or was it that I saw her just when my unfolding self was ready to take a visible person as the counterpart of the images of my dreams?

She couldn't have been more than fourteen, but she looked older than she really was, as, gravely and with merely the slight hint of a smile, she acknowledged Mark's introductions of Wije and me. Her eyes rested on me only a moment before she turned away to accept the drink that the servant was proffering her. There was no shyness; on the contrary, there was an air of complete self-possession that added to the impression she created of being more grown-up than her years.

I told myself that it was my bad luck she hadn't come in a few moments earlier, when she might have heard her father compliment me on my essay and even say I might grow up to be a novelist. For more than anything else, perhaps, that I had wanted in my whole life, I desired at that moment to impress her, to see those strange, angularly placed eyes gaze at me with interest or curiosity. I even considered for a moment asking, 'Was there anything else in my essay that you liked, Mr. Watson?' and rejected the idea: she might think I was a conceited puppy who was trying to show himself off.

The conversation flowed round me, but I hardly listened to it. Marina meanwhile played with a small black cocker spaniel who had followed her into the room; she bounced a ball on the floor while he leapt up and caught it in his mouth. I sat silent, and didn't want to stare too obviously at Marina; and yet, even when I looked away from her, I was intensely conscious of her presence and form as if she were a glowing source of heat and light pervading the whole room.

We shifted to the dining-table as soon as everybody had finished their drinks. I was placed opposite Marina, while Wije was given the seat next to hers. I was glad of this arrangement, because to sit by her would have been altogether too overwhelming, while across the table I could cast covert glances at her.

Mrs. Watson had laid on an elaborate lunch for us — as it turned out: soup, a fish course, a meat course and dessert, all served by an appu — and there was consequently an array of cutlery on each side of our plates. I managed to cope with that because Daddy had once taken me to a formal dinner at the big hotel in our suburb, and he had coached me in advance about how to handle the instruments: 'start from the outside and work inwards.' But Wije, I guessed, must have been intimidated and baffled, and he couldn't even have had the

counsel that Daddy had given me on that first occasion: 'If you're in doubt, wait till others start eating and copy what they do.' And I, at least, was accustomed to using a fork and spoon to eat my rice and curry at home. Wije, I suspected, ate with his fingers, so that now he handled his knife awkwardly, holding it in the way one would a pen, the only instrument with which he was familiar. However, he survived the soup without mishap; but when the fish was served, he started on it with the knife and fork meant for the meat, so that when the meat dish came round, he made an ineffective jab at it with his fish knife. Mrs. Watson kindly rescued him by saying, 'No, you won't be able to use that,' and called to the appu to bring him a replacement.

I was rather worried about Wije's mistake, because I thought Marina might think less well of me as a companion of somebody who didn't know the proper etiquette. But at the same time I had to admit to myself that it would hardly have made any difference: she seemed to be almost oblivious of both Wije and me, making such little conversation as she did during the meal with her parents and Mark. Most of this was about the plans for an outing with her friends on Sunday, and a number of names were dropped, of girls mostly; but Mark was evidently to be there, and somebody he referred to as 'Steve'. I guessed that he was part of that other life of Mark that I didn't share.

It was only towards the end of this conversation that I realised that the venue of this trip, picnic, whatever, would be the beach in our suburb, because Mark told Marina, 'That's where Dave and Wije live.'

Those extraordinary slanting eyes turned for a moment to me. 'Oh, really?' she said.

My heart fluttered excitedly that moment, thinking she might ask, 'Would you like to come?' Had Mark in fact dropped his remark in order to give her an opening to invite us (the trip seemed to be her affair)? But the moment passed, and I realised my wish couldn't have been fulfilled anyway: she couldn't have asked me without Wije, and whatever she thought of me, she couldn't have regarded him, with his unpolished accent and his baggy trousers, as appropriate company.

The meal was over, and the last plates had been cleared away, when Mark said:

'Dad, Dave was very interested to listen to your sacred cow. I played him some music, but I told him I couldn't touch the holy of holies.'

'Yes, I did hear some noises when I passed that way before lunch,' said Mr. Watson, chuckling as he rose. 'Now, boys, I'll play you some real music.'

'Please play the Oboe Quartet, Dad, please,' said Marina.

'Alright.' Mr. Watson went to his record cupboard and brought out two records. 'This is Mozart,' he said. 'The Oboe Quartet that Marina wanted. A real beauty.'

The music began, and it would be gratifying if I could say that I heard it with more appreciation than I had of the Gershwin. And I was anxious to like it, because Marina had shown so much enthusiasm for it, and was listening to it with her lips parted. But though I thought at the beginning that it had some nice tunes, I soon lost my way in it. It took four sides of 78s, in those days; and I wasn't even used to a piece of music that, as it seemed to me, was so long. At the end of what I now know to have been the slow movement, Marina said softly, while Mr. Watson was turning the record over: 'That's the part I like best.'

When the music ended, Wije showed his approval of it just as readily as he had done of the Gershwin. 'That was nice,' he said. Whether or not he really liked it, I envied him because Marina gave him a smile of approval. It was a smile not very different from the one she had given the cocker spaniel when he successfully intercepted the ball, but how happy I would have been to be the object of such favour!

That day was to make a great difference to my hopes and dreams for a long time to come. Daddy and Mummy asked me on my return how things had gone, and what the great J.R.D. Watson had said to me. Daddy was pleased that Mr. Watson had praised my essay, but he wasn't so thrilled by the suggestion that I might become a novelist: he would have been much happier if Mr. Watson had said, 'Some day you may be a civil servant like me.' But while I was talking about Mr. Watson, it seemed to me that by not telling Daddy and Mummy about Marina I was harbouring so weighty a secret that its pressure was a load on my heart.

I went to bed to lie awake a long time, thinking about Marina. I wove fantastic situations in my mind in which I won her love by rescuing her from floods or kidnappers or wild beasts. 'Oh Dave, how lucky I am that you were there!' she said, clinging to me gratefully and kissing me. But that was the furthest my fantasies went towards sensual contact: I could no more have thought of soiling her image with the stuff of my former nightly imaginings than I could have dared to degrade in that way the two Princesses in the picture on my mother's bedroom wall.

13

On the way back from Mark's, I had told Wije that I would like to revisit the secondhand bookshop in order to sell my old books. 'Are they open on Sunday — do you know?' I asked.

'They are always open. They live there.'

'Okay, then I'll go tomorrow morning.'

'I will come with you,' Wije said.

'But you don't have to. I'll get the money tomorrow, and you and Mark and I can have a feed on Monday.'

'That is alright. But, anyway, I will come with you to the bookshop.'

I didn't understand why, but, of course, I couldn't turn him down. We arranged that he would come to my place on Sunday morning, and we would go on from there.

I left home with Wije about nine on Sunday, and I remembered that then, or maybe a little later, Marina would be on the beach with her friends — not half a mile away. Would she pass down Hotel Road, and see me walking towards or back from the shop? If so, was it possible that she would say, 'Oh Dave, won't you join us? I'm so sorry, I should have thought of it yesterday.' But that was hardly likely, I told myself: I would be with Wije, and if she didn't want to ask us the previous day, she wouldn't be likely to do so now.

When we got to the shop and mounted the steps to the veranda, Girlie was seated, as before, at her desk, and again in a white school uniform and barefooted. But what took me by surprise was that she greeted Wije with a shy, but still unmistakably friendly, smile. Wije

responded by whispering, 'Hullo, Girlie!', which surprised me even more, and she whispered back 'Hullo!' and beamed quite broadly. She didn't take any notice of me at all until I told her, 'I have come to sell some of my old books,' whereupon she ran in, as on our previous visit, calling 'Pappa!'

I wanted to ask Wije how he had got on friendly terms with Girlie so soon, but I had no opportunity to do this because the old man came out and welcomed us, 'Come in, come in!'

Wije and I went into the inner room, and at a glance I could see that the book stock had grown. Not only were the improvised bookshelves full, but there were three chairs, two of them rather rickety, which hadn't been there before, and evidently serving no purpose other than that of supporting the piles of books on them. There was another heap of books lying on the floor.

'You have more books than last time,' I said.

'Yes, many boys have brought their old books to me.'

I showed him the textbooks I wanted to sell, and he looked through them and offered me eight rupees for the lot. I wasn't going to bargain: eight rupees was a princely sum to me, since I got only five as pocket money in a month. So the transaction was completed, and we went out. On the veranda Wije whispered 'Cheerio!' to Girlie; this time I echoed him, so that she looked in turn at each of us as she answered, more with the movement of her lips and her smile than with her voice. I decided that, in spite of her thinness, she was almost pretty when she smiled and showed her small even teeth.

Outside Wije said to me, 'Do you like to come home with me, Dave?'

'Yes,' I replied. I was all the readier to agree because I was bursting with curiosity to know how he had made friends with Girlie. 'You're a sly fellow, Wije.'

'Why, Dave?'

'You look so quiet, but you're like Jebanesan in getting off the mark, ah?' (Jebanesan was our champion sprinter who had broken the schools' record.)

'What do you mean, Dave?'

'Why, you've found yourself a girlfriend so quickly!'

Wije blinked several times rapidly, this time waving his arms too in agitation. 'No, no, Dave! She is not my girlfriend!'

'Liar! Then how did you start saying "Hullo, Girlie" to her?'

'I just met her on the road one day, Dave — by accident — and I spoke to her.'

If that was true, I still marvelled at Wije's initiative. Would I have the courage to speak to Marina if I happened to see her anywhere?

'Where was this?'

'On the Galle Road. She was going to the market.'

'You mean she does the marketing for the house?'

'Yes. Her mother is dead, and Girlie runs the house. They have one servant, but she has to cook and wash up and sweep, so Girlie does a lot of housework. Besides helping her father to run the shop.'

'Then how does she go to school?'

'She does not go to school, Dave. She left school after her mother died.'

'Why does she wear that school uniform if she doesn't go to school?'

'Perhaps she does not have many things to wear. Her father was a clerk in a government office, and he has retired.'

'Then how did he get all those secondhand books?'

'Girlie said he used all the money he got to start the shop. "Commuted pension", she said, I don't know what that is,

'And you found out all this standing on the road and talking to her?'

Wije only blinked silently in answer.

'Come on, tell me, Wije! You must have talked to her a long time to learn all that.'

'Well, I — er — walked with her to the market, Dave. And I helped to carry her things home. Only, I did not know whether her father would like it, so I left her at the bottom of Frederick Avenue, and I turned back.'

I marvelled again at Wije's exploit. I had been dreaming of winning Marina's love by saving her from wild beasts, and here was small, quiet, timid Wije making friends with a girl by carrying, I supposed, onions and potatoes for her.

When I had recovered from the effect of this discovery, I asked, 'Is Girlie her real name?'

'No, she is Padma. But her father has always called her Girlie.'

During this conversation I had accompanied Wije up Frederick Avenue, along Galle Road and down a small side-path, and we were now outside a small old house, its veranda fronted with trellis-work painted a patchy green. Wije said, 'This is my place.'

14

On the veranda was seated in a cane chair a middle-aged man, short, with greying hair, reading a Sinhala newspaper with the help of his glasses. He looked up as we came in and pushed his reading glasses up to his forehead: Wije said, 'Thaththa, this is my friend Dave.'

'Sit down,' Wije's father said in a commanding manner. As I obeyed him and sat on one of the other two cane chairs on the veranda, he went on: 'Dave? Short for David, I suppose.'

'Yes, Mr. Wijeratne,' I said.

'David, king of the Jews, author of the Psalms. You were named after him.' It was an assertion, not a question, as he said it.

'Actually, no, Mr. Wijeratne. David was the name of an uncle of mine who died young. My father named me after him.'

'No difference,' said Mr. Wijeratne in the tone of somebody who wouldn't take contradiction. 'Your uncle would have been named after King David in the Bible. It comes to the same thing.'

This is how my first impressions of the Wijeratne household were formed. I had, to begin with, been struck by the Sinhala newspaper that Wije's father was reading when we came in, then by Wije saying thaththa to his father — a term that until then I had heard only among servants and other such people of the lower classes. And the family, I could see from the smallness of the house and the scantiness as well as the ramshackle look of the furniture, was poor: Daddy would immediately have written them off as 'half-past six people'. But what I couldn't square with those impressions was Mr. Wijeratne's authoritative tone, which wasn't at all like the manner in which Daddy's clerks and other of his subordinates spoke on those rare

occasions when one of them came home. Of course, Mr. Wijeratne was a teacher and must have been accustomed to talking in a commanding fashion to schoolboys. But even so, I felt a certain resentment at his tone and his words stirring in my heart: who was he to tell me whom I was named after?

From where I sat I could look into the small sitting-room beyond. As a breeze blew aside the crocheted curtain that hung in the doorway, I glimpsed a woman in a long-sleeved blouse and an ankle-length skirt, barefooted; at the same moment she called 'Putha!'. Wije rose and went in.

'You must be surprised that I know the Bible,' Mr. Wijeratne was going on, putting down his newspaper and taking off his glasses. 'But I was educated in a Christian school — a very good school of its kind — Westland College, Galle. I know the Bible thoroughly, I even won the scripture prize twice at Westland.'

Mr. Wijeratne fixed his eyes on me with the air of a prizefighter facing an opponent whom he is sure he will knock out in the first round.

'Perhaps I know the Bible better than you. Let's see. What do you know about Noah's Ark?'

Transfixed by the steady gaze of his cold eyes, I hastily tried to dredge up from my memory what I could recall from my Sunday school lessons about Noah.

'God sent a flood — a big flood — to drown all the people on earth. Mm — that is, He wanted to drown all the sinners. Only He wanted to save Noah.'

'Why?' interjected Mr. Wijeratne.

'Because Noah was a good man.'

'Where did the flood come from?'

'God sent rain for forty days.'

'And forty nights. Right, go on.'

I was emboldened by the fact that I had survived the test so far, and my voice became firmer and my narrative more fluent.

'Noah took himself and his family into the ark, and also two animals, male and female, of every kind. That was what God told him to do before the rain started. Then, when the flood came, the ark floated on it, and when the rain stopped, the ark landed on a mountain.'

Mr. Wijeratne had listened to my telling of the story with a superior smile. Now he thrust his head forward and his eyes lit up.

'And you believe all that is true?'

'Yes.'

'Why do you believe it?'

'Because it's in the Bible.'

'So?'

'The Bible is the word of God.'

'That's the only reason you believe it?'

'That's good enough.'

'Answer my question. Is that the only reason you believe it, yes or no?'

'Yes.'

At that moment Wije came back to the veranda with a tray on which were a bottle of orange barley and two glasses. He held it out to me, and while I poured myself a drink and said, 'Thank you,' I noticed that Wije was blinking. I guessed he was uncomfortable over his father's inquisition of me.

Mr. Wijeratne refused a drink when the tray was taken to him, and told Wije, 'You have it.' Wije poured out the rest of the orange barley for himself, and sat down, looking very unhappy.

'Now let me ask you,' Mr. Wijeratne resumed his interrogation. 'How large was the ark?'

'It must have been pretty large,' I faltered.

'You mean you don't know the measurements?'

'No.'

'As I thought, you don't really know your own Bible. Genesis, Chapter 6, verse 15. It was 300 cubits long, 50 cubits wide and 30 cubits high. You know how much a cubit is?'

'N-no.'

'In modern measurements, that's about 450 feet by 75 by 45. Less than the size of the big hotel by the beach. Now, David, do you think there would be enough room in that space for all the different kinds of living creatures on earth?'

'I don't know, Mr. Wijeratne.'

'Just think only of the various kinds of whales, and the huge tanks they would need to swim in. And think of all the food all the animals would want. Not just plants and grass, but other animals to feed all the carnivorous animals. Imagine all the rats and frogs to feed all the snakes, all the deer and wild boar and cattle as food for the lions and tigers and leopards and hyenas. How do you think Noah managed?'

'I don't know, Mr. Wijeratne.'

'After all, at the Dehiwela Zoo, there's a whole staff of keepers to feed the animals. How did Noah cope with feeding-time in his zoo? He had only himself and his wife, and his three sons and their wives, to handle it. Feeding thousands and thousands of animals of different species?'

I was getting quite shamefaced at being unable to answer Mr. Wijeratne's questions, so, in desperation, I thought I would risk a guess.

'Perhaps God worked a miracle, Mr. Wijeratne. Maybe He arranged that for forty days the animals would do without food.'

It was an unhappy gamble. Mr. Wijeratne smiled an even more superior and more triumphant smile than before.

'I told you you didn't know your Bible, David... Genesis, Chapter 6, verse 21, says that God told Noah: "And take thou unto thee of all food that is eaten, and thou shalt gather it to thee; and it shall be food for thee, and for them." For them — that is, for the animals."

15

My visit to Wije's was ruined by his father's argumentativeness. I didn't stay long after Mr. Wijeratne had delivered his finishing thrust. Wije accompanied me a little way up the side-road and said, apologetically, 'I am sorry that my father argued with you.' 'Don't worry about it,' I told him comfortingly. He told me that his father's arguments about Noah's ark came out of a book by a man called Robert Ingersoll. 'My father says he is an American rationalist, and he admires him a lot.'

'What's a rationalist?' I asked.

'My father says it is a man who accepts only what is in keeping with reason.'

I had a suspicion that what Wije most regretted about the argument was that he hadn't been able to confide further in me about Girlie. During the lunch interval the next day I drew him out again, and he told me Girlie had two brothers and a sister, who had died when they were small.

'After the Great War there was a flu epidemic, and a lot of people died. It came to Ceylon also. Girlie's brothers and sisters all got it and died.'

'And Girlie didn't?'

'No. Girlie was not born then. Her mother loved her very much because she was the last child, born after all the others died. But when Girlie was five, her mother died because of another illness.'

'So who brought her up?'

'Her father, with the help of his sister.'

I didn't tell Wije that his father's questions that Sunday had caused me some disquiet for the rest of the day. At the dinner-table I thought I would dispel my doubts by raising them with Daddy. I asked, 'Daddy, do you know the size of Noah's ark?'

'No.'

'It was something like four hundred feet by fifty by forty. How did Noah get all the thousands of kinds of animals into that space? And all the food to feed them?'

Daddy stopped in the action of lifting to his mouth a piece of beef impaled on his fork. 'For God all things are possible. Anyway, how did you get that question into your head?'

'Mr. Wijeratne asked me, and I couldn't answer.'

'Wijeratne?'

'You know, Wije's father. Wije, the boy who came for me this morning,'

'That little shrimp of a fellow?'

'Yes.'

'What the hell is his father up to, trying to undermine your faith?'

'I don't think he was trying to do that, Daddy. I think he only wanted to find out how much I knew. And Mr. Wijeratne knew the Bible backwards, Daddy, he quoted the numbers of the chapters and verses.'

'The hell he did. They say even the devil can quote scripture. Didn't you tell me his son won a scholarship to Bethlehem?'

'Yes, Daddy. He's very bright in maths.'

'He sends his son to a Christian school — on a scholarship at that — and he tries to undermine the faith of other boys! I feel like complaining to the Principal and getting his son's scholarship cancelled.'

'Oh, please don't do that, Daddy; that would be terrible for me.'

I had a great deal of trouble calming Daddy's outraged feelings. Fortunately, Mummy supported me by saying, 'Don't complain, Francis, it'll be too awkward for Dave.' Daddy subsided, though not without some muttering into his after-dinner glass of port.

16

Holmung in one of his Latin lessons had told us about Janus, the Roman god of boundaries and doorways, who was represented with two faces. In the classroom Wije was Janus-faced. The maths master, and those who taught mathematics-related subjects (physics and chemistry), saw one face: in their eyes he was a brilliant student. His greatest success in this light was when Mr. Ariaratnam, our maths master, handed him back an exercise book in which Wije had proved some rider in geometry that we had been set. Going to the board, Mr. Ariaratnam proceeded to prove the rider, saving at the end:

'Everybody who got it right has proved it that way, and that's the way I would have done it too. Everybody except one boy. This is the way Wijeratne has done it.'

He set out the proof Wije had found, and said:

'A highly original proof, and more economical than the other. Very good, Wijeratne, very good indeed.'

Naturally, the whole class turned and looked at Wije, and he went into such a frenzy of blinking that it seemed his evelids would fall off.

But the other face of Janus was seen in the English and Latin classes (and at Bethlehem everybody had to do Latin, regardless of aptitude, because it was the heart of the good old British public school curriculum). Wije managed to get by in English, even though his non-élite accent must have jarred on Holmung's ears. But the Latin period was a daily ordeal to Wije, who had never succeeded in penetrating the thickets of Latin grammar. Holmung, therefore, thought of Wije as a sub-standard intelligence, since English and Latin were both subjects he taught. He would either scream in fury, 'Idiot!', 'Moron!' or 'Nincompoop!' at Wije's newest error, or he would release his irritation in barbed sarcasm: 'Scholarship boy, huh? Perhaps they meant a scholarship not to the Fifth Form but to the hostel kitchens!' Behind us Felsie-bada and one of his cronies guffawed, taking advantage of the licence granted by the form master.

But Wije's big disaster in the Latin class came about as a consequence of something for which, justly speaking, he was hardly to blame at all. Since the beginning of the term Holmung had concentrated on making us learn by heart the mnemonics at the back of Kennedy's *Latin Grammar* which are meant to help in distinguishing the genders of Latin nouns. (None of us knew the word *mnemonics* then, but that's what they were, with rhyme and metre to assist the memory.) Holmung would declaim fifteen or twenty lines of the mnemonics each time, and then he would ask us to learn that lot by heart. At the next lesson he would first ask a few boys in turn to recite the set portion, then he would throw a dozen or so nouns at us, and ask us to identify their genders. Wije fared even worse at this exercise than was usual for him in the Latin class, and he had earned a high quota of knocks, ear-tweakings and insults even before the fatal day when we had got on to masculine nouns of the third declension.

Most of Kennedy's rules were put pithily into a few lines of verse at a time, but his greatest technical feat was with the masculine nouns ending in -is of the third declension — these being exceptions so numerous that Kennedy had to make a long litany out of them. Holmung would deliver these lines as rhythmically and sonorously as if they were a passage of poetry from Virgil or Ovid. He began quietly enough with the introductory couplet:

Many nouns in -is we find To the masculine assigned:...

Then Holmung quickened his delivery, taking in the sixteen words that followed — four to a line, disyllables all:

amnis, axis, caulis, collis, clunis, crinis, fascis, follis, fustis, ignis, orbis, ensis, panis, piscis, postis, mensis...

His tempo changed at that point, like a musician switching from *allegro* to *andante*, slowing down for the three-syllabled words with long vowels at the ends of the next two lines:

torris, unguis and canalis, vectis, vermis and natalis...

Then back to *allegro* for the closing couplet:

sanguis, pulvis, cucumis, lapis, casses, manes, glis.

And on that final word, the only monosyllable in the whole list, Holmung slammed his copy of Kennedy down on his desk, like a conductor bringing down his baton on the final chord of a virtuoso performance.

It was one, no doubt; but you may be left wondering whether all that time spent by several generations of Ceylonese schoolboys 'by-hearting' (as the expression went) Kennedy's mnemonics helped them to become better kachcheri bureaucrats or Supreme Court lawyers. I certainly have never had occasion since I left school to identify the gender of a Latin noun with the help of Kennedy's rhymes. But I can't say that learning that list of the masculine nouns ending in -is has been entirely useless. Whenever I suffered from insomnia in later life, I would (like the English counting sheep) repeat that list to

myself four or five times, hearing it in my mind meanwhile with Holmung's variations of tempo. It has always worked better than any sleeping-pill.

On the day in question we had been asked to learn just that passage; and fatally, Holmung chose to ask Wije to recite first. When he stood up, I was afraid he would lose his way, stutter and collapse into silence, the passage was so long and potentially so confusing. But to my relief, Wije navigated the introductory couplet and the next three lines smoothly enough. Then he paused, seemed to hesitate for a moment, and continued:

penis, piscis, postis, mensis...

So few boys had been listening that there was only a titter or two. Holmung looked at Wije as if he couldn't quite believe his ears. Then he strode up to where we were, near the back of the class, and said, with deadly calm, interrupting Wije who was going on with *torris*, *unguis*—

'Will you say those lines again, from fustis, ignis, orbis, ensis?' Wije was shaken, sensing he must have made some blunder. I wanted to whisper to him, 'panis, piscis', but how could I, with Holmung only a few feet away? Wije resumed:

fustis, ignis, orbis, ensis, penis, piscis, postis, mensis...

This time the class, alerted by Holmung's intervention, rocked with laughter. Holmung went red in the face. He slapped Wije hard, once on each cheek. When the laughter died down, he spoke to Wije:

'Wijeratne, you dare, you have the barefaced insolence, to crack a dirty joke in my class?'

Wije was dumbfounded. Holmung went on:

'You will take a note from me to the Principal at once. Whether he'll cane you or sack you, I don't know, but you'll deserve whatever you get.'

Wije, still bewildered and confounded, was silent; but Mark stood up.

'Excuse me, sir,' he said. 'I don't think Wijeratne meant to crack a dirty joke. He may be to blame for getting the word wrong, but I don't think he meant what he said.'

I moved in to support Mark. 'Yes, sir. I don't think Wijeratne even knows the meaning of that word.'

There were several sympathetic murmurs from other boys in the class. Holmung looked round the class, and knew his action had been over-hasty; still, he had to save face.

'Very well,' he said. 'For not learning the lines properly, Wijeratne, you will stay in after school and write out the whole passage twenty-five times. By then you might know it right.'

17

There was a lot of joking later in the corridors about Wije's blunder, and thereafter his recognised nickname became 'Penis-Piscis'. A few days later, Wije buttonholed me just after the last bell rang and we were emerging from the classroom.

'Dave,' he said, 'can you please come with me to the secondhand bookshop?'

'Sure.' I started walking with him towards the gate that opened on to Hotel Road.

On the way to the bookshop Wije related his story.

Girlie had told Wije (I guessed they found means to meet, perhaps on her marketing days) that both she and her father were greatly worried about the prospects for their shop. The trouble was that, as I had already noticed, their stock had grown greatly because so many boys had sold their old text-books to the shop, but there was very little buying. Little else except exercise-books moved: there was a demand for these because they were two cents cheaper than elsewhere. (Wije explained that Girlie's father had got a reduction on exercise-books from a friend who dealt in them.) But the tiny profit on these couldn't make the shop run. Now Girlie's father had almost exhausted the money he started with, and still more and more boys,

when they heard about the shop, came in to sell their old books, but hardly anybody to buy. In desperation Girlie's father had started stocking sweets too; and now at least those boys who passed the shop on their way to or from school would drop in for them. But the profit on sweets was even smaller than the profit on exercise-books, so how could they last?

Wije explained all this with a clarity that made me respect his intelligence, but also with an undertone of deep concern that showed me how much his feelings were involved. He must really be in love with Girlie to be so bothered, I said to myself. I couldn't say anything to him in response because by that time we had got to the shop, and Wije said, 'Come in with me, Dave.'

I wasn't sure what Wije wanted me for, but we entered the veranda, and the same kind of near-dumbshow as on the previous occasion took place between him and Girlie. This time we weren't alone, as on the two previous visits: there was a small group of boys, on their way back from school, come, no doubt, for sweets. (I wondered, however, whether any of them had also been attracted by Girlie's presence: it wasn't as common then as it is now to have a girl working in a shop.) Not knowing what Wije wanted me to do, I went up to the old man and asked for ten toffees. While I was paying for them, two boys came in through the doorway: actually, two of our classmates — Abeysekera and Rodrigo.

'Hullo!' they hailed us. 'On the spree?'

'Hullo!' I said, and held out the toffees to them, and they took one each. Abeysekera then turned to the old man, who had just handed me my change.

'Do you have Scott's Emulsion?' he asked.

Next to Dickens, Walter Scott was then the English novelist most recommended for school reading, and many of us had read *The Talisman* and *Ivanhoe*; but Scott's Emulsion was a much-advertised preparation of cod liver oil. The old man went to one section of his bookshelves, and ran his hand over the books' spines, sometimes stopping to take a book off the shelf and check its title. Then he turned back to Abeysekera.

'No, I'm sorry,' he said, 'but if you give me a few days, I'll try to get a copy for you.'

Abeysekera's and Rodrigo's eyes shone with glee at the success of their prank. They turned and went out, and I followed them. On the pavement outside they doubled up with laughter, slapping each other on the back. I interrupted their delight in their own cleverness.

'That was a damned caddish thing to do,' I said. 'That poor old man has enough problems without your playing tricks on him.'

By then Wije had joined us outside. Rodrigo looked at him, and then at me, grinning.

'Protecting Wije's future father-in-law, are you?' he said. 'Or has Wije promised you a commission on the dowry?'

'The dowry will be a lot of secondhand books,' Abeysekera put in.

18

The two pranksters had left with those parting shots, and it must have been something of a shock to Wije to find that his affair with Girlie was known. (It was bound to happen, I thought: walking to market and back in a small town where there were lots of Bethlehemites — it couldn't possibly have been kept secret.)

'Did you take me to the shop for any particular reason?' I asked Wije, as we walked on. 'Or did you just want to see Girlie?'

'No, I wanted you to see the stock of books. Do you think there are many more books than ever before?'

'Yes.'

'So what should Girlie's father do?'

I pondered for a moment.

'Well, first of all,' I said, 'he can stop buying any more. Otherwise he'll just go bust.'

'I had already thought of that, and I asked Girlie to tell him.'

'Does her father know you meet Girlie?'

Wije shook his head.

'He might not like it if he knows. But even if he does not buy any more books, Dave, what can he do with what he has?'

I pondered again.

'That's hard to say, Wije. I think the biggest trouble is that the shop is in the wrong place.'

'Why?'

I hesitated. It was embarrassing to speak out what was on my mind because Wije was the only boy I knew at Bethlehem who had bought secondhand books there.

'You know, Wije,' I said, 'most Bethlehemites don't like to buy secondhand books.'

Wije looked me straight in the eye. 'Because their parents are rich and they think it is below their dignity.'

'Something like that.' I was grateful that he had relieved me of the burden of explaining what I meant, but I still felt uncomfortable because I hadn't bought books secondhand either, but he had. 'Girlie's father may have thought starting a bookshop near a school was sure to be a success. But it's the wrong school for that. The only thing he can do is to shift the shop somewhere else. Near a school like Sariputta, for instance.'

Wije was silent for some time. Then he said gloomily, 'I do not think he will be able to do that. He has paid rent for six months here.'

19

Meanwhile the cricket season was in full swing, and we were approaching the date of the big match — Bethlehem-King's. Would I have a chance, I wondered, to meet, or at least to see, Marina at the match? Her father was a distinguished old boy, and Mark was first reserve in the cricket eleven that year: wouldn't she be likely to come?

I dared not ask Mark about the prospects of that, at least not so early; but just in case, I put my name down as one of the volunteers to help in the school tent. It was a committee of old boys and the school prefects who ran the show, mostly; but there was always a need for other boys to help with such minor jobs as handing round the eats and drinks.

It was only the week before the match that I asked Mark, with as much casualness as I could manage, 'Will your parents come to the match?'

'Well, it all depends on whether Dad is busy with office business or not. But he'll probably make it at least on the second day, the Saturday.'

'And your sister?' I asked, again trying to make my tone as nonchalant as possible. 'Won't she come because you are first reserve? After all, if somebody is injured, you might be there on the field.'

Mark laughed, though I couldn't be sure whether he was amused by the idea of Marina coming in the hope of a mishap to another player, or whether he saw through my motives in asking the question. 'I don't think she'll come just because I'm a reserve, Dave. But my friend Steve is in the King's team, she might come to watch him.'

Steve. I remembered the name being dropped in that conversation about the picnic. So that was Steve Kriekenbeek, in the King's team for the second year, and now one of their opening batsmen. Tall, lean, muscular, described by S.P. Ferdinands only a few days earlier as 'a batsman who is both stylish and dependable'. I felt a twinge of jealousy, and then I told myself I was being silly. Steve obviously belonged to the inner circle of Mark's friends, and he probably had lots of opportunities to see Marina. How could I possibly hope to be his rival?

The day came, and I arranged to take a bus together with Wije to the Sinhalese Sports Club ground, where the match was played. But Wije was not going to be in the school tent, where one had to pay; he had a ticket to the free tent, put up for those boys of either school who couldn't afford the price of a ticket. The free tent was further away from the pitch, and there was only standing room there.

Although I had told myself it would be foolish to build any hopes on a possible meeting with Marina, I couldn't on the day prevent myself from wanting and hoping for one. Throughout the day I scanned the faces in the tent, looking for that unusual pair of eyes, that goldenbrown skin, that torrent of straight hair falling below the shoulders—but in vain. She wasn't there. Perhaps Mr. Watson was held up by official business, and she couldn't have come without him.

The match was going badly for Bethlehem, and there was general gloom in our tent. But I was preoccupied by my own disappointment, so much so that when Mark said to me in the latter part of the afternoon, looking at my dejected face, 'What, Dave! Losing

the match isn't the end of the world, you know!' I could only manage a wry smile. I had one consolation: Marina hadn't been there to watch Steve Kriekenbeek score a dashing 53 which had put King's in command of the match from the outset.

But on the second day, I saw, from the back of the tent, Mr. and Mrs. Watson arriving, and Marina with them. I watched as they found seats in the second row. Marina seemed to me even more beautiful than I had remembered (of course, she was dressed up for the day), and the sight of her was an exquisite pain which constricted my insides. i waited, looking at the back of her head and shoulders from time to time. Then, when tea was being served, I grabbed a plate each of patties and sandwiches, and manoeuvred to get to the row where the Watsons were sitting, but from the left end, where Marina had the seat nearest the aisle.

I held out the plates, and as she reached for a patty, said, 'Remember me?'

She looked at me, uncomprehending and unrecognising for a moment, then smiled, 'Ah yes. You came home the other day.'

I couldn't think what else to say, unless it was 'You're looking lovely', but how could I dare? So I only said, 'We're losing the match.'

She nodded and said, 'Yes, poor Bethlehemites!' but then Mr. Watson noticed me and called out, 'Hullo there, Dave! How's the novelist getting on?' So I had to serve Mr. and Mrs. Watson, and then the only thing to do was to pass down the row.

I didn't meet Marina during the rest of the day, though my eyes often gazed in her direction. In the end, after we had lost the match by eight wickets, I saw her leaving with her parents. They were walking in the direction of the King's tent, and I guessed they were going to congratulate Steve, who would be awarded the trophy for the best batsman of the match.

I went home alone; it would have been impossible to locate Wije in that crowd, nor did I want to because I was miserable, and preferred not to have company. I thought I was an incompetent failure, despising myself for not having had the guts to make friends with

Marina, and recognising that it would probably have been no use anyway, deriding my own feelings and yet unable to extricate myself from them. That evening was the end of the first phase of my love (if it is at all possible to call it that) for Marina. She might as well have been a faraway princess in a fairy tale, or, indeed, one of the two Princesses in the picture in my mother's room, for any real contact I had had with her. But at sixteen, the heart feeds on its own feelings and desires, however illusory its object, and its sufferings become the proof of the reality of what it craves.

20

School was closing at the end of March, and we would have a long hot-weather break till the middle of May. Wije told me his parents were going to Galle for the local New Year, and they would be staying on till very nearly the beginning of the new term, because there was a family wedding in Galle. He would have to go with them. I noticed he was rather dejected as he said this, and I asked him whether that was because he wouldn't see Girlie all that time. After a silence, he said 'Yes.'

'Can't you write to her?' I asked.

'Her father might open the letter. That would be the end.'

My family had a much briefer holiday — but in Bandarawela, one of the hillcountry resorts where both British colonial officials and the local élite went at that time of year to avoid the hot weather. We had been back some weeks, and it was almost time for school to reopen, when one evening Wije came home to see me. The first sight of him startled me: he looked as if he had had a painful and shattering shock. But I couldn't talk to him there because Daddy would come back from office any time, and I didn't want Wije grilled about the supposed assault on my faith.

'Let's go out,' I said, 'then we can talk.'

As soon as we got on to the street, I said:

'What's the matter? You look very upset.'

My question almost made Wije burst into tears. But he restrained himself, wiped his eyes and began telling his story:

'We came back from Galle only this morning. I thought this evening I would walk past the shop. There was no arrangement to meet Girlie, but I thought I might see her by chance. But by the time I got to the bottom of Frederick Avenue I got a big shock.'

'What was it?'

Wije had to pause again and collect himself. Then he went on:

'On the wall opposite the house, on the other side of the road, there was something written. In big letters. In red paint.'

'What did it say?'

Wije's voice almost broke. But he finally brought out the words with an effort:

'It said: "WIJE LOVES GIRLIE - HA HA!"

'What did you do?'

'I was so shocked, I felt dizzy. But then I thought, i must meet Girlie and her father, even if he chased me out. So I went across the road to the house. The door was closed, and there was a padlock on it. The windows also were shut. Not only that — the nameboard of the shop was not there. So Girlie and her father must have closed the shop and gone away.'

'But is it possible they've gone away for a few days — on a holiday?'

Wije turned on me, almost in anger.

'What nonsense are you talking, Dave? Why should they take holidays? Girlie is not at school. And you think they have the money to spend on holidays — like you going to Bandarawela? Anyway, if they went on a holiday, would they take the nameboard with them?'

By this time we had reached the expanse of open, high ground — a kind of informal park that overlooked the railway station, the hotel and the sea. We squatted on the grass. The place was full of children's voices and laughter, the smack of bat against ball. I waited for a moment, then asked:

'So you think they went away because of what was written on the wall?'

'Yes.' And now Wije's tears actually began to flow.

I let him weep a little; then I said:

'It may not be as bad as you think, Wije. They may have shut the shop because they were losing money. Remember, you haven't seen Girlie for six weeks. Things may have become more difficult, they may have had to decide suddenly to close down.'

'But they could not have decided like that. I told you, Girlie's father has paid six months' rent.'

'Supposing he got some money back from the landlord? Do you know who the landlord is? We could ask him.'

'I don't know.'

There was so much hopelessness in Wije's tone that I was silent again for some time. Then I said:

'I wonder who could have written those words. It must have been somebody in our class. It could be Felsie-bada, it sounds like him. But then again it could be Abeysekera or Rodrigo. How were the letters written?'

'What do you mean?'

'Like handwritten letters, or like printed ones?'

'Like printed letters.'

'Then it'll be very difficult to say who wrote it. But that's not the important thing. You have no idea where Girlie and her father might have gone?'

'No.'

21

Before we parted that evening, the only consolation I could offer Wije was that I would go to Mark's place and meet him in the morning; he might have better ideas about what to do. I had no hidden intentions in saying this; but as I stood outside the house in Rosmead Place the next morning, I couldn't help hoping I might meet Marina, or at least have a glimpse of her. It was a wish that wasn't fulfilled. Either Marina was out, or she didn't show herself; and I was too shy to ask Mark where she was.

Mark, however, after I had told him about Wije, sprang into action at once.

'The car is here,' he said. 'I'll ask Mum for it, and we'll drive down.'

As the Buick stopped outside the house where the shop had been, it had for me an air of desolation, with its padlocked front door and its shuttered windows. But across the road the inscription on the wall seemed a bleeding gash in its glaring red paint.

'Terrible, isn't it?' said Mark. 'Let's go and ask at that kadé over there.'

It was not much more than a small wayside stall, selling cigarettes and small groceries. Mark told the trader we had come to find out what had happened to the people who ran the bookshop, because, he said, he owed them some money for a book he had bought.

The trader smiled at Mark's imperfect Sinhala, but he was helpful.

'They went about a week ago. I had no idea they were closing the shop until a lorry came there that morning, and they put all their furniture and books into it.'

'Where did they go?' asked Mark.

The trader spread out his hands. 'I have no idea.

'Is there anybody who might know?'

'You can try asking their landlord. Mr. Panditharatne — he lives in a house at the other end of Hotel Road. Just where it joins Galle Road.'

We turned to go, but Mark was struck by a new idea, and swung round.

'That writing on the wall opposite that house,' he said. 'Do you know who wrote it?'

The trader spread out his hands again. 'I don't know. It must have been written last night. It wasn't there before that.'

'You're sure?'

'Yes, yes. When I walked that way last evening, there was no writing.'

Mark thought a moment, then said:

'I am a boy at the school here, at Bethlehem. I am a — how do you say "prefect" in Sinhalese, Dave?'

'I haven't a clue.' But I told the trader, 'My friend's father is a big person working for the government.' The trader nodded.

'The school will begin in three days' time. I don't want that writing to be there then. Can you get a man and have it wiped out? I'll pay for it.'

'Yes, mahattaya.'

'How much money do you want?'

The trader reflected. 'I might need ten rupees to pay a man, mahattaya, and to get some stuff to wipe out the paint.'

'Alright. I'll give you ten rupees now. If the writing is gone in three days' time, I'll give you another ten rupees for yourself.'

'Very good, mahattaya.'

As we climbed back into the Buick, Mark said, 'At least, that will be a comfort to Wije. The writing couldn't have had anything to do with Girlie and her father leaving.'

'Are you going to try to find out who wrote it, Mark?'

'Best not to make a fuss about it, Dave. There'll be no way of proving who did it. And if the writing is gone by the beginning of term, not many boys need know it was there.'

We drew a blank with Mr. Panditharatne. All he could tell us was that Girlie's father had said he was shutting the shop because it was a failure. He looked woebegone, said Mr. Panditharatne, who had felt sorry for him and given back the rent for the two months the landlord still held. The father had said something about moving to the house of one of his cousins, but he hadn't said where.

We drove to Wije's house: the driver found it quite a problem to manoeuvre the big Buick down that narrow side-path. Fortunately, Wije's father wasn't in, so there was no danger of his interrogating Mark and me on the Creation or the Resurrection, on which Robert Ingersoll must have said something. Wije was relieved to know the writing on the wall had nothing to do with the closing of the shop, and he said fervently, 'Thank you, thank you, Mark, I am so grateful to you.' But in the weeks and months to come, I could see that the loss of Girlie still saddened and haunted him.

The crisis (of a very different kind) happened in November. The eleventh of November, to be exact — Remembrance Day. Every year on that day poppy-sellers would be out in the streets from morning, and we would arrive at school flaunting the vermilion flower in our buttonholes. But in the last few years there had been a rival flower sold on the same day — a suriya mala. The poppies were nicely turned out in cloth; the suriya mal were flimsy bits of yellow paper. Daddy said this was an anti-British venture, and he connected this with the fact that at the elections in 1936 two 'firebrands', as he called them — Philip Gunawardena and N.M. Perera — had been elected to the State Council. 'They're Communists,' he said, 'trying to undermine British rule. Otherwise why should they sell these flowers on the same day as the poppy?'

On the morning of the eleventh, as I was walking to school, two people were standing outside the gate of the post-office. One was a big-bosomed white woman in the uniform of the Salvation Army, with a tray of poppies. On the other side of the gate was a scrawny young girl in a sari selling suriya mal. I walked up to the poppyseller, dropped into her box the fifty cents Mummy had given me, received a toothy smile, a hearty 'thank you' and a poppy, stuck the flower in my buttonhole, gave the suriya mal seller a cold stare, and went my way to school.

That morning we had a special assembly, where Sulla spoke to us of the heroic sacrifices of the men who had fought and died in the Great War. 'But they are not really dead,' he said, 'they are immortal, because they gave up their lives for King, Country and Empire. As the great poet Rupert Brooke, himself one of those heroes, has said...' and he intoned:

These laid the world away; poured out the red Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be Of work and joy, and that unhoped serene, That men call age, and those that would have been, Their sons, they gave, their immortality. 'At eleven minutes past eleven — the eleventh minute of the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month — the moment when the guns fell silent in 1918, the school bell will be rung, and you will stand up in your places in class, and observe two minutes' silence. In remembrance of the heroes of the war.'

As we walked into class and sat down, I noticed with a shock that Wije was wearing not the poppy but a bedraggled yellow flower! 'Why are you wearing that?' I asked him.

'If you buy a poppy, the money goes to England,' he said. 'If you buy a suriya mala the money stays in our country, to be used for our people.'

I had no time to argue with him because Holmung started marking the register. When he had finished that, he talked to us about the Great War. We had heard that Holmung had fought in that war, but he had never spoken to us about it before: evidently he had reserved the subject for the eleventh of November.

'I was only a lad of twenty when I enlisted,' he said. 'Nobody compelled me to go out and fight. But I volunteered because I wanted to do my bit for King and Empire.'

He described to us what trench warfare was like, drawing on the blackboard a diagram of the two opposing lines of trenches and 'no-man's land' in between.

'The real test was when you had to go over the top, as we called it. You had to scramble out of your trench and race across no-man's land, with rifle and bayonet at the ready for attack, while shells were bursting and machine-gun fire crackling round you. I don't mind telling you: the first time I had to do it, I was in a blue funk just thinking about it. And so were most of my mates. But the night before that first attack, the chaplain of our battalion taught us a beautiful little verse. Just four lines:

Infinitely tender, Exquisitely near, Is God our Father. What then have we to fear? I said that to myself over and over again on the morning of the attack, and even while I was running across no-man's land. That's what gave me courage.'

Holmung took off his glasses and wiped his eyes, evidently touched by his own memories.

'But with all the constant danger of death, and the stench of the corpses, and the mud, and the rats scurrying around in the trenches, it was a great life. Those years at the Western Front were the best years of my life. And when I hear the old wartime songs, 'It's a long way to Tipperary', or 'Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag', it all comes back, boys, it all comes back.'

He looked round as if savouring his own sentiments and expecting our appreciation; and then his gaze was suddenly transfixed by something he saw.

'Wijeratne!' he roared. 'Come here!'

Wije rose and walked towards the master's desk.

Holmung looked at him as if he was one of those rats in the trenches he had been talking about.

'What's that filthy thing in your buttonhole?'

Wije swallowed, then seemed to pull himself together, and said:

'It is a suriya mala, sir.'

'And how dare you come to school wearing that abomination?'

Wije gave Holmung the same answer he had given me. 'Because the money from suriya mal stays in our country, sir, and it is used to help our people.'

'The hell it is! It's used to spread Communism, that's what it is. And you, a scholarship boy, you should have a better sense of loyalty than to come to this school wearing that dirt.'

Wije's voice, as he answered, quavered for a moment, but it was steady thereafter.

'I am loyal to the school, sir,' he said, 'but I do not have to be loyal to the British Empire.'

Holmung flushed at this defiance. 'You, you little snipe, you think you can stand up against the Empire — the Empire on which the sun never sets! I'll show you!' He reached into his desk, brought out a piece of paper, and hastily scribbled a note. 'Take this note to the Principal at once.'

The door closed behind Wije. 'Now boys,' said Holmung, 'I'll read to you Laurence Binyon's poem, "For the Fallen."'

23

Wije returned to class a quarter of an hour later, but without the suriya mala he had been wearing. Holmung didn't condescend to ask him what the Principal had said, or even to look at him; he ignored him as if he had no existence. It was only during the lunch-break that Mark and I were able to ask him what had happened in his interview with Sulla.

'He read the note,' Wije said, 'then he took the suriya mala from my shirt and dropped it in his wastepaper basket. Then he said, "Mr. Ohlmus is right; you have no business to come here wearing that." Then he asked me to tell my father to come and see him.'

'And does your father think the same as you?' I asked.

'Yes, of course. He knows that I was going to wear the suriya mala to school.'

I felt that Wije had created unnecessary trouble for himself, but I didn't want to say anything because he evidently felt so strongly about his act. Mark was silent too. We waited anxiously for the outcome of Mr. Wijeratne's meeting with Sulla.

But the next morning Wije wasn't in school. Mark and I decided we would go and see him at home after schoolhours. So after the last bell I got into Mark's Buick that was waiting for him, and we drove to Wije's house.

Wije was sitting on the veranda, looking quite cheerful, and, as we entered, Mr. Wijeratne came out, too, and I introduced Mark to him.

'What did the Principal say, Mr. Wijeratne?' I asked.

'Well, last night, I already decided to take Harischandra out of Bethlehem College. It was my mistake sending him there. I thought he will have a good education in some ways. But what's the use of that if he won't have the freedom to think as he wants? We are not living in the days of the Inquisition.'

Mr. Wijeratne looked challengingly at us.

'Last evening I met the Reverend Dr. Salgado. He told me he didn't want any boys in his school who might spread subversive ideas, so he would have to think what to do about my son. I said: "You don't have to worry, sir, I am taking my son out of the school." I think he was very relieved.'

Wije, sitting on the sofa and listening while swinging his legs, smiled happily.

'Of course, it will be something of a sacrifice to me,' Mr. Wijeratne continued, 'because Harischandra will lose his scholarship. But no matter. I will get him into Sariputta. Because he's the son of a member of the staff, he will only have to pay half the fees.'

24

I didn't see much of Wije for the rest of the year because I didn't want to call on him, not only because I feared another theological confrontation with his father, but also because I thought Daddy would disapprove of any close friendship between him and me. He had heard about the suriya mal episode, had identified the boy who figured in it, . and warned me against keeping up relations with him.

But one day several months later, as I was returning from the post-office, I ran into Wije. He told me he was going for a walk, and invited me to join him. I could hardly refuse, so we walked to the same stretch of open high ground where we had sat before. Wije told me he was very happy at Sariputta. 'At Bethlehem, 'he said, "i was like a fish out of water, but at Sariputta I am among my own sort.'

'Then are they all Sinhalese and all Buddhists there?' I asked.

'No, no, Dave, there are plenty of Tamil and Muslim boys at Sariputta. That is not what I meant.'

'Then why did you say they were of your own sort?'

'Nobody there is really rich. Nobody there will think I am a bumpkin. There are a lot of boys who have come from the outstations and who are not so good in their English.'

Wije went on to say his father didn't even have to spend anything on school fees because, when Mr. Kaviratne heard why Wije had to leave Bethlehem, he gave him a scholarship. 'And have you heard anything about Girlie?' I asked.

Wije's face clouded. 'No.'

I felt unable to say anything, and Wije seemed unwilling to continue talking about Girlie, so there was a silence between us, while a train went hooting past on the line below. When its whistle had faded into the distance, Wije said:

'Dave, there is another thing about which I feel sad. Mark was so kind to me while I was at Bethlehem, and I think I have let him down. Him and his father.'

'Why his father?'

'Because I think it is his father who must have donated the scholarship. Otherwise there is no reason why Mark should have invited me to lunch that day. You were the prizewinner, but why should I have been there? I think his father wanted to see me, because he had donated the scholarship.'

So Wije had come to the same conclusion that I did. I said:

'Mark told me he wanted to cheer you up, after Felsie-bada had made fun of you.'

'That must have been an excuse.'

I didn't want to argue because I thought he was right. Wije went on:

'I would have liked to go and see Mark because he was so nice to me. But it is better not, his father might think I will be a bad influence. Spreading subversive ideas, as Sulla told my father.'

It didn't seem possible for me to contradict that, so there was another silence. We parted soon after, and that was the last I saw of Wije for many months to come.

Two

VARSITY, 1939-43

1

The Principal of the Ceylon University College is pleased to announce that the following scholarships have been awarded on the results of the University Entrance Scholarship Examination, 1939. The listings are in order of merit:

- 1. K.A.H. Wijeratne (Sariputta), for Pure and Applied Mathematics.
- 2. A.M.B. Watson (Bethlehem), for English
- 3. L.G. Rajapakse (King's), for Physics
- 3. Miss D.J. Labrooy (St. Clara's), for English

The scholarships, each of a value of Rs. 480 per year, are awarded for a period of four years, commencing July 1939, subject to the academic performance and good conduct of the student.

Robert Kenneth Mackenzie Principal Ceylon University College.

2

1940. We were sitting in Professor Van Geyzel's English Honours class. Six of us — Mark, a young man by the name of Peter Arnolda, and me on one side of the table; on the other side, Daphne Labrooy, Joyce Samarakoon and Savitri Arasanayagam. Three men students and three women. As soon as we had passed from school to university college, we were no longer 'boys' and 'girls'; though still legally minors at eighteen and nineteen, we were honorary adults, addressed as Mr. or Miss So-and-So. The men wore coats and ties (a compulsory requirement for attendance at lectures), the women were in saris, except for Daphne, who wore a formal and well-tailored frock.

Three men on one side of the table and three women on the other. However grown-up and emancipated in theory, none of us had ever made a move to break up this partial segregation of the sexes. To be honest, I preferred it that way. Each of the three young women was, in her own way, at least reasonably good-looking, and Daphne was very pretty. It was pleasant to have them facing us, where I could, from time to time, contemplate the charms of one or the other of them. How often had I done so (particularly during Dr. Weinman's lectures on Old and Middle English literature, so consummate in their boredom), while pretending to be absorbed in the relation between the *Beowulf-Grendel* myth and Norse stories of trolls in waterfall caves! (If I have got it right, that is: Dr. Weinman's lectures, mercifully, have become a fading memory over the years.)

Professor Van Geyzel was middle-aged, with bushy eyebrows, an aquiline face and a goatee. We called him the Geyser, in recognition of his ability to spout: nobody could possibly have complained of boredom in his class. (We had named Dr. Weinman the Grinder for contrast.) On this occasion the Geyser was discussing Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress'.

'One can say, if one wants to, that what Marvell is engaged in is a highly ingenious strategy in a game of seduction. The woman with her coyness and modesty is to be manoeuvred into bed by convincing her that time will not let her beauty last; she may as well make the best of it while she can. He doesn't even pretend he's in love with her — no romantic sentiment there.'

Daphne piped up in disagreement: 'But, sir, he talks about getting to know her heart at the end.'

'Ah yes, Miss Labrooy, but that's in that extravagant fantasy at the beginning. That's all part of the game: he can talk about her heart there, just as he can talk of spending two hundred years on adoring each of her breasts. But when he comes down to business later, he admits frankly that what moves him is lust:

And your quaint honour turn to dust, And into ashes all my lust.

'As I was saying, somebody might argue: This is just a brilliant ploy by an experienced roué. And it is that, at one level. But what makes it more than that? What makes it a great poem? Can you say?' He looked round our six faces. Peter jumped in by saying:

'Is it the mastery of the form, sir, the three-part structure, the change of rhythm between the first part and the second...?'

'Yes, all that's there, Mr. Arnolda, but if that were all, I would say it was still the cleverly executed strategy of a seducer. No, I think what makes it a great poem is the evocation of human mortality—time's winged chariot hurrying near—in the midst of this deployment of sophisticated wit. Of course, the destructive power of time is an old commonplace, but here the horror of the grave is felt in all its naked force:

Then worms shall try
That long-preserved virginity.

'You have to imagine, in the most literal sense: you have to make a picture in your own mind of what he wants the woman to imagine. Can you?'

He looked at the three women. I could see that what he was driving at had come home to them in a vivid and horrific flash. Daphne made a face, Joyce bit her lip and Savitri visibly shuddered.

The Geyser was clearly gratified by the effect he had on them. 'Yes, that's it: you have to picture worms crawling up the woman's vagina in a grotesque caricature of copulation. If you are horrified, you can understand what the woman in the poem felt.'

However, while the Geyser was still savouring his success, Mark intervened:

'But, sir, what about us three poor men? How can we imagine worms crawling up what we haven't got?'

We laughed appreciatively. The Geyser, patently unprepared for Mark's come-back, tugged at his goatee, but he quickly recovered.

'Empathy, Mr. Watson, empathy. The purpose of reading literature is to extend your range of imaginative understanding. That will make up for any physical limitations.'

We laughed again. On this unplanned climax the bell pealed, marking the end of the lecture-hour. The Geyser sighed, and closed his copy of Marvell.

'Unfortunately, we cannot make our Sun stand still, as Marvell says. We'll have to stop there. Before next time, can you consider the possible meanings of *quaint*? It may help to remember your Chaucer. I'm afraid the OED won't be of use there: Murray and his boys were too prudish for that.'

3

'The old Geyser had a whale of a time horrifying the three of you, didn't he?'

That was Mark, as we walked down the corridor after the lecture.

'It was awful!' Daphne exclaimed. 'He was enjoying embarrassing us.'

'And giving us the creeps,' Savitri joined in.

'But it was all in a good cause,' I said. 'What he was saying was that you couldn't really feel the poem until you shared the shock of the woman in it.'

'Nonsense!' Joyce said scornfully. 'It was all for his own pleasure.'

'What was all that about quaint?' asked Daphne.

'Ah ha!' chuckled Mark. 'Something that a well-brought up young lady like you shouldn't know.'

'Come on, Mark. Tell me.' pleaded Daphne. 'Tell, will you!' as Mark shook his head.

'Well, if you really want to know, I think *quaint* is connected with the modern...' Mark paused, evidently having an inhibition about saying the word before the three women. 'The modern *c-u-n-t*.'

'C-u-n-t?' echoed Daphne, genuinely puzzled. 'What's that?'

Joyce and Savitri looked equally perplexed, while Mark, Peter and I burst into laughter. But just then there was a cry of 'Dave!' behind us. I turned to see Wije come running up towards us.

I rarely encountered Wije at the varsity, and that wasn't only because he had been admitted to the Science Faculty, and was now doing Maths Honours. More importantly, as I had been told by one of his fellow-students, Wije appeared to be involved for the greater part

of his time in political activity — my informant thought, for the left-wing Lanka Sama Samaja Party. And this was likely, because Wije had once come to me at the campus and appealed to me to collect money for a campaign about a Tamil estate worker who had been shot by the police. I declined to make any collection, hut I gave him five rupees of my own money for the cause, just because it was Wije who asked me.

The war had broken out not even two months after we joined the varsity, but in its first year it seemed a remote European conflict which made no perceptible impact on our lives. The LSSP had condemned 'the imperialist war', as they called it, and at first with seeming impunity. But with the war hotting up in Europe, four of their leaders had been arrested and detained.

Now Wije came running up to us with a bundle of leaflets in his hand. He scattered a few of them among the six of us. 'Try to come!' he called, as he disappeared down the corridor.

I looked at the copy of the leaflet Wije had pressed into my hand. It was a small strip of paper with the text turned out on a duplicating machine, and read:

DEMAND THE RELEASE OF THE LSSP DETENUS OPPOSE THE MURDEROUS IMPERIALIST WAR!

Meeting at College House tomorrow (15th) at 5 p.m.

- Socialist Students' Group

'He's a friend of yours?' asked Daphne.

"Well, he is, or was — not only mine, but Mark's,' I said. 'He was at Bethlehem with us until he got into trouble — political trouble.'

'But he's a brilliant maths student,' Mark said to Daphne. 'Remember, he topped the scholarship exam?'

'So are the two of you going to his meeting?' Daphne continued.

'Well, I certainly can't,' returned Mark. 'My father would have a fit if I went to a meeting to oppose the imperialist war.'

'I might look in to see what it's like. I'm curious,' I said.

'But the 15th is tomorrow — my birthday.' said Daphne. 'Remember, you all promised to come. And that includes you, Dave.'

'That's okay. The meeting is at five. Plenty of time for your party.'

'Now don't you go and get locked up by the police before that, Dave!'

4

Next morning the corridors were buzzing with rumours. The Principal, it was said, would ban the anti-war meeting. Some even said the organisers would be arrested, like their political leaders; others that they would only be expelled.

By the time we came out of a lecture by Dr. Weinman (it was even duller than usual, having to do with the differences between the A, B and C texts of *Piers Plowman*), there was no need for speculation. Mac (as the Principal was called by students) had issued a notice that he had banned the meeting because it was contrary to the wartime Defence Regulations.

'Good!' said Daphne, as we studied the notice prominently displayed on the board. 'Now there won't be any danger, Dave, of your not coming to my party because you're in a police lockup.'

The six of us walked towards College House, which contained common rooms and tuckshop (this piece of school terminology still lingered on in spite of the adult status granted us). And it was another place where segregation of the sexes prevailed. While there was no law prohibiting women students from entering the tuckshop, none of them ever did: if they wanted food or drink, they would summon a waiter and have it brought to them in the seclusion of the women's common room. On the other hand, male students were strictly barred from entering that sanctum.

On this day, the three women went into their common room, Peter decided to go off to the library to follow up some references, and Mark and I sat down in the tuckshop.

'I'm rather worried about Wije,' said Mark, puffing out a cloud of smoke over the tea we had ordered. (Mark had taken to smoking soon after we entered the varsity, and was now quite given to the habit.) 'You mean, because of his politics?'

'Yes. I hope it won't get him into even more serious trouble than at Bethlehem.'

'How do you mean, Mark?'

'Well, it'll be again a matter of his scholarship. Only, at Bethlehem, he could still give it up and go elsewhere. But if he loses his scholarship now, where can he go?'

'But can they cancel his scholarship because he's involved in left politics?'

'Not just like that, they can't, Dave. But from what I hear, he's so active politically that he sometimes misses lectures, or fails to present assignments on time. It might be forgiven an ordinary student, but it won't be treated lightly in somebody who has a scholarship. And when that somebody is engaged in anti-government politics ...' Mark broke off and left me to imagine the rest.

Mark's concern for Wije had always had the quality of that of a protective elder brother, and it reminded me of the guess both Wije and I had made about the source of his scholarship at Bethlehem. I had often been on the brink of asking Mark whether we were right, but had desisted, thinking I would be violating his family secrets. But now, with Mark's fresh show of concern, I couldn't resist the desire to know.

'Mark,' I said, 'what did your father feel when Wije left Bethlehem?'

'He was very, very upset.' Mark had responded at once, probably without realising the implication of what he was saying.

'Does that mean your father was the donor of the scholarship?'
Mark smiled ruefully. 'You've caught me out, haven't you,
Dave? So I'll have to say: yes, he was.'

I had to break off the conversation because there was a stir in the tuck-shop. A student — I knew him as Abeysinghe; he had been at King's, was now in the History Honours class and was supportive of the LSSP — had come in with a placard that he went on to hang on a nail on one of the walls. It read:

THE FIVE O'CLOCK MEETING WILL BE HELD — IN SPITE OF ANY BAN!

— Socialist Students' Group

I went up to Abeysinghe. 'Won't you be courting trouble?' I asked.

'We're prepared to face it,' he said, 'Mervyn is not going to give in, just like that.'

I went back to where Mark was sitting at our table, emitting another cloud of smoke. 'Are you still going to look in at the meeting?' he asked.

'Yes, I don't want to miss the fun. Tell Daphne, if I fail to turn up, she'll have to come and bail me out at the cop station.'

5

Mervyn Wijesinghe was known as the leader of the left group of students at the varsity. This, in spite of the fact that he was a son of E.K. Wijesinghe, the boss of the Kelani Group, the biggest Ceylonese-owned newspaper establishment in the country. E.K., as people generally called him, had built the seat of his empire near the banks of the Kelani river at Grandpass, and beaten the longer-established British competition. He was an ally of D.S. Senanayake, the conservative and pro-British political leader, and, in addition, had a record of ruthlessly smashing up strikes in his early days when he was building up his business (nobody at the Kelani Group had dared strike thereafter). But it was E.K., nevertheless, who had fathered Mervyn, the young Marxist who was now in his final year at the varsity.

I had heard Mervyn deliver to a student society a few months earlier a lecture titled 'The Labour Theory of Value in Relation to History'. It was full of Marxist economics, most of which I couldn't follow, though I was supposed to have done economics in my first year, and even passed in it. But the general argument was clear enough, as it came fluting out of Mervyn's sensually full lips set in his cherubically fat face. Marx had proved that inherent in capitalism

was a tendency for the rate of profit continually to fall; hence capitalists had to squeeze their workers ever harder, and engage in ever fiercer competition for markets and colonies. Hence, increasing impoverishment of the working class; hence, rivalry between capitalist countries, culminating in imperialist war; but both leading inevitably to socialist revolution. Q.E.D.

Wije was at the lecture too, and at the end of it, I asked him how Mervyn managed to reconcile his political ideas with being the eldest son and heir of E.K.

'That will not worry him,' Wije said. 'You wait and see — once the old man dies and Mervyn takes over, the party paper will be printed at the Kelani Group.'

That conversation was on my mind as I made my way to College House shortly before 5. Would this be Mervyn's first big battle with the forces of authority?

There was a crowd of students (not large, only about fifty) congregated on the veranda of College House. As I learned, the inner doors that gave access to the hall, where meetings were usually held, had been locked by order of the Principal, so the veranda was the only part of the building that was open. Mervyn and three other students who, I presumed, were part of his inner circle (Abeysinghe was among them), were conferring earnestly on one end of the veranda. Wije wasn't among that lot, but he was standing prominently in the forefront of the crowd, and he greeted me as I came in, saying 'I am glad you came, Dave.' I didn't want to tell him I had come only out of curiosity.

Mervyn and his aides now descended the steps and turned around so as to face the assembly.

'Ladies and Gentlemen,' began Mervyn (though there were no ladies present), 'I congratulate you on your courage and your sense of what is right in attending this meeting and defying the official ban. We have met here to discuss two issues—'

But a strident voice broke in on his speech.

'You cannot hold this meeting! I have banned it, and it is illegal!'
It was Professor Mackenzie, who had appeared on the scene, and was now standing only a few feet away from Mervyn. Besides being Principal of the University College, Mac was a colonel in the

Ceylon Light Infantry, and his tone, as he interrupted Mervyn, would have passed muster on the parade ground.

Mervyn looked away from him and addressed the crowd. 'Is it your wish that I should continue with the meeting?' There were cries of 'Yes, yes.'

Mervyn turned back to Mac, and made a gesture with his upturned palms as if to show he was helpless, a mere instrument of the will of the people.

A pink flush coloured Mac's face. 'You, you, you, you,' he said, pointing in turn to Mervyn and each of his lieutenants, 'you are all suspended.' He then turned on his heel and walked away.

There was a brief consultation between Mervyn and his comrades. 'Friends,' said Mervyn at the end of that, 'I suggest that we move to Queen's Road outside and continue the meeting there. Then nobody can say we were occupying university premises illegally.'

The shift was made, and the audience stood on one side of the street, and the speakers on the other, while cars continually passed in between, their occupants looking curiously at what was going on. But it didn't last long: only Mervyn and one of his associates spoke, and they kept their speeches short, perhaps to avoid a police incursion. The two resolutions — one, demanding the release of the LSSP leaders, the other, condemning the imperialist war — were passed by acclamation; and the crowd dispersed.

I had, in the morning, left a change of clothing at an aunt's house in Bambalapitiya, and I went there after the meeting and refurbished myself before making my way to Daphne's home in Gregory's Road.

6

Daphne's father was a successful heart specialist, and the house was a large one set in an extensive garden. As I passed through the gateway, there was a circle of people, seated on the front lawn, who were singing: they turned out to be university students and other younger friends of Daphne (her older family friends and relations were, I found later, all sitting in the living room inside). Daphne hailed me as I crossed over to the lawn:

'Oh hullo, Dave! I'm so glad you haven't been copped.'

I had already wished Daphne a happy birthday at the varsity that morning, so I silently pressed my gift into her hand, and joined the circle. The group went on singing 'My Darling Clementine', but Mark left his seat to come up to me and ask:

'What happened about the meeting?'

I gave him a brief account, and Mark shook his head and said, 'Bad', though I wasn't sure whether what he disapproved of was the fact that the meeting was held or that Mervyn and his friends were suspended. It wasn't possible to ask because the group on the lawn had meanwhile moved into 'My Old Kentucky Home', and there were cries of 'Come on, Mark and Dave! Stop talking and sing!'

It was later in the evening, after the beer had been handed round (Daphne's family code apparently forbade the serving of anything stronger to young people), that there were shouts for a solo from Mark. He had a pleasing light tenor voice which was always in demand on these occasions. He said, 'Okay, okay,' stood up, moved to where Daphne was sitting, faced her, and began singing 'Let's do it'.

Since I had first heard Cole Porter's song, it had always seemed to me that there was an ambiguity in the words: after the example of the birds and the bees, one takes 'let's do it' as an invitation to bed, so that when the romantic 'let's fall in love' comes, it's still charged with the overtones of carnal desire. I don't know whether Mark felt the same way about the song, but his action in choosing to address it to Daphne immediately turned it from a mere performance to a personal declaration. I am sure everybody there was conscious of this, and a kind of perceptible electric current seemed to pass through the little circle of people on the lawn. But the effect was enhanced by an accidental happening. It was a full moon day, but it had rained earlier in the evening, and the sky was still cloudy, so that it was dark where we sat in the shadow of the trees. But by the time Mark got to the third line of the song, the moon came out from behind a cloud and lit up his whole figure, with his right hand outstretched, as if in an appealing gesture. It was almost as if the lighting had been planned and executed by a stage technician; and I think it must have been this quality of theatricality that made Mark do something that he probably didn't

intend when he began singing. On the line 'Let's fall in love', he went down on one knee on the grass, indifferent to the fact that it was still wet after the evening rain (or was it that he purposely wanted to demonstrate that he didn't mind spoiling his beautiful pair of grey gaberdine trousers?). Daphne had watched him, to begin with, with lighthearted giggles, as if she took what he was doing as a piece of foolery; but as the song proceeded, with Mark, spotlit by the moon, kneeling like a supplicant before her, it must have been impossible for her not to take the situation in earnest. Embarrassment and pleasure struggled with each other in the expression on her face, and in the very posture and movements of her body.

When Mark finished and rose to his feet, there was a moment's silence as if everybody in that circle was uncertain how to take what had just happened; then they found refuge in a burst of applause. Mark prolonged the theatricality of the act by bowing, fully from the waist, addressing the bow not to Daphne but to us, the audience; and it seemed that he was laughing gently at us, saying, 'So you thought that was real? As you see, it was only a piece of stage-acting.' Then he turned and walked back to his seat.

I had always liked Daphne, from the time I first met her when our university careers began — and that, not just because she was pretty, but because she had a warm, open and affectionate disposition. Some goodlooking young women are so conscious of their power to attract male admiration that they appear to be perpetually on the defensive even in their ordinary relations with men, like a ship always prepared to repel boarders. There was no wariness of this kind about Daphne: she carried her charms easily and unselfconsciously, and she seemed to take for granted that it was natural that she should be liked and that there was no need to give it undue importance. I had long thought she had a special fondness for Mark, but until that evening he had not, to my knowledge, made any move to push that inclination of hers any further. Had he, in fact, decided to make love to her? The rest of the evening, through the dancing, dinner and parlour games that followed, left this still an open question in my mind: nobody could say from his behaviour, once the serenade was over, that his emotions were anywhere engaged.

Three days later, the suspensions on Mervyn Wijesinghe and the three other students who had organised the anti-war meeting were withdrawn. Nobody knew why the withdrawal had taken place, but Peter was openly cynical when we happened to talk about it.

'Of course, Mervyn's suspension couldn't be allowed to stand,' he said. 'After all, he's the son of E.K.'

'But his father must be loathing his politics,' I said.

'Blood is thicker than politics. And because Mervyn had to be let off, the others had to be pardoned too.'

I put the question to Wije a day or two later when I ran into him at the tuck-shop. Wije knew no more about it than I did, or if he did, he wasn't talking.

'Anyway,' I said, 'people like Mervyn will always have it easy. Even if they get into trouble, there'll always be some powerful person to pull a string for them. Not like you and me.'

'That is not true of Mervyn,' Wije said. 'He will not sacrifice his principles because of his connections.'

'But you Marxists believe that class interests are stronger than anything else,' I objected.

'You have got the wrong end of the stick, Dave. Class interests are stronger than other things — for the class as a whole. That is not true for each individual in the class. Do you know that Engels was a factory owner?'

'Engels? Who's he?'

'He was the friend and comrade of Marx. Dave, if you really want to know what Marxists think, you should read them. Read Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky. Not what their enemies say about Marxists.'

'I'm not really interested,' I said, looking at my watch and rising, 'Cheerio, Wije, I have a lecture in ten minutes.'

So, I thought (walking across from the tuckshop to the Arts Faculty's lecture rooms on the other side of Thurstan Road), Wije was now a committed Marxist. I knew who Marx and Lenin were, just about, but of Trotsky only that he had been thrown out of Russia and that a few months earlier he had been murdered: where was it?...

in Mexico, was that right? It was all very vague to me. But one thing I had noticed during that conversation was that Wije hadn't blinked once. So Marxism, or perhaps the LSSP, had done something for his self-confidence.

The lecture was the Grinder's. While his hollow tones droned on with excruciating slowness about The Miller's Tale, I tried to find relief by studying Joyce's long, slender fingers as they rested opposite me on the table; they were exquisitely cared for, and tinted a delicate rose to match the shade of her sari. Could one fall in love with a woman only for the shape and look of her hands? I wondered. Perhaps that would make you a hand-fetishist... Meanwhile the Grinder's fat hands and pudgy fingers made little thrusts in the air from time to time to emphasise his points, and each time I had an image of him tearing apart Alisoun, the carpenter's young and pretty wife whose portrait he was discussing. He took all the joy out of that picture by his evisceration. Mark and I had already read The Miller's Tale in our first year, just for pleasure. Trust the Grinder, I thought, to turn the most brilliant smutty story I had ever read into a bore. But the Grinder was all out to prove to us it wasn't smutty: it was a great work of art and a highly moral tale. ('Why can't it be both smut and art?' I wanted to shriek, but I knew it would be futile.)

'And now,' said the Grinder, rubbing his hands after the rape of Alisoun by analysis was over, 'we come to Nicholas's first attempt at — um —' he screwed up his mouth as he searched for the most decorous phrase, 'physical intimacy with Alisoun. And prively he caughte hire by the queynte.'

Three pairs of eyes looked at the three pairs opposite, and Mark, Peter and I knew illumination had come to the three women. *Queynte...quaint...cunt*. We smiled on our side of the table, knowingly and a little patronisingly; on the other side they smiled secretively and a little shyly. The Grinder caught our smiles and frowned; seemed to want to say something disapproving of our frivolity, then perhaps thought better of it and turned back to the text. But just then a peon came in with a note that he handed to the Grinder, who read it, and then rose.

'I'll be back in a moment,' he said, and walked out of the room. 'So now your education is complete,' said Mark to Daphne as soon as the Grinder was out of the room. 'You know what a *queynte* is.'

8

The Grinder came back in five minutes.

'I'm terminating the lecture now,' he said. 'Mr. Gunawardene, will you come out of the room with me, please? The rest of you can stay here and wait for the lecture you have with Professor Van Geyzel.'

I rose, wondering what the matter was. Outside, the Grinder said, 'Come with me to my car.' I obeyed, and we started walking down the corridor, when he spoke again.

'That note was to ask that an urgent message be given to you,' he said. 'Your mother has suddenly been taken ill. The probability seems to be that it's a heart attack. It may not be serious, she's conscious, but naturally she's being rushed to the General Hospital. I'm taking you there now.'

I was dazed. As soon as I could speak, I asked, 'From whom was the message, sir?'

'An aunt of yours. Evidently your mother was visiting her when she had her attack. Your father has been informed, and he's on his way to the hospital too.'

We had reached the parking space, and he unlocked his car and said, 'Get in.'

As he started the car he told me, 'While I was out of the lecture room I got permission from Professor Van Geyzel for you to go. I also rang Dr. Labrooy, and he'll be at the ward himself when your mother is brought in.'

By then I had recovered sufficiently from the first shock to say, 'Thank you so much, sir, for everything.'

'It's nothing.'

When we got to the hospital, Mummy was being lifted on a stretcher out of the ambulance that had brought her, Dr. Labrooy was waiting at the admissions office, and Mummy was whisked through to his ward. He patted me on my shoulder and said, 'I remember you,

son, from Daphne's birthday party.' Daddy, his face tense and drawn as I had never seen it before, arrived only a quarter of an hour later. The Grinder then said to me, 'Now that both you and your mother are in good hands, I'll leave you. Don't worry too much, but if you have to miss lectures for a couple of days, it'll be alright.'

In the weeks that followed everybody in my class was most concerned and helpful, but especially Daphne, who was a daily visitor to the ward, where her position as the daughter of the doctor-in-charge gave her influence with nurses and attendants. Her sweetness and charm captivated Mummy, who, by the time she was fit to go home, had formed a great affection for Daphne. But the Grinder was concerned and attentive in the most unobtrusive way, checking frequently with Dr. Labrooy about Mummy's progress, calling at the ward often with fruit or flowers but rarely asking to see the patient, not wanting, I suppose, to trouble her overmuch with the intrusions of a stranger.

I had until then tended rather to despise the Grinder, whose plodding and commonplace mind was greatly outshone in my eyes by the dazzling coruscations of the Geyser's. I thought that the Grinder had never had an original idea about literature in his life, and this opinion, I am sure, was shared by my classmates. Mark had once wittily called him 'a manual labourer' because the lecture notes he brought to class were laboriously transcribed from various learned sources: such a contrast with the Geyser who never had anything in front of him except the text while he spouted! But now, in the aftermath of Mummy's illness, I had to admit to myself that it would never have entered the Geyser's head to ring Dr. Labrooy that day, to drive me himself to the hospital, or to perform the many acts of kindness that the Grinder did in subsequent weeks. In my naivety and inexperience of life, and my youthful arrogance, I had assumed till then that intellectual distinction was the highest of virtues, but I had now to recognise that there were other kinds of human excellence that didn't necessarily go with it. I was to be confirmed in this discovery more than once in the course of my later life, but it was the Grinder who, without intending it, first educated me in that truth.

The enigma of Mark's feelings for and intentions towards Daphne remained. After the episode of the serenade he appeared rather to avoid creating an impression of any special partiality towards her. When the six of us, for instance, arranged to go to the pictures together to see The Grapes of Wrath, it was Joyce whom he treated with particular attention. Mark now had a car of his own, a small Morris, in which he drove us to the cinema, and he opened the car door for Joyce so that she could sit in the seat next to the driver's, while we, the four others, squashed ourselves into the back seat. And at the cinema, too, he bought the tickets at the counter, handed four to us, said, 'Let's go, Joyce,' and walked off ahead with her, as if he wanted to make sure she would sit with him. Daphne was too sweet-natured to show any obvious signs of jealousy, but I wondered sometimes from the look in her eyes whether she was suffering inwardly. If I was right in supposing she was fond of Mark (to put it at the lowest), then the sudden transformation from the public declaration at the birthday party to a show of indifference couldn't have failed to cause her pain. Or was the former only an act, a piece of showmanship, which on second thoughts Mark now wanted to repudiate?

Turning these matters over in my mind brought me to think also about the limits of my friendship with Mark. It was impossible for me to question him about his behaviour or its motives, or to say anything like 'Aren't you being cruel to Daphne?' However close we had been as schoolfriends, our relations had never extended to that degree of personal intimacy. Mark had now relaxed his earlier, selfimposed taboo on inviting me home: at least, he had asked me to his last birthday party, so perhaps our shared undergraduate status overcame any fears that I might be put off by the grandeur of his home and the social eminence of his father. But the lifting of this small barrier didn't mean that I could expect to receive or ask for any confidences about his feelings for or relations with other people. I wondered whether there was anybody among his other friends whom I had met at that birthday party who was intimate enough for him to overcome that reticence. Or was Mark, for all his evident bonhomie, secretive and taciturn by nature about his innermost emotions?

Going to Mark's birthday party had raised in my mind the possibility that I might encounter Marina. It was with some trepidation that I thought about it on the day of the party. I was three years older than when I first met her; and in the meantime, at the varsity I had grown into a more relaxed relation with the other sex. Moreover, my literary education had taught me to cultivate towards love the sophisticated detachment of a Donne or Marvell; and on the library shelves the bound volumes of the journal *Scrutiny*, which had for us the authority of Holy Writ, stood like sentinels guarding us against sentimentality, self-pity, fantasising and other mortal sins. But I didn't know whether one look from those extraordinary eyes might break through all those defences and reduce me again to the callow schoolboy of three years ago.

At the party I waited with a mixture of hope and anxiety for her appearance. She didn't turn up. Late in the evening I summoned up courage to ask Mark, 'Isn't your sister coming?'

'She isn't here, Dave. It's the school holidays, you know, and she has gone away to my aunt's place in Kandy for a week. I even think she may have arranged the trip to avoid my birthday.'

'Why, have you quarrelled?'

'No, but she says she's tired of my friends treating her like a child.'

I couldn't imagine anybody treating Marina as a child, and said so. Mark smiled.

'You know, Dave, at seventeen she's at the stage when she's abnormally sensitive about wanting to be treated as grown-up. Particularly now, when she's head girl at St. Clara's.'

10

1941. We had just finished a lecture of the Geyser at that small building facing Reid Avenue that was known as Sampson's Bungalow. I came down the stairs with Daphne, and we were both marvelling at the Geyser's reading (I mean, his vocal rendering) of 'The Windhover' that we had just heard.

'I nearly swooned,' she said.

As we emerged into the open air, I saw a figure standing under a tree a few yards away, and recognised him. It was Mr. Wijeratne.

'Good morning, Mr. Wijeratne. Have you come to meet Wije?' I asked.

'No. I came to meet you and your friend, Mr. Watson.'

I looked round: Peter and Savitri were walking on, but there was no sign of Mark and Joyce. Evidently they had lingered upstairs.

'He should be coming down now,' I told Mr. Wijeratne.

Daphne said 'Cheerio' to me and went on; in a few minutes Mark appeared, though he still stopped at the doorsteps to talk to Joyce.

'Mark!' I called. 'Wije's father is here to see you.'

Mark interrupted his conversation and came up to us.

'I wanted to see both of you,' Mr. Wijeratne began, 'because of what has happened to Haris. His scholarship has been cancelled. His Professor has reported that he is irregular in attendance and work.'

Mr. Wijeratne's eyes were weary, I thought, from sleeplessness or worry.

'This is what I feared might happen.' Mark said.

'So did I,' said Mr. Wijeratne. 'In fact I warned him when I knew he was cutting lectures. It's all because of his political activities. I don't like to interfere, he must have the freedom to act according to his views. But not at the cost of his future life.'

'So what can we do?' I asked.

'This is what I wanted to talk to you about. Haris wants to give up his university career and leave. I told him he mustn't do that, I'll somehow find the money to pay his fees. Of course, it will be difficult. The scholarship paid not only for his fees but also his books and his travelling.'

'So how will you find the money?' asked Mark.

'I can do some private tuitions in the afternoons and evenings. Sariputta is a one-session school. Mr. Kaviratne made that change because he thought it would be healthier for the boys.'

'But can you make enough on tuitions to cover the loss of the scholarship?' asked Mark.

'I am sure I can find the fees at least. About the other expenses, my wife and I will make any sacrifice for Haris to finish his degree.'

Mr. Wijeratne's expression, no longer glacial, as I remembered it from our first encounter, glowed with paternal devotion.

'But this is what I want to ask both of you. Haris refuses to accept those sacrifices from us. He's determined to give up his university career. You are the two people he looks up to most from his Bethlehem days. Can you please come and see him and persuade him not to be rash?'

Mr. Wijeratne looked from Mark to me, beseechingly.

'We'll come,' said Mark. 'Okay, Dave?'

'Yes, of course. But is he at home, Mr. Wijeratne?'

'Yes, that's another problem. He gets out in the morning, and often doesn't come back till late at night. But if you come early, by eight, you'll catch him. If I am not asking too much of you. It will be a great favour.'

'We'll come. Tomorrow morning, Dave?'

'Okay.'

Mark arrived at my home at 7.30 the next morning. I got into his Morris; we drove to Wije's, and caught him over his breakfast. Mr. Wijeratne and his wife discreetly left us alone to talk.

'I have no right to expect such sacrifices of my parents,' Wije said stubbornly after we had told him our business. 'What I have done was my decision. If there is anything to suffer, I must be the one to do it.'

'But your parents will suffer, it'll cause them great distress if you give up your studies,' Mark said.

'You know, Mark,' Wije responded, 'both you and they are making a great mistake. Why do you want me to finish and take my degree? Because you believe this system is going to last. That is the great mistake you are making.'

He looked hard at us, with a gaze strengthened by the force of his convictions. I remembered the way in which he had confronted Holmung over the suriya mala in his buttonhole, but now there was no quaver in his voice. 'This war, repression here and elsewhere — all those are signs that the system is cracking up. You may not believe it, but the war will not end without a revolution. International revolution, Mark. It is the workers who will end the war. Of what use then will university degrees be?'

'I can't argue with you about that,' Mark said quietly. 'I don't know what the future will bring, I'm not as confident as you that I can foresee it. I'm only appealing to you to save your father and mother a lot of unhappiness in the present.'

It was hard to persuade Wije, and if we succeeded in the end, I think it was only because of the respect and gratitude he felt for Mark. He promised, in response to Mark's urging, that he would do enough work to complete his degree.

'Today is the last day of term,' Mark said. 'You have the whole long vacation before you to catch up on what you have missed. It's only two years more, Wije, buckle down to it, and get over it, then you can do what you like with yourself.'

As we climbed back into the car, Wije's mother came rushing out.

'Please wait and have a cup of tea,' she said in Sinhala.

'No, that's alright,' I said. 'We have to get back. We have a class.'

'Are you sure? I feel so bad that I couldn't even give you a cup of tea.'

'It's alright,' I repeated.

'I don't know how to thank you two children. Haris's father hasn't been able to sleep for the last two nights. For me also it has been like a fire in my chest.'

'I think you shouldn't worry now,' I said.

What a pity, I thought on the way back, that Wije had lost contact with Girlie, she might have given him an interest and a purpose to balance his political enthusiasm. But a remark of Mark broke into these reflections.

'My sister, Marina, heard yesterday that she has passed her university entrance. So she'll be there next term.'

'What's she doing, Arts or Science?'

'Arts. She wants to go in for economics.'

That night I had a most unusual dream. I was back at Bethlehem, and was walking through the quadrangle, down the path that led to the hall. Then at the other end of the path there appeared — Marina. I ran up to her and said, 'Marina! How wonderful to meet you here!' She looked at me coldly and asked: 'Who are you?' I said, 'Can't you remember me? I gave you a patty at the Bethlehem-King's match.' She frowned and said, 'Oh yes. You're the boy who mixed up the fish knife and the meat knife.' I protested, 'No, that wasn't me, it was Wije!' She said, still more coldly, 'No, it was you. And you call your father Pappa.' I shouted, 'No, no, that wasn't me, it was Girlie!' Just then a boy in a cricket cap and pads came up. He said, 'Come on, Marina, stop talking to him. Let's dance.' A band from somewhere struck up Strauss's 'Tales of the Vienna Woods'. Marina smiled at the other boy: 'Lovely, Steve. Let's dance.' They walked on to one of the lawns of the quadrangle, hand in hand, and began waltzing. I stumbled away in a blind rage, so that I blundered into a barbed wire fence beyond the quadrangle, and had to disentangle my trousers from it. I was still in a rage when I woke up.

11

From time to time during the long vacation I thought about the prospect of Marina at the varsity. Four years had passed since I had seen her, and then only on two brief occasions. It was unlikely she would remember me: I told myself my dream might be prophetic in that way. But I wondered what difference those four years might have made to her — to her looks as well as the kind of person she was.

One day during the vacation I ran into Daphne at the library. During the conversation that followed, I asked her:

'Do you know Mark's sister, Marina? He says she'll be here next term.'

'She was a kid at St. Clara's when I was there,' Daphne said. 'But yes, I know her. She's clever, and very pretty, but I don't really like her.'

'Why not, Daphne?' I asked.

'She's not like Mark, she's a stuck-up little miss.'

It wasn't like Daphne to make derogatory remarks about anybody. She herself must have felt she had spoken out of character, because the next moment she added:

'But then, I'm going on what I knew of her when she was very young. She may have changed, many people do at that age. And she's very talented, Dave. Have you met her?'

'Only briefly.'

'She played the lead in the school play last year — Lady Precious Stream. She was excellent, everybody thought so.'

I was disturbed by Daphne's remarks for a long time after we parted. Was Marina in fact a stuck-up little miss? But I thought I must wait and judge for myself, and Daphne herself had admitted that that was when she was very young, and she might have changed.

When I saw Marina on the first day of the new academic year, she was standing in a queue of fresher students waiting to receive their admission cards. She certainly had changed — outwardly; but in such a way as to enhance her beauty. She had shed whatever puppyfat she might have had at fourteen, and could now be described only as slim; and she had grown still taller than I remembered her. She was now, more unmistakably than before, Mark's sister, but for the glory of her golden-brown complexion, the flowing abundance of her hair, and, of course, that miracle of her eyes which, even at the distance at which I glimpsed her, revived in me the fascination with which I had regarded them at first sight.

I describe her as I saw her then, in my twentieth year, with a gaze no less enchanted by her than at sixteen. The sight of her inspired in me a fresh longing even while it filled me with despair: with all her assets — beauty, intelligence, talent, and even social position — how could she fail to find many admirers and pursuers? She didn't see me watching her (nor was it likely, I thought, that she would have recognised me even if she had): she was talking animatedly to a young man, another fresher, who was deeply absorbed by the conversation and seemed to have no eyes or ears for anything else — how, indeed, I thought, could he?

The second time I saw her at the varsity was a couple of days later: I was coming out of the library and she was going in. This time

I thought I would dare fortune, and I said 'Hullo! I'm Dave. Remember me?'

She stared at me for a moment, so that I thought the dream was going to be re-enacted; then she smiled and said, 'Oh, Dave? Yes, of course, I remember you. Mark talks so often of you. You're one of his best friends, aren't you?'

'So you don't remember me, but you remember Mark's talk of me?' I asked.

'No, no, I remember you alright.'

'Because I came to your place years ago for lunch.' I was about to add 'after I had won the Watson Memorial', but swallowed the words, deciding they would be injudicious.

'Yes, yes, I remember.'

Could she be speaking the truth, or was she merely being polite? I had no opportunity to make up my mind on this, because she looked at her wristlet and said, 'Excuse me please, Dave. I must go in and find a book and then rush to a lecture. See you sometime.'

After that, when I passed her on the way to or from a lecture, or in the corridors of the Arts block, or in the library, she always smiled, sometimes said 'Hullo,' or even 'Hullo, Dave'. But I had no opportunity to extend my acquaintance with her because she was most often in a group of students, of either sex, or was sometimes squired by a young man—any one of several with whom I saw her on different occasions.

I think my obsession with Marina could well have ended there, in a distant admiration and a passing word. The truth was that by this time I was half in love with Daphne, though I never used the word 'love', even in my own mind, to describe my feelings for her. I was under the influence of that romantic convention that says you can only be in love with one woman at one time; and Marina was still, however remotely and fancifully, the object of my devotion, whose glove I carried in imagination as the badge of my worship.

Meanwhile, however, I saw Daphne every day in lecture-room and library, walked with her and talked with her, for while there was no open estrangement between her and Mark, he seemed to shun being thrown together with her except in other company. I was even more attracted than before by the kindliness and warmth of her nature as well as her charm and intelligence. Daphne, on her part, seemed to find pleasure and comfort in my company, perhaps on the rebound from her frustrated relationship with Mark. Could my friendship with Daphne have flowered into something deeper and more lasting? It's an unanswerable question, because an unforeseen train of events choked off any such possibility.

12

That year the Geyser was going to direct a play for the University Dramatic Society (popularly known as the Dramsoc), and he had chosen a Shakespeare play, *Twelfth Night*. A notice went up on the board, inviting students who were interested in playing to meet him at specified times so that he could make a preliminary selection of those who were to be considered for acting roles. Then a gathering of those who had passed this first stage was arranged for a Saturday afternoon and a Sunday morning so that the Geyser could move on to auditioning them for specific roles. All those who had been so selected were asked to read and be familiar with the play.

Mark, Daphne, Joyce, Peter and I were in the crowd of thirty or so who met in King George's Hall on the Saturday for the beginning of that second stage. Savitri would have dearly loved to play, but she was engaged to a young Tamil doctor who was only waiting for her to complete her university course to marry her; and he had frowned on the idea of her participation in a public performance. Savitri had therefore offered to help instead in the printing and sale of tickets.

When we trooped into the hall, I was at first startled to see Marina among the crowd, but then I realised I should have expected her presence: hadn't she, according to Daphne, been a great success in *Lady Precious Stream*?

The Geyser stood up before the gathering, made an initial pull at his goatee, and said:

'To begin with, I am gratified by the response to my invitation, and grateful to all of you who have presented yourselves for auditioning. Of course, you must realise that these are still early days

in the production. The fact that you are asked this evening or tomorrow to read a part doesn't necessarily mean that you will in the end be performing it. In this respect, as in others, many are called but few are chosen.'

The Geyser then spouted for twenty minutes about the play. He wanted us to get away from the practice of approaching Shakespeare on bended knees, to remember that he was a man of the popular theatre. The play was a comedy written for the occasion of Twelfth Night, celebrated with festivity and foolery: its spirit was a joyous liberation of the instincts of pleasure: 'Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?' The Geyser had no truck with those who wanted to arouse sympathy for Malvolio: he was a killjoy puritan and a hypocrite who got his just deserts to the huge satisfaction of the audience.

The rest of the evening and the next morning were taken up by the readings. The Geyser tried out different people in the principal roles: sometimes he had the same scene, or part of a scene, read in succession by a different combination of performers. Early in the evening the Geyser wanted me to try Feste, but I protested:

'No, sir. Feste has to sing, and I can't sing a note to save my soul.'

'Who'll volunteer to sing?' asked the Geyser.

'Mark, how about you?' I said.

The Geyser shook his head. 'I'm thinking of trying Mr. Watson as Malvolio.'

Four people were ultimately found as possible singers, and tested. None of them knew the Feste songs, of course, but they each sang what they chose, ranging from 'Drink to me only with thine eyes' to 'Oh give me a home where the buffaloes roam', and we had a lot of fun listening to their impromptu performances, punctuated by a few false notes and muddled words. When that was over, and a young man by the name of Vernon Perera from the Science Faculty had been tentatively picked, the Geyser turned to me again.

'Mr. Gunawardene, I think your face will be the right one as the lovelorn Orsino.'

There was general laughter, but my heart gave a leap, because the trend of the auditioning had shown that Marina was the most likely Viola. As if to confirm this, the Geyser said to me:

'Get up on that stage with Miss Watson and run through the latter half of Act 2 Scene 4. From line 78, where Orsino dismisses the rest of the court and the two of you are left alone.'

It was an ironic reversal of reality, I thought as I climbed the steps to the stage — Marina-Viola, deeply in love with Dave-Orsino, and unable to declare her feelings except by obliquities and disguised signals. When we began the scene, Marina's proximity seemed so overwhelming that I had to make an effort to pull myself together and start reading.

I could sense even in my state of emotional excitement that Marina was good, very good indeed. When she said:

You cannot love her, You tell her so. Must she not then be answered?

her tone was of rational acceptance of the inevitable, but there was a catch in the voice in the last phrase that showed Viola had to struggle with her own feelings in imposing that resignation on herself. And she used her eyes to great effect, looking askance and away from me at

My father had a daughter loved a man— As it might be perhaps, were I a woman, I should your lordship—

and then turning them directly and challengingly on me with *Was not this love indeed?* As for me, I fear I got credit for playing the distracted lover with an actuality that had nothing to do with the imaginary Olivia.

By the end of the second day's auditions, the Geyser had more or less settled on the main roles: Marina as Viola; Elizabeth, a History Honours student, as Olivia; Mark as Malvolio; as Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, a pair of students from the economics department, one fat and one thin, so that they were immediately christened Laurel and Hardy; Daphne as Maria; Vernon Perera as Feste; and me as Orsino. 'Rehearsals begin on Tuesday at 5,' announced the Geyser. 'Those of

you who have been assigned roles will start learning them, and others will also attend the rehearsals until I have sorted out the minor parts.'

13

The big news for most students the following week, however, concerned the lecture that Mervyn Wijesinghe was giving to the Historical Society — the same society where I had heard him talk about the falling rate of profit and the inevitability of revolution. Mervyn had passed out a few months earlier with a first in Economics. His new lecture was cryptically titled 'The Shape of Things to Come: The Post-Capitalist Society', and anybody who had heard him before might well have expected that this would be another blast, from that pair of sensual lips, of the trumpet of socialist revolution. But days before the lecture, the varsity was buzzing with rumours that the lecture was going to be Mervyn's recantation of Marxism, and the hall was therefore packed to the full by an expectant and intrigued audience.

Shortly before Mervyn graduated, a book had come out in the United States that created a shortlived intellectual stir. Its author was an academic by the name of James Burnham, who had been a Marxist and Trotskyist, but who now announced that while Marx was right in claiming that capitalism would disappear, he was wrong in believing that it would be replaced by socialism. What would actually follow would be a managerial society, one in which the ruling class wouldn't be property-owning capitalists but managers. This form of society had already come into being in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, and was on the way in the United States.

When Mervyn began talking, it was apparent within the first five minutes that this was indeed the theory he was going to expound. In fact, he proceeded to preach the gospel according to Burnham with as much certainty and fervour as he had the gospel according to Marx in his lecture two years earlier. He ended by saying: 'We must have the courage to revise our theories when they come into conflict with social actuality. I invite you, to adapt the words of Lenin on a memorable occasion, to take off a shirt that is old and dirty and put on a new and clean one.'

The questions erupted from the floor as soon as Mervyn had sat down. Most of the Marxists in the audience were predictably

outraged, and fired away at Mervyn's equation of the class structures of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. But even right-wing liberal students found it preposterous to claim that in the United States managers were taking power from private property-owners. The debate between Mervyn and his interrogators raged back and forth a long time at the level of intellectual argument. Then Abeysinghe, the student who had been one of Mervyn's lieutenants on the evening of the antiwar meeting, rose. It was now late evening, and several of the participants had tended to make long speeches, so the student-chairman stopped Abeysinghe before he began.

'Owing to the lateness of the hour, I'm going to permit only brief questions. Yes, Mr. Abeysinghe.'

'My question will be very brief, Mr. Chairman. I only want to ask Mr. Wijesinghe whether he has embraced the theory of the managerial revolution in preparation for his future position as a manager.'

A ripple of laughter ran through the audience. Abeysinghe had given utterance to a thought that till then had remained unspoken but had been in the minds of many people in the audience. When the laughter subsided, Mervyn said:

'It is not an argument against any intellectual position to question the motives or the integrity of the person who holds it. A theory can be assailed only by reasoned analysis, not by personal insinuations.'

On his last words, it was Wije who rose from the audience. Abeysinghe had spoken with a calm, cool irony; Wije's small, slight frame was quivering with a passion that it seemed he could hardly contain. He made no show of addressing the chair, but directed his words straight to Mervyn:

You want us to take off an old dirty shirt and put on a clean one? The clean, luxury shirt of the capitalist manager — that is what you want! Yes, the workers' shirts are dirty because they are stained with sweat and blood. But we are not ashamed of that. The revolutionary movement has seen many renegades leaving it, but that has not killed it. It has survived Kautsky and Plekhanov. It will survive Mervyn Wijesinghe.'

He sat down, his body still shaking and his hands trembling with emotion.

'I don't think any reply to that is necessary,' said Mervyn.

14

The rehearsals were going well, and the Geyser seemed generally satisfied and cheerful. But for me they were a tantalising and torturing allurement. Every time I played opposite Marina, I felt myself more and more deeply trapped by the fascination I felt for her. There was neither real pleasure nor happiness in these moments; yet I could no more have foregone them than I could have done without air. I would live from rehearsal to rehearsal, feeding in the interim on the memory of a situation when she seemed to have smiled at me somewhat more warmly than usual, or of a remark she had dropped in approval of my playing. One evening, as we finished rehearsing that part of the final scene where Orsino threatens to kill Viola out of jealousy, she looked at me, half-closing her eyes so that they became narrower than ever - two liquid lines - and said, 'Oh Dave, you were so good, you made me play much better than ever before!' This, from her who was already acknowledged by everybody to be the bright star of the production, dazzled me, and that night I lay sleepless for a long time recalling it. On the other hand, the apparent coldness or indifference of a word, a look, a gesture, would be incised into my memory as a wound that continued to torment me until the next rehearsal either assuaged or deepened it.

'I got it bad, and that ain't good.' Mark had for some time been running a jazz club at the varsity, where he and another student talked about particular musicians and played recorded selections of their music. He had persuaded me to attend these meetings, and I had begun to overcome my original, ignorant dislike of jazz (in fact, it was Mark's musical education of me that began what was to become later a lifelong interest). One song of the young Ella Fitzgerald that had moved me was that in which she sang, 'Lawd, I got it bad, and that ain't good.' (Has any other kind of music caught so powerfully the quality of unfulfilled yearning as that tradition of jazz that derives from the

blues? I don't think so.) The song came to my mind now: I got it bad with Marina, and I knew it wasn't good, but there was nothing I could do about it. I was like a sailor, adrift in a raft in mid-ocean, who has nothing to slake his thirst with but salt water. The Geyser must have had special insight in picking me to play Orsino, with his unfulfillable, self-destructive desire.

15

One rehearsal day we went on quite late: the Geyser wanted to get the big scene of the exposure of Malvolio perfect. At last he was satisfied. 'That was excellent, Malvolio,' he said. 'And you too, Olivia.' Even in the informality of the rehearsals the Geyser didn't address us by our first names, but he compromised by calling us by the names of the characters we were playing.

It was about ten when we left the hall. As we came out into the open air, Mark said to me, 'How are you getting home, Dave?'

'I can still get a bus,' I said.

'No, but it's late, and you'll be tired and hungry by the time you get home. I'll take you.'

'All that way?'

'That's nothing.'

'It's very kind of you, Mark, but I don't think I should take you out of your way. You'll be much hungrier by the time you get home.'

'Not to worry. Liza and I nipped out and had a bite at the thambikadé while you were doing the scene with Marina.'

'Alright, if you really don't mind.'

'Of course not.'

Daphne, who was just behind us with Joyce (who was playing one of Olivia's ladies-in-waiting), said: 'Mark, if you are going that way, do you mind dropping me at my aunt's place at Bambalapitiya? Then I can ring from there for the car.'

'Better still, Daphne,' said Mark, 'why not come with me to drop Dave, and I'll drop you back home after that. That way I'll have some company driving back home.'

Daphne hesitated a moment. I guessed that she hadn't been in Mark's car for some time. 'Oh alright,' she said, 'Thank you, Mark.'

'Thank you, Daphne, for coming.' He called out to Marina, whom he naturally took home every night after the rehearsal. 'Marina, I'm going to drop Dave home, and then Daphne at Gregory's Road. You'll come with us, won't you?'

I had a momentary vision of sharing the back seat with Marina, while Daphne sat in front with Mark, but Marina's response dispelled it.

'Not if you're going loafing all over the countryside.'

'It isn't all over the countryside. We'll be home in half an hour or thereabouts anyway.'

'I'm hungry, I don't want to wait half an hour. Vernon,' she said to the young man who was standing with her, 'you can drop me home, can't you?'

'Yes, of course, Marina.'

Driving off with Daphne and me, Mark seemed to have been put in mind of Wije by our destination. 'Have you been checking how Wije is doing. Dave?' he asked me.

'Yes. I asked one of his classmates, and he said Wije's been very regular since the beginning of the year. So he has kept his promise to us.'

'Oh, that's very good.'

'In fact, his friend thought if he continued in that way, they might restore his scholarship.'

'That would be excellent.'

'Who's Wije?' asked Daphne.

'You remember the student who topped the scholarship exam in our year, beating both you and me?' Mark began to tell Daphne Wije's story, including the fact of his lost girlfriend. Daphne's tender heart was evidently touched by the narrative. 'Can't you do something to find her?'

'How?'

'By inserting a personal ad in the papers.'

'I doubt Girlie reading newspapers,' said Mark, 'they probably wouldn't have the money for them. And if her father sees the ad, she might have trouble with him.'

When I got home, I was glad Mark had given Daphne a lift home: I hoped it might help to bring them closer again. Though my absorption with Marina had weakened the strength of my feelings for Daphne, I was still very fond of her, and I had always thought she and Mark would make an excellent pair.

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But during the next two days Daphne seemed to be behaving strangely. On the first of these days I thought she was tense and unusually silent before and after lectures; and at the rehearsal that evening she sat apart and silent when she wasn't performing. Mark meanwhile chatted gaily between scenes, either to Joyce or to Liza, and walked out with the latter into the garden when he wasn't required on stage.

The second day Daphne acted even more abnormally. She arrived at the lecture-room after the bell, and only just when the Grinder was beginning. And after the lecture, she did something she had never done before: without waiting for the rest of us, she hurried down the corridor and soon disappeared from sight. When we reached the garden, she was getting into her car, which drove off.

Nobody said anything then; the five of us walked to College House; Joyce and Savitri went into the women's common room; Peter, the inveterate crammer, walked on towards the library; and Mark and I sat down in a corner of the tuckshop.

It was impossible for me to pretend that nothing had happened. 'What's wrong with Daphne?' I asked.

Mark made a ring with the smoke from his cigarette. He silently watched it float in the air and then dissolve. 'Why ask me?' he said at the end of that.

'Because on Monday night, you took Daphne home after dropping me. Then she was quite normal. But from Tuesday morning she has been acting very oddly. And she seems to be very unhappy.'

Mark stubbed out his cigarette-end.

'Okay, Dave, you're right, you're the great detective.'

'That's a nasty thing to say, Mark. I'm not being a snoop. Of course, if you tell me it's none of my business, I'll have to shut up. But because I like Daphne and I like you, I thought I would ask you and take the risk of being snubbed.'

'Yes, I'm sorry, I apologise.'

He relapsed into silence.

'It's alright, Mark, if it's something you don't want to talk about.' I rose, and said:

'Would you care for a game of ping-pong?'

Mark remained seated, pondering. Then he said:

'No, I should tell you. But I can't talk about it here. Shall we take a walk?'

'Okay, Mark.'

Mark led the way out of College House, then across Thurstan Road, through a gap in the fence, to the playing field. We sat down on the grass in the shade of a tree. There was nobody there at that time. Mark pursed up his lips as if wondering how to begin.

'First I must tell you, Dave, that I like Daphne enormously, I'm very fond of her. As you know, she's pretty and intelligent, and on top of that she's a real sweetie. I like her so much I'm sure that most people, feeling as I do for her, would want to make love to her.'

'Why don't you? You could do worse, you know, Mark.'

'Yes, why don't I? It's not that I'm afraid of being rejected. I'm not flattering myself, but I feel fairly sure that Daphne likes me...' Mark looked away across the playing field where a boy was rolling the pitch, and added, '...very much. If I had told her that I loved her, she would probably have accepted me.'

'So why didn't you?'

'Yes, that's the million-dollar question for you, isn't it, Dave? But that's because you're a romantic. For you things are very clearcut, I'm sure. Don't you believe that of all the millions of women in the world, there is one who can make you happy, if you are lucky enough to win her?'

I thought of Marina as Mark said this: I didn't believe I had much chance of winning her, nor was I sure she would make me happy if I did.

'No. That isn't true,' I said. 'Not just one woman.'

'Okay, maybe three, or five. But you see what I mean: I'm sure, if you fall in love, you'll always regard the woman you're in love with as special.'

'So?'

'Well, that's just what I can't feel, Dave. However much I like Daphne, I can't say that I want to commit myself to loving her for ever, till death do us part.'

'So are you waiting for one with whom you can?'

'No, no, Dave. That's not it at all. I think I would feel just the same with any woman. Even if she were Greta Garbo and Madame Curie and Joan of Arc rolled into one.'

'Hm.' I couldn't say I quite understood, still less that I approved. 'Well then, what happened on Monday night?'

17

Mark plucked a leaf from a small plant that was growing in the grass, and rolled it between his palms.

'Yes, that's the hard part to tell, Dave. But first of all, I must say: I'm not proud of this. I'm only telling you just how it happened.

'After I had dropped you, I had intended to take Daphne straight home. But on the way she asked me whether I had with me the library copy of Tolkien's edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Remember the Grinder wanted us to look up a note in it for Tuesday?'

'Yes.'

'She asked me, could I give it to her on the way home, so that she could read it in the morning? So instead of driving first to her place, I drove to mine. By the time we got there, the house was dark, everybody had gone to sleep. So I got out of the car, but then I said to her, "Why don't you come in too for a moment, Daphne?" She said, "But everybody seems to be asleep." I said, "That's alright, I'll take you into my room."

'You mean you took her upstairs?'

'No, no. For quite some time I've had the front room, the office room downstairs, with a separate entrance. So I can come and go when I want without disturbing anybody.'

'So?'

'I swear I had no ulterior motive in asking her to come into my room. It's just that we'd been so friendly and chatty on the way, there was a kind of intimacy between us after a long time. And I just wanted to extend that by taking her into my room where she had never been before. And she must have felt the same way because she hesitated only for a moment, and then said, "Alright."

'And then?'

'Then I unlocked the door, we went in, but just before I switched on the light to find the Tolkien, I felt a sudden rush of desire for her. I took her in my arms and I kissed her. She responded — oh, quite warmly.'

Mark was silent for a moment, so I had to prod him again. 'Yes?'

'Then I switched the light on and found the book, and we walked back to the car after locking the door. When we got to Gregory's Road — and that house was almost dark too — before dropping her off I kissed her again. And again with the same response from her.'

Mark paused and began shredding the leaf in his hands.

'You must realise, all this happened in silence. In silence and in the dark. She said nothing and I said nothing. I rather think now, looking back, that Daphne would have expected me to say after that first kiss, "I love you, Daphne". And if I had, I'm sure she would have said, "I love you too, Mark." But that wasn't at all what I wanted to say, because that wasn't what I felt. I kissed her simply because I was fond of her, and because I was glad she was there, at that moment.'

My head was in a whirl, listening to Mark's narrative. I couldn't set myself up as judge over him; yet I couldn't suppress my reactions.

'But did you have the right, Mark, to kiss her if that's all you felt?'

Mark looked at me in a way that reminded me oddly of how he used to look at a boy he was pulling up when he was a school prefect.

'Come on, Dave. The trouble with you is that you're both a romantic and a puritan. It was only a kiss, it wasn't as if I had fucked her. And mind you, there was a bed there, in that room. If I had pulled her on to it, I don't think she would have resisted.'

I was shocked, I must admit it, both by his sentiments and by his language. Actually, I had never heard Mark use the word *fuck* before, any more than I had heard him say *bastard* before he lost his temper with Felsie-bada. If that was anger, this, I thought, was perhaps exasperation; but I still didn't like his using the word of somebody who was both his friend and mine.

'So you take moral credit for not —'. I paused, unable to bring myself to echo his word.

'I'm not concerned with taking credit, Dave, I told you I'm just telling you how it happened. But the trouble is that Daphne's moral code is probably just the same as yours. One doesn't kiss anybody one isn't in love with. So I'm sure she waited on Tuesday for a declaration from me. And since it didn't come, she's pining away.'

'But you can't just evade responsibility like that, Mark. You ignored Daphne on Tuesday; I saw you at the rehearsal chatting away with Joyce and Liza, while Daphne sat depressed in a corner.'

'Yes, because I sensed what she wanted. And I wasn't going to be coerced into an emotional commitment because she was sulking.'

'But you can't do that, Mark. It was bad enough after you serenaded her at her birthday party. I'm sure Daphne took that as a declaration of love. Most other people must have thought so too. And she probably waited for you to make a commitment, and when you didn't, she must have suffered.'

'Yes, that's why I shyed away from her after that. Monday night was just one of those things that happen without your intending it.'

'But why did you sing "Let's do it" to her anyway? And go down on one knee — in public?'

'Oh, that was just a lark, I got a kick out of it. But don't get me wrong: I like Daphne, I like her very much, but I don't want to spend the rest of my life with her.'

'Or with anybody?'

'With anybody so far. And perhaps never.'

'In that case, you should keep away from women.'

'I can't do that. As Byron said of himself, "I can't live without an object of attachment." And the object has to be female. But when the attachment becomes a ball and chain, then I have to free myself.'

'But what happened between you and Daphne can happen with any other woman.'

'Yes, probably. With most middle-class women in Ceylon anyway. And that's one reason why I don't want to stay here. I want to go away.'

'Where?'

'After the war is over, I'll go away to England or Europe or the States. Anywhere where there'll be some women, at least, who don't think that a kiss must have an engagement ring as its sequel. Or, for that matter, that a fuck must have a wedding ring as its prelude.'

There seemed to be nothing more to say, so I made an attempt to get up, but Mark stopped me by putting his hand on mine.

'There's one thing more I want to say, Dave. I've already made myself disagreeable to you. Now I'm going to be more so. And it's your turn to shut me up if you think it's none of my business.'

'What?'

'About Marina. There isn't a ghost of a chance that she'll fall for you. So you'll only be hurting yourself by wearing your heart out for her.'

I was dazed. I started to stammer, 'What makes you think — but Mark interrupted me.

'Come on, Dave! You wear your heart on your sleeve, and you think nobody can see what you feel. The way you gaze at her, the way you follow her around, or follow her with your eyes, even when you don't speak to her — I'm sure the whole cast knows you carry a torch for her.'

I was silent.

'But it's futile, Dave. Marina isn't to be won by romantic devotion, she has had plenty of that in the last few years. From more admirers than I can count. It's only somebody who'll make her feel that *she* has to woo and win him who'll get her. And that someone won't be you.'

I said nothing again. I could have told Mark my feelings for Marina had nothing to do with any hope of winning her, but I didn't think it possible to explain this to him. Mark put his hand again on mine.

'I'm sorry, Dave. I told you I'd be disagreeable. But I don't want you to get hurt — at least, not more than you've already been, probably.'

I can't say that Mark's advice about Marina made a difference to me; after all, he told me essentially nothing that I didn't already know. But what made me touch emotional rockbottom was an incident that took place two days later, on the eve of the play's première.

It was the occasion of the first dress rehearsal, and I was in my rich ducal costume. The night was warm, and my costume made me warmer; so after the gulling scene of Malvolio began, when I knew there would be a long interval before my next appearance in the final scene of the play, I went out into the garden for a breather. As I stood there and refreshed myself with the night air, I noticed two figures standing against one of the pillars halfway down the covered way that led to the hall. They were embracing, cuddling, kissing, whatever. There was enough light in that corridor for me to recognise them: they were Marina and Vernon.

I turned and went back into the hall. My mind was a whirlwind of chaotic thoughts and emotions. Was the unremarkable Vernon, I asked myself, the somebody who had made Marina feel that she had to woo and win him? But then I told myself I was being foolish: a cuddle or a kiss didn't necessarily mean Marina was in love with Vernon. That recognition didn't make my pain any easier to bear.

I went through the rest of the play somehow: it was a galling irony that in my final line I had to take Marina by the hand and proclaim her 'Orsino's mistress, and his fancy's queen!' I went home and abandoned myself to an orgy of self-laceration. It was in this state that I did what I am ashamed to speak of; but to be honest, I must.

There was a servant-girl in the house who must have been around sixteen; like most domestics in middle-class households, she had come from a village. Her real name was Laisina, but it was the general practice of urban housewives to replace such country names by those more familiar to them, and yet such as would be at a far remove from those of the daughters of the house. So Mummy had renamed Laisina 'Alice'. Alice was buxom, with prominent breasts and sturdy legs, and her face was round, fair, and frequently smiling. Young servant-girls were often the partners, willing or coerced, with

whom adolescent sons in middle-class families made their first groping experiments in sexuality; and some of my friends had boasted to me of their successes in this line. Alice had often aroused my desire, but, absorbed in my romantic obsession with Marina, I had not wished to sully myself, as I thought, by contact with an inferior creature. The only occasion when I had yielded to a sudden spasm of lust was once, when I was eating dinner after returning late from a rehearsal, and Alice came in to leave a glass of water on the table. As she did so, I grabbed her hand and squeezed it; she didn't pull it away. I then dropped her hand and reached out in the direction of her breasts, at which she panicked and ran away.

She was the only servant then in the house. Mummy usually kept an older kussiamma too, but the last one had proved dishonest and Mummy had sacked her, so that until a replacement was found for her, Alice was doing all the work; and she slept alone in the kitchen.

Now, lying in bed after an hour or so of self-torture over Marina, I decided I would assuage my frustration by finding what satisfaction I could from Alice. Barefooted in order to make no noise, I made my way through the sitting room and the dining room. The house was dark: but the faint moonlight shining through the glass skylight in the roof enabled me to find my way down to the kitchen without colliding with any of the furniture and thus waking up the household. My heart was pounding with the fear of being discovered, but I had thought up a story in case that happened: I had woken up with a furious thirst, and was looking for drinking water. When I entered the kitchen, it seemed a solid mass of blackness, but taking a cautious step forward, I felt the rough texture of a mat under the soles of my feet, and simultaneously, there was a gasp that came from the level of the floor, I guessed from Alice. She wasn't asleep, she had probably only just finished the work of washing up and tidying. Her gasp was probably one of fear on seeing a dark silhouette above her, so I whispered to her, 'I am Dave mahattaya', and dropped on my knees to the mat where she was lying. I wanted to reassure her by telling her I wouldn't do her any harm, but in the poverty of my Sinhala, I was able to say only, 'I won't do bad.' Alice giggled softly in the dark, whether at my grammar or the absurdity of what I had said I don't know, but it encouraged me. I lay down with her on the mat, kissed her and caressed

her breasts and legs. I wondered whether she would let me go all the way with her, but an instinct of prudence warned me not to take that risk. So I put my penis between her thighs, and tried to ask her to press them against it, but again in my excitement I was at a loss for words. However, she seemed to know what was expected of her, and did what I wanted, while I continued to kiss her and feel her breasts, until I came. I then kissed her once more, and stole back to my room.

I ended my romantic dream of Marina there, on that kitchenmat spread between the fireplace and the meat-safe, half losing my virginity, and using Alice's body as an object to punish... whom? Marina? myself? I don't know... in an act of bitter and sterile sensuality.

19

The play went very well, both box office-wise and critically: the Watson duo got most of the praise, particularly Marina, but several others received their fair share of bouquets. One reviewer thought I was 'a born Orsino', which drew a grimace from me when Daddy, with the morning paper before him, read the sentence out to me at breakfast.

With the play over, I got accustomed to encountering Marina in the old accidental way on the varsity premises, though with some lingering embers of pain in my heart. Things must have been more difficult for Daphne, who had to sit opposite Mark every day in the lecture room; but outwardly, at least, she gave no evidence of distress. At the time of the public performances of *Twelfth Night*, I wondered whether she got some satisfaction out of the gulling and persecution of Malvolio; but then I dismissed the thought as unworthy: Daphne was incapable of malice.

20

1942. With the entry of Japan into the war, it had ceased to be remote from our lives. Ceylon was full of British troops, and although the Japanese air raids temporarily emptied the city, the evacuees soon

came trickling back. Shortly after the air raids, the four LSSP detenus escaped from their prison. The party, which had been in a state of semi-illegality, was now completely proscribed. Several members of the party were detained; others, for whom warrants had been issued, went into hiding, and there was a police hunt on for them and for the escaped leaders.

One morning I took up a newspaper and read on the front page that a clandestine printing press had been raided by the police on a tip-off. The press had been in the process of printing a subversive leaflet, apparently intended for distribution among British servicemen, and titled 'A Message to British Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen from the Workers and Peasants of Ceylon'. The newspaper said three people had been taken into custody — two men who were operating the press, and 'a university student, K.A.H. Wijeratne, who was found on the premises, and who was suspected of involvement in the transport and distribution of the illegal literature printed there.'

I didn't know what to do. My first impulse was to rush to Wije's house, but on second thoughts I feared the police would be keeping a watch on it, and I didn't want to lay myself open to suspicion. Mark, when I consulted him later in the day, thought that was prudent.

I didn't see Wije until his trial three months later, to which Mark and I, as well as some lecturers and students from the Maths department, went. The charges were very serious: Wije and the other two men were being tried under the defence regulations, charged with attempting to sow disaffection among and undermine the loyalty of members of His Majesty's armed forces, as well as with maintaining and operating an illegal printing press on behalf of a proscribed organisation. Wije, however, looked calm and untroubled, buoyed up, I supposed, by his political faith. He had a lawyer, whom his parents, who were present in court, must have retained. There was one dramatic incident during the trial. Wije's lawyer argued in his submissions to court for the defence that no evidence had been led to show that his client had knowledge of the contents of the leaflet, so the first charge couldn't be sustained.

Wije rose in the dock before anybody could stop him. 'Sir,' he said to the judge, 'I not only knew the contents of the leaflet, but I fully agreed with them.'

At the end of the trial the judge found all three accused guilty on both counts. He said that the first offence of which they had been convicted was particularly serious, since it involved the loyalty of His Majesty's armed forces at a time when the country was facing a threat of enemy attack and invasion. He sentenced the two older men to a total of ten years' rigorous imprisonment. Then he gave Wije seven years; the lesser sentence, he said, was in consideration of his youth and the fact that he was a university student who had won a scholarship in open competition. He hoped that in his period of imprisonment the accused would come to realise that he had been misguided, and would resume his studies on release and become a useful member of society. Mrs. Wijeratne sobbed audibly in court when sentence was passed on her son.

We had no opportunity to speak to Wije in court before he was led away. But Mark and I agreed that we should try to see him in jail. We didn't know what access we would have to him, and Mark offered to speak to his father and to try to use his position and influence to enable us to meet Wije. Mr. Watson must have strongly disapproved of Wije's political activity, apart from his grounds for personal disappointment with him; but Christian charity must have prevailed, and he did speak to the Superintendent of the Welikade jail on our behalf. Apparently, Wije was allowed only one visitor a week, but at Mr. Watson's request, the two of us were given special permission to see him together.

Mark and I wondered whether we could take anything for Wije, 'I'm told that food won't be allowed,' Mark said. 'Nor clothes.'

'Can we take him a book?' I asked.

'We can try,' Mark said.

The book we finally settled on was Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, because, as Mark said, 'One would need a prison sentence to finish reading it.' The book was taken from us at the prison entrance, and we were told it would have to be examined and approved before being handed to the prisoner.

We were allowed to see Wije in a special room (by grace of Mr. Watson, I suppose) with a single jailor present. Wije was brought in, in his prison clothes; he looked cheerful and unruffled as he sat down.

After we had exchanged greetings, I asked him, 'How are you, and how are they treating you?'

'Nothing to complain,' he said. 'I am being treated as well as a prisoner can expect. Class counts, even in an imperialist jail. The fact that I was a university student, and that I can speak English, makes a difference.'

'What's the work you do?' Mark asked.

'They have put me to work in the prison laundry. It is a good experience.'

Wije's eyes suddenly brightened.

'But you don't know who came to see me last week.'

'Who?' I asked.

'Girlie.'

'Girlie!' we both exclaimed.

'Yes. She had read about my jail sentence in a Sinhalese newspaper. After that she inquired from the jail whether she can see me. She was told I was allowed only one visitor a week, and that my father comes on Fridays. She waited outside the jail on Friday, and met him. Now there is an arrangement that Girlie can see me one week and my father or mother the other week.'

'But does Girlie's father allow her to come and see you?' I asked.

'Girlie's father is dead,' Wije said.

'Dead!'

'Yes. He died soon after they closed the bookshop.'

Wije then told us what happened at that time, five years in the past.

Girlie's father had been growing more and more depressed about the failure of the bookshop, and their money problems had grown more acute from day to day. He took a sudden decision to close the shop — an act, really, of despair, Wije said. He begged an aunt of Girlie to let them stay with her for a short time. They moved the books and the furniture there; but this act seemed to have finally unsettled his mind. The day after they arrived at the aunt's house, Girlie's father tried to burn the books, and actually set fire to some of them before he was stopped. He then had a stroke, and lingered for a few months before he died.

'And how did Girlie exist after that?' I asked.

'She stayed on with her aunt. Her aunt is very kind to her. But after the war moved here, she found a job as a clerk in a co-op.'

'Oh, your reunion with Girlie is great news, Wije,' Mark said. 'Now you have something to look forward to, not just the revolution.'

Wije smiled. 'My love for Girlie and my faith in the revolution go together.'

21

1943. Dr. William Ivor Jennings had arrived the previous year to take over as Principal of the University College, and had recommended the immediate raising of the college to university status. So it was that we passed out among the first graduates of the newly created University of Ceylon. Mark got a first, Daphne an upper second, and Joyce, Peter and I lower seconds. Savitri had only a third, but that was to be expected: she did no work in the final term, being too busy with her trousseau. The last time the six of us met as a group was at her wedding.

And so we went out into the world, leaving the enclaves of school and university behind us, equipped with an education that had done nothing to prepare us for the seismic shocks that were to change the landscape of our lives in the future.

POSTSCRIPT TO PART TWO

Today, I hear university students frequently using the word canpus, but the word was as remote from my generation in the 'forties as were student strikes and contemporary-style ragging. The common colloquialism was varsity.

The Geyser's view that in Marvell's poem 'To His Coy Mistress' quaint is a pun on queynte, an older form of cunt, isn't his original idea. It was first suggested, as far as I know, by Pierre Legouis. Perhaps it took a Frenchman to think of it.

D.S.G.

Three

KANDY, 1943-47

1

After passing out of the university, I took on a teaching job at a school in Kandy, although Daddy was keen that I should sit for the Civil Service Examination. I didn't particularly relish the idea of a lifetime as a bureaucrat, nor did I think I would be suited to it; nor, for that matter, did I believe I would be chosen even if I took the exam. Having turned down the idea of the civil service, I saw no point in applying for lesser office jobs, so what else was there to do except teach? Daddy was bitterly disappointed, but I stuck to my guns. At the back of my mind I had a memory of Mr. Watson's compliment to me that I might be a novelist in the future, and I thought that in Kandy, far from the madding crowd, I might fulfil his expectation. Nothing came of that, except that I wrote a few bad poems and some short stories which I later tore up. Still, I didn't regret my decision: Kandy was beautiful and pleasant enough to live in, and teaching left me a lot of free time, to read, if not to write. But more important was the fact that my stay in Kandy brought me an experience that extended my education.

It happened this way. I had answered an ad by St. Andrew's College in Kandy, wanting a teacher to take English literature with upper forms, and had received a reply from the Principal, fixing a date and time for an interview. That morning I took the train; I had only a light breakfast before I left home, because I hate eating so early; and when I arrived in Kandy, I was ravenously hungry. Walking down one of the main streets, I noticed a sign saying 'The Esmeralda', and below, 'Café and Restaurant'. I thought I would try it. I went in, and found the place empty of customers; there was one waiter laying out forks, spoons and knives on the tables, and at the far end a lady was talking to a girl at a desk, who must have been a cashier. I was about to walk out and go elsewhere, when the lady saw me and came up to me.

'Can I help you?' she said.

'I came in hoping I could have lunch,' I said.

The lady looked at her wristlet. 'It's only eleven-thirty. We don't really start serving lunch till twelve.' She looked at my shoulder-bag and added, 'You must be a visitor to Kandy.'

'Yes, I just got here, by the Colombo train,' I said. 'The trouble is, I'm very hungry, and I don't think I can wait till twelve to eat. Can you possibly cook up something for me in the meantime? Just a snack even, it doesn't matter.'

The lady smiled. 'Yes, I'm sure we can.' She called to the waiter, and turned back to me. 'Would you like fried eggs? Or an omelette?'

'An omelette would be fine, thank you.'

'With toast, or just plain bread?'

'Just bread would be okay.'

She gave the waiter the order, and asked me to sit down at the nearest table. While this conversation was going on, I had been struck by the fact that she had a pair of slanting eyes, not as unusual as Marina's but still arresting, and a beautifully clear creamy complexion. She was older than me: I thought she must be around thirty (actually, I learned later, she was thirty-five). But I found her attractive and charming, and was glad I had happened to choose that restaurant.

She went back to the cashier's table, finished her conversation with the girl, came back and sat down at my table.

'Are you on a day's trip to Kandy?' she asked.

'Well, actually...' I found myself telling her about my application for a teaching job and the interview.

'So if you get the job, where will you stay in Kandy?'

'Well, that's something I have to look out for. Perhaps I can rent a room somewhere. In fact, if you know of a suitable place, it would be a great help.'

She furrowed her brow, and was silent for a moment, thinking. Then she said, 'I don't know whether you'll like it, but I do have a spare room. I don't really have lodgers, but I've kept this room empty for any friends who might come to stay. But that's so rare, I don't mind letting it to you.'

'That's great. Can I see it?'

Just then the waiter came up with the omelette and bread, and she said, 'Yes, after you've eaten.'

She left me to get on with my meal, but when I had finished, she took me upstairs. As we were climbing the stairs, she said, 'If you do take the room, you don't have to be worried that your sleep will be disturbed by noise from downstairs. The restaurant closes at nine-thirty: Kandy has no night life.'

As we reached the top of the stairs, a small girl of about four came rushing up to her, with an ayah following her. 'Mummy!' she shrieked. 'You're going to stay upstairs!'

'No, darling, I came up to show this uncle a room. Say hullo to him.'

The girl said, 'Hullo,' shyly, and I said, 'Hullo. What's your name?'

She was too overcome by a further attack of shyness to answer, so her mother said, 'She's Isabel.'

It had struck me, when we read Donne in class, that he and I had one thing in common. 'Eyes, lips and hands to miss,' Donne had written, and these were the same three features of a woman I always noticed first, if she was nice to look at. While I was talking to the lady, I hadn't seen a wedding ring on her left hand, with its long well-shaped fingers, so the child came as something of a surprise to me.

The room was fine, with a view of the lake. There was a single bed, with a mosquito net, a table and chair and an almirah, and a bathroom attached. I said, 'I should love to take it — but, of course, that's if I get the job.'

She said, 'What time is your interview?'

'Two.'

'There's lots of time. You might like to lie down for a bit. Or would you like a proper lunch after twelve?'

'No, thank you. I'd be too full.'

'Then you can take a nap. The room is kept swept, but I'll tell one of the men to put a new bedsheet and pillowcase on.'

'Thank you.'

She said, 'I'm Melanie,' and held out her hand.

I took it, and said, 'I'm Dave.'

'Are you going back to Colombo today?'

I said, 'Yes, but I'll drop in on the way back from the school and tell you how I fared.'

'See you.' She turned and went out of the room.

The Principal of St. Andrew's was quite happy to engage me. I was to start the following week. On the way back to the railway station I met Melanie and told her the news: she was delighted, and I arranged to take the room.

Before leaving, I said, 'I'll be here on Sunday, because I have to start school on Monday morning. But if there's any problem, how do I get in touch with you?'

'Ring me here.' She scribbled the number on a card and handed it to me.

'But I don't even know how to ask for you. I don't know your surname.'

'I'm Mrs. Fernando.' She made a face. 'I don't like that name, because I'm divorced. But that's what it is. You didn't tell me your surname either.'

'Gunawardene.'

On Saturday evening, I thought I had better ring her anyway to confirm I was coming. I asked for her, and when her husky voice came over, I said, 'This is Dave.'

She said, 'Oh God, you're not coming, is that it?' There was a tone of real disappointment in her voice.

'No, no!' I said quickly. 'I thought I'd better ring and confirm I'd be there. Tomorrow morning.'

Over the phone I could hear an exhalation of breath. 'When you said it was Dave, I thought you'd rung me to say you'd found a job in Colombo, and the other was off.'

'No, I wouldn't have done that even if there had been a job in Colombo.' I said that without thinking, to reassure her; then I realised it was true.

2

I got to Kandy the next day, and moved into the room, which Melanie had all ready for me. She was warm and welcoming, and asked me to

join her at lunch. As we talked over the meal, I found her even more attractive than on the first day, and said to myself, 'What a pity she's older than me.' I went for a walk in the evening round the lake. At dinner, Melanie was busy because there was a small party of people who had ordered a special dinner, and she was supervising its serving; but I spoke to her briefly before going up to my room.

I had changed into a sarong and had lain in bed for more than an hour, reading *Darkness at Noon* that I had picked up in a bookshop that week, when there was a knock at the door. I opened it to find Melanie.

'I just finished with that crowd, closed the restaurant and freshened up,' she said. There was a subdued scent of lavender in the air. 'I thought I'd chat to you. But not if I'm disturbing you or you're sleepy.'

'No, not at all, Melanie. It's good you came. Step inside.'

She came in, and we chatted casually for a little time, but even trivialities can seem interesting when you are talking to a charming woman. I found myself drawn to her, but I would never have dared to suppose I could go any further with her than silent admiration. For one thing, the fact that she was older than me was something I couldn't forget: I thought of her rather as one would of an elder sister or even a youngish aunt.

It was she who made the first move. I was sitting on the bed, and she on the chair opposite me; she reached out and took my hand and began caressing it.

'I find you very nice, Dave,' she said at the same time. 'You don't know how happy I am that you're here.'

'I like you very much too, Melanie,' I said, which was very true, but even as I said it, my heart was going pit-a-pat: what would this lead to?

At that she moved over to the bed and sat down beside me. I asked myself inwardly, 'Come on, are you a man or a mouse?', and I tentatively put an arm round her. She responded by putting her cheek against mine. She was no longer elder sister or aunt but a desirable woman, and there was only one direction I could go: I swivelled my face round, and then we kissed. We kissed again, and yet again. She

withdrew her lips after that last kiss, and I saw she was unbuttoning the top button of her blouse. My hands, it seemed, by their own will, unfastened the other three, and she let them, waiting. I then slid her blouse over her shoulders and down over her arms; she moved her hands to the back of her body and unhooked and dropped her bra. I saw the globes of her naked breasts (the first time I had seen a grown woman's breasts fully uncovered), and the sight was all the stranger because one of them was stained by a large pink birthmark. I fondled her breasts, and then bent down and kissed them, but even as I did so, a thought disturbed me. This could have only one end, so should I continue? Would I display my inexperience, my untaught virginity, to a woman who must know more than me of love-making? And what if she became pregnant? I straightened up, and she sensed there was an obstacle.

'What's wrong?' she asked.

'I don't know whether I should go on.' I said. 'It may be a problem for you.'

She smiled. 'I thought of that, Dave. I had a cap put on.'

'Cap?' I looked at her, not understanding.

'An IUD.' As I still stared, she said: 'You don't know what that is? An intra-uterine device.'

'But when?' I stammered.

'It had to be done by a doctor. Fortunately, there's a woman doctor in Kandy who's a great friend. I had it done three days ago.'

I must have looked astonished, because she said:

'When you fall for a mature woman, you must expect her to plan things in advance. Not like the undergraduettes whom you must have had affairs with at the university. Are you shocked, Dave?'

'No, not at all. I'm so grateful.'

3

After my first experience of making love with Melanie, I was like a sailor who has made an accidental landfall in a country he had only heard about in travellers' tales, and is overwhelmed by the unfamiliar sights, shapes and smells. When I woke the next morning and

consciousness came flooding back, I might have thought the memory of the night before was a dream if the faint scent of lavender, clinging to the pillow and the bedsheet, hadn't assured me it was real. When I started work in school that morning, it was what I was doing and saying there that seemed unreal: it was absurd that I should be talking about Romeo and Juliet and not about Melanie and me.

Later, I asked her what she would have done if I already had a girlfriend and wasn't willing to respond to her: wouldn't it have been a waste to have a cap put on?

'Oh, I was willing to take a chance on that and let things work themselves out. But the way you looked at me the very first day, I felt fairly sure you were winnable.'

Our love relationship, begun so, was, in many ways, extraordinary, not only because I was 22 and she was 35, but also because Melanie imposed certain restrictions on it. There were to be no walks round the lake together, or visits to the cinemas; not even handholding in public. She sometimes lunched or had dinner with me at the same table downstairs, but nobody watching us could have said we were more than landlady and lodger who had a cordial friendship.

'I'm making these rules because of you, Dave,' she said. 'Of course, if people know, they'll spread scandal about me; but what do I care about their talk, they can't hurt me. It's different for you. I know they're very prim and proper at St. Andrew's, all that missionary school business, and if they know you're living in sin with a divorced woman, they'll boot you out, that's sure.'

I hardly ever saw her in the mornings before I went off to school, and I returned in the late afternoons, perhaps pausing before I climbed the stairs to say a word or two to her in the restaurant. We met at dinner, some days, and on Saturdays and Sundays I could perhaps meet her at lunch or dinner, if she wasn't otherwise occupied. But it was after the restaurant closed that she came to my room every night and we made love. None of the restaurant employees were around at that time, except a watcher in his cubby-hole downstairs. Her ayah could not have failed to know what was going on between us, but she had looked after Melanie since she was a child, and was devoted to her. So we kept our secret well enough in the four years that our

relationship lasted. The conditions under which it was maintained meant that it remained an oasis, always fresh and green, cut away from the routine of daily existence.

It was she who continued to be the lead player in our love-making. I had confessed to her early on that I had never slept with a woman before her; I told her about Marina, and even gave her an account, though not without shame, of the nearest I had come to losing my virginity with Alice. 'Okay, Dave,' she said. 'You can teach the St. Andrew's boys literature, but I'm your teacher here.' and she patted the bed we were lying on. In return for my confession, she told me about her marriage, to a man who was normally kind and affectionate, but turned brute when he was drunk, and that happened several times a week. She endured it for five years, then she left him, and got a divorce.

'And the child?' I asked.

'She wasn't his. But that's another story, and that too was over years ago.'

That awakened my curiosity, but the flatness with which Melanie had dismissed the subject warned me that it wasn't something she wanted to talk about.

Only two weeks after we began, she surprised me with an unexpected announcement. She had come in as usual after the restaurant closed. We embraced and kissed, she started undressing, but then stopped, and said, 'We're going to do something different tonight.'

'What?'

'I have my periods, Dave. So I can't sleep with you.'

'Oh? Then what?'

'I'm going to suck you off.'

I was startled, and, frankly, more than a little shocked. She saw that in my eyes, and said, 'Is my little boy upset?'

I didn't answer, so she pressed her hands against my cheeks, and said, 'Tell me. You're ashamed, you think it dirty?'

'Something like that, 'I said hesitatingly.

'Nothing is dirty, Dave, when it's done in love.'

She coaxed me into going through with it, but it was only in the third month that I became fully reconciled to it. After that I found pleasure in it, just as much as with customary love-making, and Melanie showed me that it needn't be the one-sided pleasure I had imagined it to be.

I had only one quarrel with Melanie in the four years I lived with her — and it wasn't a quarrel really because it was only she who lost her temper with me. This was in the first year of our relationship. Isabel would come into my room sometimes in the mornings, when I was getting ready to go to school, and in the afternoons when I had returned. I played tik-tak-tuk with her and then draughts when the former became boringly repetitious (she was an intelligent child and rapidly grew proficient at the latter), taught her English nursery rhymes and little songs, read to her out of storybooks. She was a lonely child, having no children to keep her company, and although her mother loved her dearly, she was often too busy running her restaurant to have enough time for her. I ventured one day to remark that Isabel needed to play with other children, and Melanie flared up.

'Do you think I don't know that?' she snapped. 'Where am I to find these other children?'

'Aren't there any people you know who have children she might make friends with?'

'No. My only friend in Kandy, the doctor I told you about, is unmarried.'

'Or can't you send her to a nursery school, Melanie?'

'And have her despised by the teachers and parents of other children as a little bastard? You don't realise what a gossipy narrow-minded place a small town like Kandy is. And it's not your business, Dave, don't think because you sleep with me, you're Isabel's foster-father!'

That was hard for me to swallow, but I hid my feeling of pain. I sensed that Melanie was angry because I had touched a raw spot that made her uncomfortable. I said quietly, 'I never imagined that. I asked you only because I felt it was bad for Isabel to have no friends of her own age.'

'I told you, I know that very well, but it's part of the price I have to pay for living the way I want. Unfortunately Isabel pays it too.'

There seemed no more to say. Later Melanie said she was sorry, she knew I had spoken only out of concern and affection for Isabel, and she was grateful for everything I had done to relieve her loneliness. The conversation had reawakened my curiosity about who Isabel's father was, and in what circumstances Melanie had broken off with him. But I didn't dare ask, fearing another explosion of anger. The following year, however, Isabel was sent to school, and whether people gossiped or not, it didn't seem to have affected the child, so Melanie had to admit she had been over-anxious.

4

1946. Over the three years since graduation, my links with my friends of my university years had loosened or snapped — partly because I was away in Kandy most of that time, and partly because of the changes in their own lives.

After he got his first class, Mark had begun teaching in the university English department. Since the conversation on the university playing field, there had been, not estrangement, but a certain coolness, between Mark and me; and, of course, the fact that I was in Kandy most of the time after graduation meant that we hardly met at all. Then, one day in 1946, when I was spending the August school holidays in the family home, Mark rang. Would I care to have drinks and dinner with him that evening?

I was rather surprised, but I naturally accepted.

'I'll call for you at 7, shall I?' he said.

'It isn't necessary for you to drive all this way,' I protested. 'I can come up and meet you.'

'No, no, Dave. Let me have the pleasure of picking you up.'

As we drove up Hotel Road that evening and passed the house where the secondhand bookshop had been for a few brief months, Mark asked: 'Have you visited Wije in jail recently?'

'Not for about a year,' I said. 'It's rather difficult to arrange my visits, because Wije is allowed only one visitor a week. So I would have to see that I didn't clash with Girlie's visits or his parents'. And that's rather difficult to co-ordinate from Kandy. I have written to him, though, occasionally.'

'How is he, Dave?'

'He seems in good spirits from his letters.'

'Still waiting for the revolution, is he?'

'I don't know. He hinted in his last letter that he has had more time to think and read in jail than when he was politically active, and he has changed his mind about many things. But he didn't elaborate.'

'If you write to him, give him my love, Dave. Say there won't be any possibility of my seeing him for a long time. And perhaps no possibility of seeing you either, Dave. That's why I wanted to meet you this evening.'

I remembered Mark's intentions about the future, expressed that day on the playing-field. 'Why, are you going away?'

'Yes.'

'Where?'

'To England. I've got a place at Cambridge. But that isn't what I'm really interested in. Just in going away.'

'Is the university sending you, or giving you leave?'

'No, I've resigned my job. If I'd stuck around for some time longer, I could have got leave. But I didn't want that, because then I would have had to make a commitment to come back. And I'm not coming back if I can help it, Dave, not ever.'

'For the reasons you told me — that day on the varsity playing-field?'

Mark hesitated and was silent for a few moments. Then, as if making up his mind, he said, 'For those reasons, partly, but also for reasons I didn't tell you about, Dave. And I don't see why I shouldn't tell you now, when it's possible I may never see you again.'

I was startled by his tone of voice as he said this — a curious blend of the melancholy and the sardonic. I said, 'You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, Mark.'

'No, I want to, Dave. Because I think that day you must have condemned me morally without knowing everything there was to know.'

'I've never presumed to condemn you —' I began, but Mark interrupted me.

'Condemn, disapprove, frown on... you can pick the right word out of *Roget's Thesaurus*, Dave, but I'm sure there was something of that order. You did think I behaved badly to Daphne, didn't you? — admit it.'

'Well, I was sorry for her...' I began, but Mark interrupted me again.

'You don't have to soften it, Dave. I know Daphne suffered, and I was to blame. But there's no way I could have avoided that, because if I had put her feelings first, there was only one place where it could have ended.'

'And where was that?'

'At the altar.'

'And you didn't want that, for the reasons you told me that day?'

'For those reasons too, yes, but now we come back to what I didn't tell you. I don't want ever to be married, Dave, because I've seen marriage with the lid off, ever since I can remember.'

Mark paused, and there was a silence. I felt he was waiting for a response from me, so I said:

'You mean, at home?'

'Yes. Between Mum and Dad.'

Another silence. It was the season when the Vel festival was on; we were approaching the kovil, and the street was thronged with worshippers and sightseers. The silence between us continued while Mark navigated his way past the temple and turned off the main road. Then he said:

'Now that I've started telling you, I'd better finish it. Dad has had a mistress for years and years — in fact, another family. I don't know how he began it, but Mum is rather prissy, and I suppose at some point he met a woman who was warmer, more affectionate, more passionate... whatever it was. When I was a small boy there were violent quarrels all the time. They were a daily nightmare of my childhood. I used to pray, Dave, I used to pray every night when I went to bed, "Please, dear God, don't let Mum and Dad fight."

'So does that still go on?'

'No, not in that way, because Mum has to take Dad's double life for granted; there's no question of changing that now. But the resentment and jealousy smoulders underneath, so quite often there are explosions. Not about the other woman, but about some really trivial thing that seems unconnected with all that.'

'And that's the main reason why you want to go away, Mark?'

'Yes. But it's also the main reason why I don't want to marry. I don't want to take any risk of finding myself in such a situation.'

Mark looked at me.

'You probably think that's a morbid reaction, Dave. But Marina has been just as much affected by living through it, though she has reacted differently.'

'How?'

'I think she has insulated herself from any kind of strong feeling for another person.'

'But isn't that what you've done too, Mark?'

'Not quite, Dave. As I told you, I couldn't live without an object of attachment. I do get involved emotionally, very much so in Daphne's case, for instance, and then I recognise the danger and force myself to break away. For Marina the danger-point has never arisen, so far.'

'You mean she has never been in love?'

'I don't think so. Plenty of flirtations, even affairs, yes. But all that's superficial. In spite of her immense attractions and charm, she's the original Ice Maiden. You should be grateful, Dave, that you never got anywhere with her.'

He had slowed down, and now braked the car. We were outside what I knew of as an exclusive club — the Napoli; I had never been inside.

'Is this place okay by you, Dave? I'm a member here.'

'Yes, sure.'

He parked the car and we went in. Bow-tied waiters who greeted Mark, soft lights, a band at the far end that was playing 'Honeysuckle Rose'. Mark took my arm and steered me in the direction of the bar.

'Let's have a drink first, Dave.'

The barman hailed Mark.

'Good evening, sir. The usual?'

'Yes. Gin and tonic for me; what will you have, Dave?'

'Make mine gin and lime, please,' I told the barman.

We settled ourselves on two stools, and while the barman was pouring the drinks, Mark said:

'I see Daphne is getting married next month. I had a card from her.'

'Yes.'

'Do you know anything about the man she's marrying?'

'She sent me a letter with my card. Apparently, he was a British RAF officer who was stationed here in 1943. They met then, and later they corresponded. He came back here a few months ago, and then they got engaged. Will you be at the wedding, Mark?"

'I won't be here, Dave. I'm leaving next week. But I wrote to Daphne. I said I hoped she'd be very happy, and I added, "I don't know of anybody who deserves happiness more."

The drinks arrived. I picked up my glass, and said 'Cheers.'

'Cheers,' said Mark, raising his glass. 'But let's also drink to Daphne's future.'

5

1947. Mark and I had parted that evening, promising to write to each other. I did write soon after Daphne's wedding, which I described, and mentioned that she had been very touched by Mark's good wishes. I had a reply, much briefer, which said how he was settling down in Cambridge. Thereafter, there were no letters from him, even in reply to mine: only three postcards over a year, with pictures of his college, of boating on the Cam, and of some antique object in a Cambridge museum, with short messages inscribed on the back. I learnt from these that he was progressing in his work for his doctorate (he had told me it was on 'The Colloquial Tradition in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry'), but nothing about his personal welfare. Finally, communication with him lapsed since he hadn't answered my last letter: I assumed he had found new friends, perhaps new interests, and didn't want to thrust myself on his attention.

One day at school I was handed a letter that had come through the post. It was from Mervyn Wijesinghe, who was now Managing Director of the Kelani Group. He was offering me a post on the editorial staff of the *Daily Herald*. He explained that when he took over, the Kelani Group had been staffed mainly by professional journalists of the old school. He was keen on bringing in new blood — younger people who had come out of the university and had broader intellectual interests. He made me a tentative offer in respect of salary; it was about twice what I was getting as a teacher.

That was tempting, because I had come to realise that a teacher's salary didn't stretch very far; it severely limited the possibilities of luxuries like books and records. But what would happen to my love for Melanie if I took the job and moved to Colombo?

I raised the question with her that night. We had made love, and I was lying beside her in bed. I first gave her the letter to read.

'What should I do, Melanie?' I asked when she had finished.

'You must take it, Dave. Of course.'

I was surprised. I hadn't expected her to make up her mind immediately, and that, for my going. I was even prepared for the possibility of her asking me to turn down the offer, and if she had, I would have agreed.

'But what about us, Melanie?' I said.

She smiled, and stroked my face. 'You know I'm a calculating woman, Dave. I always knew something like this would happen sometime. It could be a job, it could even be your falling for a younger woman.'

'I would never fall for a younger woman, Melanie. After you, that would be like soda water after good wine.'

She smiled. 'Be realistic, Dave. After all, there are thirteen years between us. It can't go on for ever. Just think of when you are forty and I'm fifty-three. Or you are fifty and I'm sixty-three.'

'I would still love you, Melanie.'

'Yes, that's what you feel now. But don't spoil what we've had together by clinging to it. You've given me four years of happiness, and I think I've done the same for you, so let's be satisfied with that.'

'But even if I take the job, I can still come and see you.'

'No, don't think in those terms, Dave. It's better to part while we are still happy and grateful to each other.'

'But do you want me just to break off with you and go away?'

'You can certainly write to me, Dave, and if you happen to be visiting Kandy, of course I'll always be glad to see you. But let's not make commitments that'll be a millstone round your neck.'

A week later, on the train going back to Colombo (Melanie and I had spent a last night together, and I had parted from her in the morning, tearfully on my side, and she more collectedly), there was one thought that consoled me. Working as a journalist, I told myself, I would gather experience and skill in writing that might come to fruition some day in original creation.

That hope turned out to be as much of a chimera as my dreams of becoming a writer in Kandy. A good deal of my writing for the Daily Herald was hackwork — particularly my daily chore of turning out editorials on some topical question, ranging from the choice of a national flag to corruption in the co-operatives. And when the subject was a political one that touched the paper's policy, then I was only a ventriloquist's dummy through whom the voice of the institution spoke — and that really meant the voice of Mervyn Wijesinghe. Even if I had possessed the talent to write the Great Ceylonese Novel, it would have been killed by the hours I spent tapping away at the typewriter each day, finding words for somebody else's thoughts, and, it sometimes seemed, nobody's thoughts at all. I often thought that if I copied out of the files the last editorial on the problems of bus transport or congestion in the public hospitals and had it reprinted, nobody would notice the difference.

Actually, the only original writing I did in those years, apart from an occasional book review or theatre review, consisted of the long letters I wrote to Melanie. In the first few weeks after I left Kandy, I felt intolerably lonely, and I relieved my feelings by writing to her. Sometimes I felt like throwing up my job in Colombo and begging her to have me back. She always replied, lovingly, but also firmly insisting there should be no change in what we had agreed on. If she

was lonely too, she didn't say so, perhaps not wanting to encourage my melancholy. About three months after my departure, she said in a letter: 'I must tell you the spare room is empty, not because I want to hint you should come back, but to assure you nobody has taken your place.'

Dearest Melanie, whose remains now lie in a Californian graveyard! You healed me, and made me as whole as I could be, cured me of my immature romanticism, saved me from infatuation with some adolescent Kandyan beauty and from repeating all over again my errors with Marina, or looking for momentary, purchased sexual satisfactions. It was with you that I really grew up, one year after attaining my legal age of majority.

Four

THE KELANI GROUP, 1947-49

1

As I write, preparations are going on to celebrate Sri Lanka's fiftieth anniversary of independence in February 1998. Yesterday Kumar Jayasuriya, who had been a younger journalist on the newspaper on which I worked, and is now a producer for one of the private TV channels, rang me.

'We want to arrange a discussion on the fiftieth anniversary,' he said, 'but among a panel of people who were born before independence. That means they'll all be at least fifty, but in practice I guess most of them will be in their sixties or seventies.'

'A collection of fossils, in short,' I said.

He laughed. 'But what we want them to do is to discuss how far we've progressed since independence, and whether we've regressed in any respects. That sort of thing. Will you take part?'

'No,' I said. 'I don't watch TV, even when Sri Lanka wins the World Cup or Princess Diana is killed, so why should I appear on it? But I can suggest a title for your programme.'

'That's good. A catchy title is something we're looking for.'

'This is actually a phrase that Leonard Woolf used as the title for one volume of his autobiography.'

'Doesn't matter. What is it?'

'Downhill All the Way.'

He laughed again. 'I don't think we can use that. You're sure you won't take part?'

'No. Thank you for asking me.'

He probably thought I had grown cynical in my old age. But really, what is there to celebrate in the fourteenth year of a war that is the legacy of the unresolved problems of independence and the follies and crimes of leaders?

Kumar's invitation reminded me of the evening of the 4th February, 1948, when I stood on the balcony of the Kelani Group's building with a group of fellow-journalists, and watched the fireworks rocketing into the sky above Galle Face Green and exploding each time in a shower of stars. Down below in the nearer distance a shimmer of light showed where the Kelani river was flowing below Victoria Bridge and down to the sea. What would I have felt if at that moment I could have had a Cassandra-vision of the countless numbers of unidentified bodies that would float down that river, and other rivers, in the decades to come?

But such a premonition would have seemed fantastic to any of us at that time. Actually, political leaders were patting themselves on the back that we had achieved independence peacefully. That morning the *Daily Herald* had editorialised:

'It is a happy augury for Ceylon's rebirth as an independent nation that it has been realised without a drop of blood being shed.'

The previous year, two states had been born on the subcontinent in an orgy of mass murder, abduction and rape. Implicit in the self-congratulation on the peaceful transfer of power in Ceylon was the unspoken assumption that we were so much more orderly, civilised, democratic, non-violent, than those lesser breeds across the Palk Strait.

The morning after independence, when I came into my office, Rani Atapattu looked up from the Denise Robins novel she was reading, and said, 'The big boss wants to see you, Dave.'

'The big boss' meant Mervyn. The editor of the *Herald*, an old man who had risen over the years from cub-reporter to the editorial chair, was referred to only as 'the boss'. Rani was the secretary who had been assigned to me when I was appointed Features Editor at the beginning of 1948 — that is, only a month earlier. She typed any handwritten articles that were accepted for publication, dug up in the library pictures that could go with feature articles, answered the phone,

made appointments for me, and had just done a highly efficient job in helping to produce the sixty-four page supplement we brought out for independence. Hers was a pleasant enough face, with her large eyes (my usual weakness for beautiful eyes came into play here), to have opposite me. I liked her, except for one thing: she read Denise Robins and Mills and Boon romances by the cartload, starting another almost as soon as she finished the previous one.

However conservative its politics, the Kelani Group was a democratic institution in one respect: first names were in widespread use, even between superiors and subordinates, and 'sir'-ing was frowned on. So Rani calling me Dave wasn't anything unusual. Mervyn wished those who had known him at university to call him by his first name. I don't think he would have objected to others following the same usage, but the older hands, who had worked under E.K., were too inhibited by his traditions of authoritarianism, and now went no further than 'Mr. Wijesinghe'. Perhaps Mervyn's encouragement of first-name usages was only a way of disguising the structures of power, but I still preferred this to the stiffness of customary bureaucratic practice.

I answered Mervyn's summons, and the first thing he did, after asking me to sit down, was to compliment me on the independence supplement. 'It was very well done, Dave, a really fine job.'

'Well, for the mechanics of it, Rani must take a lot of the credit. I couldn't have done it without her, Mervyn.'

'When the time for bonuses comes, you can make a recommendation for her. But that isn't why I asked you to come, Dave. You were a friend of Wijeratne, weren't you — the maths student who went to jail?'

'Yes. I was at school with him, briefly.' I wanted to add 'Wasn't he a comrade of yours?', but I forbore.

'Do you know he's about to be released from jail — a remission of sentence for good behaviour?'

'No. When, Mervyn?'

'Maybe as soon as next week, I understand. But what I'm interested in is that he's a good writer in Sinhalese.'

'I didn't know that. I would have supposed he knew his Sinhalese well, but I didn't know anything about his writing.'

'He was very good. He did write a good deal of the... mm... wartime underground literature.'

I sensed that Mervyn was saying this from his inside knowledge of his old party.

'What I want to know is: what are his political ideas now? Because I want to offer him a job on the *Lakmava*. The fact that he was in a revolutionary movement and went to jail for it doesn't matter. After all, revolution may have seemed desirable under the British; now we are independent, and things are different.'

Mervyn seemed to me to be offering his own apologia. He wasn't satisfied with what he had said, however, but went on, as if he was briefing me for an editorial.

'Anybody can now advocate any social changes, however radical, and get them democratically approved by the people, if that's what they want. There's no place for revolution now. So Wije's past doesn't matter. What I want to know is: what does he think now?'

'I know he's no longer a Marxist.' I went on to give him an account of my last conversation with Wije, though with some necessary censorship.

3

My conversation had taken place at Welikade, soon after my move from Kandy to Colombo. Being in Colombo, I found it easier to arrange with Mr. Wijeratne a date and time for my visit to the jail. There was no possibility of an intervention by Mr. Watson on this occasion, so I saw Wije in the common hall for interviews with prisoners, under the watchful eyes of prison guards.

Wije looked physically fit, but less cheerful and less self-confident than in the past. After the exchange of personal inquiries on both sides — 'How was Kandy?', which I answered without reference to Melanie, and 'How's Girlie?' — I asked Wije why he said in a letter that his way of thinking had changed.

'Yes, Dave. You know a book by Trotsky called *The Revolution Betrayed*?'

'No.'

'Trotsky showed how in the Soviet Union the bureaucracy had seized power, under Stalin. That was true. But his explanation was

that the Soviet Union was then a backward country, so the working class was too weak to fight the bureaucracy.'

'Well?'

'But I ask myself: cannot this happen, even in an advanced country? Because there are always people who are greedy for privilege and power. Even if the working class is ruling to begin with, cannot a bureaucracy emerge — from them? I think that is what happened in the Soviet Union.'

Wije was speaking with the same passion as he had shown in the years past; though he had seemed dispirited when he came in, his face had lit up now and his eyes flashed with something of the old energy.

'Yes, that's possible,' I said.

'Think of Mervyn Wijesinghe. He understood Marxism better than me. But when he was going to inherit the Kelani Group, that was too much for him. So I have come to the conclusion that just revolution is not enough. There must be an inner change in people, otherwise we will end up in the same old rut.'

'How are you going to bring about inner change, Wije?' I asked doubtfully. 'Jesus Christ and the Buddha and Mohammed tried to do that. I don't think it has made a lot of difference to most people.'

Wije's expression changed. It was as if a weariness that had been submerged while he had been speaking was now surfacing again.

He said slowly: 'Yes, that's what I still have to find out.'

This was the conversation of whose gist I now gave a report to Mervyn—minus, of course, the reference to him—and he seemed satisfied. The cynical thought occurred to me that to those whom Mervyn would once have called 'the bourgeoisie', it was much more comforting that people should think of inner change than of revolution. But that didn't matter to me: I wasn't a politician. If Mervyn was going to offer Wije a job and Wije would take it, so much the better: Wije had told me that he and Girlie intended to get married whenever he was released, provided he could find a job, and I told Mervyn of that situation too.

Before I left his office, Mervyn said:

'The committee for small industries is meeting at 2. You'll be there, won't you?'

'Yes, Mervyn.'

Mervyn had recently become convinced that it was his mission to promote the economic development of Ceylon, but he had also fallen for a kind of diluted version of the Gandhian idea of small-scale village-based manufactures. He had recruited three young economists who had come out of the university with Honours degrees; their job was to do studies of feasible small industries. I was on the committee too, although I knew nothing worthwhile about economics. The three young experts turned out academic tutorial-style articles, bristling with phrases like 'marginal utility' and 'Say's Law'; it was my task to turn these into newspaper features intelligible to the ordinary reader. When I had hacked and cleared my way through the jungles of economists' prose, Rani would retype them.

But a couple of months before, there had been a comic misunderstanding at the committee. Mervyn's hair, probably owing to the stresses and strains of power, was already beginning to fall, and he was using Pear's Oil as a remedy. He produced a bottle of it at one of the meetings, and asked:

'Why can't we produce something like this here? Rajanayagam, I want you to do some research on it and produce a note on it.'

'Yes, Mr. Wijesinghe,' Rajanayagam said dutifully.

Unfortunately, he had misheard Mervyn. He went to the Wild Life Department, got from them an estimate of how many bears there were in Ceylon, and of how much oil could be extracted from each animal. (It was a pardonable error, since bear's oil was an old remedy for falling hair.) But Rajanayagam was intelligent enough to know that an industry couldn't be sustained on wild bears, and also that there might be a hue and cry among the Buddhist public against the idea of killing bears for the extraction of oil. He therefore suggested in his note that a farm for the breeding of bears should be established as the source of the raw material, and that it should be sited in the mainly Catholic region north of Colombo. He dressed all this up in economists' gobbledegook, and presented his note at the next meeting, to the committee's merriment and Mervyn's consternation.

When I returned to my office, I told Rani the news about Wije. I had mentioned him to her before, vaguely, but I now told her the story of his past. Rani's tender sympathies were roused by the story, and I also guessed that Wije's winning and losing of his girlfriend and regaining of her through going to jail appealed to her as an addict to romantic fiction. When I told her the only doubt in my mind was whether Wije, with his inflexibility of principle, would accept an appointment from a man whom he had once called a renegade, she said, 'But you must persuade him, Dave. After all, you said he's not a Marxist now. And if he wants to marry Girlie, he must take the job. Don't you think that's sensible?' I agreed.

I went to see Mr. and Mrs. Wijeratne, found them gladdened by the news of Wije's impending release, but they said no exact date had yet been set. I told them about Mervyn's intentions, which made them still happier, and they said both they and Girlie would use their influence on Wije to persuade him, if such pressure was needed.

But walking into my office one morning a few days later, I found Wije seated there, in a chair in front of Rani's desk and typewriter. Wije jumped up as I entered and we hugged each other warmly.

'When were you released?' I asked.

'Only yesterday. I wanted to see you as soon as I could.'

'I see Rani has been looking after you, so I don't have to introduce you.' There was a tray with tea-things on her table.

'Yes. She was very kind. She rang Mervyn and told him I was here. He wants me to come to his office in fifteen minutes' time.'

'Oh, that's very good. I was hoping you'd have no problems about taking a job in this capitalist stronghold.'

Wije's expression saddened a little. 'What am I to do, Dave? Girlie and I want to get married as soon as possible. I do not like working for Mervyn. But it would be very difficult for me to find a good job anywhere else, with my prison record.'

'Quite so, quite so,' I hastened to reassure him. 'It would be silly to refuse this offer.'

Just then the phone rang. Mervyn wanted Wije to come in. Wije came back later, with a promise of an appointment, initially, as an

editorial assistant on the *Lakmava*, starting in the following month. Mervyn had said: 'Get married, get your honeymoon over, and then come to us.'

'Girlie and I will get married without any fuss,' Wije told me when he came back to my room. 'As soon as possible. My mother and Girlie's aunt will want an auspicious day. My father will not care, he is a rationalist. But I suppose we will have to please the others.'

He looked at me with melting eyes.

'You are the truest friend I have, Dave, the only one, besides Girlie, who came and saw me when I was in jail. You must be there when we are married.'

'Of course,' I said.

He turned impulsively to Rani.

'And you also, Rani.'

'I'll be happy to come.'

5

The astrologers must have obliged Wije by giving him an early auspicious day, because the marriage ceremony took place the following week. It was a simple one, at a registry office, to which Rani and I went together. The only other people present were Wije's parents, Girlie's aunt, and a friend of Girlie who had worked with her at the co-op store. Wije insisted on my signing the register as one of the attesting witnesses, the other being the bride's aunt, an old lady in her late-sixties whose hand trembled as she signed.

I hadn't seen Girlie since she disappeared together with the secondhand bookshop more than ten years earlier. She had grown taller, she wasn't quite as thin as I remembered her, and, dressed up as she was for the occasion, she looked quite pretty. She was in a Kandyan saree, and wore a circlet of gold, studded with gems, encircling her forehead, with another such band running across the top of her head. I had never seen anything like it before, and I asked Wije what it was.

'Dave! You spent four years in Kandy, and you ask what that is! It is a nalal-patiya, worn by Kandyan brides.'

'I didn't spend my time in Kandy looking at Kandyan brides,' I said. 'But is Girlie Kandyan?'

'Yes, she is.'

I noticed that Wije and Girlie spoke to each other in Sinhala, and guessed that Girlie found conversing in English a trial. But when we had repaired to her aunt's house for the little reception that had been arranged, Girlie considerately used English when talking to me. She spoke haltingly, sometimes pausing before finding the word she wanted. But Rani put her at her ease, sitting next to her and talking away animatedly in Sinhala. Girlie blossomed out with this encouragement and turned to me to ask, also in Sinhala, 'So when are you going to get married?'

I started to answer in Sinhala, 'I haven't yet found...', found myself at a loss for words, and finished lamely in English, 'I haven't yet found the right person.'

'Aiyo, you don't know how to say that in Sinhala?' Girlie mocked me. 'Rani, you'll have to teach him.'

'Yes, private tuition,' Rani responded.

'And what's all this about finding the right person? If you wait too long, your nice curly hair will turn grey, and start falling. Then who will marry you?'

'I'm waiting for somebody who'll marry me for myself, not for my hair,' I said in English.

'Really, he needs private tuition,' Girlie said to Rani.

This teasing, vivacious Girlie was a different person from the image I had of her as shy, retiring and timid; but then I realised I had formed that impression only on the basis of the few occasions I had seen her at fifteen on the veranda of the secondhand bookshop under her father's gaze. The Girlie who walked with Wije to the market, or waited outside the gate of the Welikade jail, must have been a different person.

On the way back from the wedding I asked Rani, 'How did you come to know Sinhalese so well? You must have been educated like me in a Christian school in English.'

'I fearnt it by using it at home,' she said. 'It's the only language I can speak to Amma. She doesn't know a word of English.'

'How's that?'

'She was a peasant girl when my father married her.'

This was surprising news to me, but I didn't pursue it because I didn't know how Rani would take my curiosity.

Wije started work at the Kelani Group the following week. 'We had no money for a honeymoon in a resort or hotel,' he told me, 'and neither Girlie nor I wanted that.' He became a leader-writer and feature-writer on the *Lakmava*, and like me, therefore, one of Mervyn's ventriloquial dummies. For a man of strong opinions, even though he was now uncertain about some of them, this role was sometimes difficult to take. But for Girlie's sake, Wije grumbled privately, especially to me, gritted his teeth, and delivered his editorial, written as the boss wanted, by three o'clock each afternoon. He was, however, still seeking answers to life's problems: he had been immensely excited by the *Bhagavad-Gita* which he had encountered for the first time in his life, and was strongly affected by the teaching that it isn't the fruit but the motive of action that matters. He had certainly come a long way from his Marxist days, I thought.

6

1949. One day, when I got home from office, there was a letter that had come through the post waiting for me. I recognised the writing on the envelope: it was Melanie's.

She had important news for me. She was going to be married: her intended husband was an American businessman, who owned two hotels in California. He had been in Ceylon for a month; they had got to know each other in Kandy, and had finally become engaged. He was about forty, and was a widower who had lost his first wife when she was still young. He was at the moment touring India, but when he came back at the end of the month, they would be married, she would sell her business, and they would leave together for San Francisco, Isabel with them. 'I wouldn't have agreed to marry him if he hadn't taken to her,' she said, 'but actually, he is, if anything, even fonder of Isabel than I am, perhaps because he is childless.' Melanie didn't say she was in love with him, but she said he was very loving and devoted

to her, and she believed she would be as happy with him as she could reasonably expect.

The letter was warmly and affectionately written, and recalled fondly several memories of our time together, but there was no suggestion in it that she would like to see me before she left, or, indeed, that I could do so. At first, I felt a certain sense of resentment: I thought it ironic that before our parting, she had spoken of the possibility of my falling for a younger woman; but it was she who had chosen to marry an older, more experienced, and — I couldn't ignore it — a richer man. I suspected that, just as she hadn't told me any details about the man who had fathered her child, she probably hadn't told Mr. Frankfurter (that was her future husband's name) anything about me, perhaps not even of my existence. It was the nearest I had come to jealousy with Melanie, and its taste was bitter in my mouth.

But as I struggled with these emotions that evening, I began to feel I was unfair: hadn't Melanie made it clear before we parted that she was not asking for any continued commitment on my side, so how I could expect any from her? And wasn't a marriage of this kind the best thing for her in her vulnerable position? Further, the more I thought about it, the more I was pierced by the recollection of how much I owed her, and by a grateful sense not just of the four-year happiness she had given me but also of what she had done to make me anew. In the end, I wrote her a loving letter, expressing my deepest wishes for her happiness, and signing it, 'Your loving little boy, Dave.' I thought that would both touch her and amuse her.

It was perhaps because there was still some residue of pain at the bottom of my heart that I was irritable when I went into office the next morning. I also felt a need to pour out my feelings to somebody: but who was there? Certainly not Mummy or Daddy or my sister. If Mark, with his worldly sophistication, had been on the spot, he might have done, but I didn't know even in what part of the world he was. Wije, with all his affection for me, would probably be stretched beyond his range of emotional sympathies and life-experience in trying to understand a relationship like mine and Melanie's.

It was a day when I had been left to my own devices in finding a subject for an editorial, and for lack of anything better I ultimately

chose the need to improve the production and distribution of milk, because some co-operative societies had made representations on it. While tapping out my seven hundred words on this, to me dreary, subject, I happened to glance across the room while I was trying to think of a synonym for 'inefficiency', which I had already used three times in what I had written. My eyes happened to rest on Rani, who was engaged in the much simpler exercise of retyping one of the economists' ponderous exercises, after I had hacked and simplified it and virtually translated it into plain English. In the last few months, I had come to value Rani more and more, not only for her practical help in sorting out the problems of the Daily Herald features, but also for her patience, her good humour, her common sense, and, above all, for her warmth of feeling. She had, since Wije's marriage, become intimately friendly with Girlie, whom she visited fairly frequently, and Wije himself had told me that Girlie thought Rani had a heart of gold. On this impulse, I thought I would finish my editorial and then confide in Rani about Melanie and see what her reactions would be.

I finished the last sentence of the editorial: 'To step up the production of milk and to assure to the consumer a cheap and plentiful supply of this vital commodity will be, therefore, not only an important contribution to rural prosperity but also a step towards building up the nations's health and well-being.' I re-read that sentence and thought it didn't sound orotund enough, and the repetition of *step up* at the beginning of the sentence and *a step* near its end was bad; so I altered the first to *increase* and the latter to *a major step*. I reeled the page out of my typewriter, thinking, not for the first time, what a waste of time and effort it was (perhaps not 1 per cent of readers would even glance at it), walked across to the editor's office where the old man was dozing, put it on his table, and came back to my room.

Rani had finished her typing and had her nose buried in her latest Mills and Boon. I waited for a moment, thinking she might look up and give me an opening to talk to her. But no, she appeared to be totally absorbed in the doings of the hero and heroine who were gazing soulfully into each other's eyes in the cover picture.

'Rani,' I said with exasperation, 'why the hell do you spend all your time reading that trash?'

Rani put down her book, and looked at me with astonishment in her eyes. I had sometimes chaffed her gently on her reading, but I had never spoken so sharply to her before — not on any subject whatever.

She was silent, and I went on, 'You're not stupid, you're quite intelligent, so why must you come down to the level of typists and shopgirls who don't know any better?'

She stared at me with a defiant expression. 'But I am a typist,' she said, 'so why shouldn't I be like other typists?'

'Don't talk rubbish, Rani! You do some typing, but that doesn't make you a typist, any more than it makes me one.'

'I can't pretend to be like you. I'm not a graduate, I'm not an intellectual, I'm just an ordinary woman who reads love stories, I'm no different from the typists and shopgirls you look down on.'

She had started speaking in a firmly assertive tone, but she faltered at the end. Then, to my horror, I saw that those two great eyes were brimming over with two large tears, which, as I looked, rolled down her cheeks.

'Rani, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you...' I started to say, but she jumped up, snatched her handbag, and saying in a choked voice, 'Excuse me,' ran out of the room.

I was left thinking over the scene that had just been enacted. If I had hurt Rani's feelings, there was no question that I was to blame. But the more I thought about what had happened, the more I felt I had been wrong, not only in offending her, but also in my judgments on Mills and Boon readers. That remark about typists and shopgirls — wasn't it a facile intellectual stereotype of these people? What did I really know about their inner life — I who had never had any close relationship with any of them? Hadn't the Grinder taught me that there need be no connection between intellectuality and human goodness? And who was I to impose on Rani my tastes and preferences in books?

Rani came back some minutes later. She must have been to the bathroom, washed away her tears and cleaned up her face.

'Rani,' I said as she resumed her seat, 'please forgive me. What I said was arrogant and snobbish. It was unpardonable, but please forgive me.'

'It's alright, Dave,' was all she said.

After what had happened I never got round to asking her opinion of Melanie, but she didn't treat me with any evident coldness or estrangement. Still, the incident awakened a sense of guilt in my mind whenever I recalled it for several months to come.

7

Towards the end of the year, I had an opportunity to make partial amends to Rani. The Geyser was directing Shaw's *Major Barbara* for the varsity Dramsoc, and I had been given two tickets in order to review it. I asked Rani whether she would like to come with me to the play, and she accepted.

Though Rani had never acquired intellectual literary tastes, she had a natural intelligence that had been neither developed nor blunted by university education, because she never had one. I had sometimes been surprised by the acuteness of her remarks; on this occasion, when I asked her at the end of the play what she thought, she said, 'Oh, I enjoyed it. There's one thing that worried me, though. I can understand Barbara giving up the Salvation Army, but why does she choose the guns at the end?' I thought that went to the heart of what was faulty in the play, and when I wrote my review next day, I said: 'An intelligent, though critically untrained, spectator remarked to me...' and quoted Rani's words, adding: 'That is exactly what Mr. Shaw fails satisfactorily to answer.'

When I went into office the morning that the review appeared, Rani looked up smiling, and said, 'Thank you for the compliment.'

'No compliment. It was the honest truth.'

Just then the big boss's personal peon came in to say I was summoned.

'Sit down, Dave,' Mervyn said when I went in.

He paused as if wondering how best to frame the conversation, and then asked, 'How would you like to go to London?'

'On a trip?'

'No, on an assignment that may last some years.

This took me by surprise.

'I'd like to know more about it.'

'Yes, of course. Do you know the man who runs the London office at present — old Sam Abeyratne?'

'I've never met him, Mervyn, but i've heard of him, and of course I've read what he writes.'

Mervyn clasped his hands together, as he commonly did when he was giving me an editorial briefing.

'Then you'll understand what I'm going to say. Sam is a good fellow, conscientious, hardworking, but he has natural limitations. He's a professional journalist of the old type. But now we need more than that — to begin with, in two places, London and New Delhi. Since Ceylon is now independent, she will have to evolve her own foreign policy.'

'Yes, I see.'

'For that purpose, our public, and even our policy-makers, must be well informed about current trends in international affairs. It's our job, through our papers, to keep them informed. Our man in London must follow the British and European papers and journals, keep his eye on the British Foreign Office, and be able to say how what is happening there is going to affect us. Sam doesn't really have the capacity to do that.'

'Yes.'

'The same thing is true, in a different way, of New Delhi. But I've already decided to send Oliver to our New Delhi bureau. I'm offering you the London office.'

He paused for a reaction from me.

'What'll happen to Sam?' I asked.

'Oh, he's retiring in any case early in the new year, so you don't have to worry about him. But how do you feel?'

'Can I have a little time to think about it, Mervyn?'

'Yes, of course. How much time? A week?'

'I don't think so long. Say, three days.'

'Excellent. Let me know.'

I left Mervyn's office, torn between opposite feelings. I was sure anybody at the Kelani Group who might learn of Mervyn's offer would envy me, and say, 'What a marvellous opportunity! And at your age!' They would find it incredible that I hadn't accepted it straightaway. And one part of me was thrilled by the thought of being in London, of having access to plays, concerts, libraries, of the kind I would never know here. But another part of myself shrank from the thought of living several years in a strange city. I had been intensely lonely in the first months after I left Melanie; how much worse it would be. I thought, under the grey skies and among the anonymous crowds of London. A succession of Eliotian images streamed into my mind: The burnt-out ends of smoky days... the river sweats oil and tar... trams and dusty trees... I had not thought death had undone so many. It was ironic, I thought, that I should have to go to the literary texts of my academic training to find the words to articulate, even to myself, my doubts and fears. And would I find myself isolated from any real human contact in that dreary landscape? However anglicised I was in upbringing and culture, I knew, from the experience of other people, that it wasn't easy to penetrate the armour of cold aloofness of the English, particularly for a brown Asian.

With these conflicting thoughts jostling each other in my mind, I had returned to my room and sat at my desk. I continued to be preoccupied silently for some time, until I saw that Rani was regarding me curiously.

'What's the matter, Dave? Has Mervyn put you on the mat?' I shook myself out of my reverie. 'Why do you ask that?'

'Because you look so serious — and almost depressed.'

'No, it isn't like that. It's just that Mervyn has put to me a problem I have to think out.'

She returned to a typescript she was correcting. But her interruption brought me face to face with the further question that I had to resolve for myself before telling Mervyn what I wanted to do.

For several months now, I had become aware of how much my feelings for Rani had grown, from esteem, initially, to warm friendliness, and beyond these, to great affection. Yet if somebody had asked me at that point of time: 'Are you in love with Rani?', honesty would have made me say, 'No.' I had never felt for her the romantic delirium that Marina had inspired in me, nor the intensity of passion that I had known with Melanie after I had surmounted my original diffidence. I had never thought Rani beautiful (except for that one outstanding feature), nor even pretty: if I had been asked to describe her face, I would have called it pleasant or charming — words that one usually uses of a woman who doesn't seriously engage one's desires. But I had grown attached to that face, and to the personality whose outward expression it was, in seeing the first, and getting to know the other, over nearly two years.

It was because I couldn't say to myself, 'I'm in love with Rani' that I had refrained for months from doing anything that might commit me to a deeper relationship with her. All my romantic predilections had encouraged me to believe that I could marry only a woman with whom I was in love, and that to depart from this principle would be to place myself in the same category as those creatures of convention who had marriages arranged for them on the basis of matching castes, comparing horoscopes, dowry negotiations and the rest.

But now I was in a quandary. My feelings for Rani were warm enough at least not to exclude the possibility that they might grow into something warmer still. But there was no time to wait and see: I had to give Mervyn an answer. I could, of course, tell him that for personal reasons I couldn't take the London job just then. Mervyn would accept my decision, and I would have time to decide exactly what I felt about Rani and what I should do about her. But there was a serious drawback to this course: it was unlikely that Mervyn would ever again offer me the London office, and I should like to take it, if it wouldn't leave me isolated and uprooted.

There was only one way, then, if I wanted London and Rani too; I had to propose to her, and hope that she would accept me and accompany me to London. Had I reason to hope she would? I knew she was unattached: when I invited her to the play, I had said half-jokingly, 'Will your boyfriend mind?', and she had firmly answered, 'I don't have a boyfriend.' She liked me, and her tears over my remark

that hurt her suggested that my opinion of her mattered. But did she like me enough to marry me?

It was impossible to make up my mind then and there. I finished what I had to do for the day, tidied up the papers on my desk, and got up to go. As I said, 'Bye, Rani,' she looked searchingly at me and asked, 'Have you solved the problem, Dave?'

'No, not yet,' I said.

'I hope you'll sleep on it and get it over.'

The problem stayed with me all the way home, and into the night. Would I be making a risky gamble if I married a woman with whom, I had to admit, I wasn't in love, even if I was very fond of her, and who didn't share some of my interests? Would I tire of her in time? If I came across another and more glamorous woman, would I be tempted away from Rani, and would I be wrecking her life? These questions nagged and worried me over and over again. It occurred to me in the course of my self-inquisition that my dilemma would seem absurd to some of my old university friends. I could hear Peter, in particular, saying in astonished tones, 'What? You're thinking of marrying a woman who reads Mills and Boon?' But that was the least of my grounds for hesitation. I even found some amusement in imagining myself saying to Peter, 'The woman I'm going to propose to hasn't read Eliot or Joyce or Lawrence, but then she has a thorough knowledge of the complete works of Denise Robins.'

9

I went into office next morning, all keyed up for the big moment. Rani wasn't there. Instead there was a note on my table. Rani had rung up to say she was ill and wouldn't be able to come to work that day. 'Oh damn!' I said to myself. There was no indication when she would be back.

I was so exasperated I almost decided to go to Rani's home that evening (she lived in Kelaniya, and I had driven her there and dropped her at the gate after the play). But no, that wouldn't do. There would be parents around. Parents!.. I had never thought of that aspect

of the matter before. Would Rani need their consent? I knew nothing about them, except for the information Rani had let fall after Wije's wedding, that her mother had been a peasant girl and knew no English.

I could only wait, in the hope Rani's illness wouldn't last long. I tried to revise one of the economists' drafts for a feature... equilibrium... inflationary trends... money supply... deregulation... consumer demand... No, it wouldn't do, I couldn't fix my mind on it. I threw it into my drawer.

I had a dream that night. I was climbing the stairway of the Esmeralda. On the landing Girlie was waiting, looking grave. She said, 'Rani is very ill.' 'What's wrong with her?' I asked. 'Double pneumonia.' I rushed to my old room, and Melanie was there at the door. She said, 'She's dying because you didn't love her.' I protested, 'But I do love her. I want to marry her.' She took me into the room, where Rani was lying in bed. As I came up to the bed, two large tears rolled down her cheeks. I took her hand and said, 'Don't cry, Rani. I love you.' Melanie said, 'Get into bed with her.' I objected, 'But it might be bad for her, Melanie. She has double pneumonia.' Melanie smiled. 'Nothing is bad if it's done in love, Dave.' I got into bed with Rani, and we kissed. Then I woke.

The real scene next day wasn't as dramatic as that. I was relieved to see Rani at her desk on coming in next morning.

'Oh I'm so glad to see you back. I was told you had double pneumonia.'

'Who told you that rubbish? I just had indigestion.'

But I had no opportunity to continue the conversation. The phone rang, Rani answered it, and said, 'The big boss wants you. There's an editorial staff meeting in five minutes.'

'Oh God,' I groaned. This would be one of those dreary meetings that Mervyn summoned whenever he felt he had to brief the top rungs of the staff on the directions of the establishment's policies — another part of the democratic façade he liked to maintain. On this occasion it was worse than usual, because much longer. Mervyn was clearing the ground for his new obsession — international affairs — and he discoursed for nearly an hour on the cold war, the place of small countries like ours, and the tasks of the Kelani Group in keeping the

policy-makers and the people informed so that the country could have an intelligent foreign policy. He made no reference to the London office and the New Delhi bureau, except to say, 'I shall shortly be making some new appointments to enable us to perform our role with greater effectiveness.'

By the time I got back to my room it was 11.30. I decided to take Rani out to lunch; maybe that would be the best move in these circumstances. I invited her.

'But I've brought my sandwiches as usual, Dave.'

'That's alright, you can feed them to the dog at home. I told you I had a problem to solve. I want to tell you the solution and see whether you approve of it.'

Half an hour later, I put Rani into my car.

'I usually have lunch at the Sundae Tea Rooms. Is that alright by you, Rani?'

'Yes. Dave.'

Soon after we had sat down at a table, an unshaven face peered in through the glass front of the restaurant. I knew it: it was that of Geoffrey Perera, a man who was mentally deranged and was to be found daily tramping the Fort pavements, muttering to himself, and at mealtimes cadging money from sympathetic people. He had been a literature student, and if you listened to his muttering, you found that it consisted of long passages from *Paradise Lost*. He now scanned the restaurant, spotted me and came in, much to the horror of the waiters who were used to attending on white mercantile executives and their brown counterparts. Geoffrey was dressed in a tattered shirt and a dirty pair of trousers. He came up to our table.

'I'm sorry,' I said, 'I don't have any change on me, but if you wait till I finish and pay my bill, I'll let you have something.'

Geoffrey nodded, and went out.

'You know him?' asked Rani.

'Yes. He was a brilliant student, got a First in his degree, won a university scholarship to England, went to Cambridge, and then went off his head.'

Rani was immediately touched. 'Oh poor fellow!' she exclaimed. 'Doesn't he have anybody to look after him?'

'Nobody. He lives by begging.',

'Where does he sleep?'

'I have no idea, Rani.'

'Can't we get a group of people each to contribute something every month, so that at least he doesn't have to stand on the pavement, in the sun and rain, and beg?'

'It's an idea. But I wonder whether Geoffrey will want to give up the pavement. It has become his life, you know, Rani. Still, you can try.'

The food arrived, and over it I began the prelude to what I was going to say. I told Rani of Mervyn's offer, that I had asked for time to decide, and that he had given me three days.

Rani's eyes seemed to grow larger as she listened.

'And did he say for how long?'

'Not exactly. But he did say it might be for some years.'

'It's a wonderful chance for you, Dave. There's no question that you should take it. Of course,' she dropped her eyes, 'I'll miss you very much, but that doesn't count.'

This was the opening, I thought. .

'There's one way, Rani, that I can take it without your missing me.'

'How?'

'Will you marry me, Rani?'

I could see at once that this was totally unexpected by her. She stared at me, speechless.

'Is it a shock to you, Rani?'

'Yes.' She paused and hastily corrected herself. 'I don't mean that I dislike it. it's just that I never expected you to...' Her voice trailed away. 'Of course, you've been very nice to me, but I never thought...' Her voice dropped again.

'I won't take the London job unless you'll come with me, Rani. So if you don't dislike it, can I hope... that you will have me?'

'But are you sure, Dave? Will you regret it later?'

'Why should I regret it?'

'I'm not like you, Dave. I'm not intellectual.'

'To hell with intellect! It's you as a person I want, not intellect.'

'Can I think about it, Dave? Just till tomorrow?'

'Okay. But will you have to ask your parents?'

'There won't be any reason why they should oppose it, if I agree. But I must tell you about them, Dave. It's something you should know.'

Rani took a sip of water.

'My father is a Land Settlement Officer. That's how he met Amma, when he was stationed in Polonnaruwa. He was young then, and... I don't know how to describe it... whether to say he fell in love with her or he just... desired her.'

'Yes, I see.'

'Amma has never told me this in so many words, but I think he first began an affair with her, I think she became his mistress. Then, some years later, he was transferred. He didn't want to break off with her. But there was no way he could take her with him unless he married her. So he married her.'

Rani smiled for a moment to herself, as if amused by her own thought.

'In a way, it was a little like your wanting to marry me because you're going to London.'

'Yes, except that —'

'Yes, except for so many differences. But that's how it happened between Thaththa and Amma. And, as I told you, Amma didn't know any English. When I went to school, that was a shameful secret I didn't want to tell anybody.'

'Where did you go to school, Rani?'

'To St. Bernadette's. You know it, it's quite a posh school. I'll tell you something that happened when I was about six.'

She paused, evidently needing to compel herself to tell the story.

'We had an end-of-term concert, and I was taking part. As a fairy. I had a costume, with silver spangles, golden wings and all. Amma normally never came to school, but that day she had to, because Thaththa was away on duty. So she had to come and pick me up.'

Her voice wavered.

'This is shameful, but I have to tell you. One of the girls at school, she must have heard Amma talking to me in Sinhalese, she

said to me the next day, "You have a grand ayah, no, sari and slippers and all?"

'So she mistook your mother for an ayah dressed up?'

'Yes. Those days servants always wore cloth and jacket, and they were barefooted.'

'Yes, I can remember at home too. But there's nothing for you to be ashamed of in that, Rani.'

'No, no, Dave. This is what makes me feel I was a worm.' Her eyes filled with tears. 'I never corrected her, I never said, "That wasn't an ayah, that was my mother," because I was too ashamed of her. Now, when I think of it, I feel terribly guilty.'

'It's the way we were all brought up, Rani.'

I paid the bill, and we went out. On the pavement Geoffrey was leaning against a pillar, and as I came up I could hear *Silence*, ye troubled waves, and thou deep, peace! Normally I gave Geoffrey five rupees on such occasions; that day I gave him ten. But Rani opened her handbag, took all the money out of it, two notes and some loose change, and pressed it all into his hand. As we turned away, she said, 'It's a celebration, Dave. Now you'll have to lend me money to go home in the evening.'

'Better than that. I'll drop you.'

10

Fortunately, though entirely by accident, we were matched caste-and-religion-wise (Rani had been brought up as a Christian, though her mother had remained Buddhist), so her family raised no objections to our marriage. Indeed, they may have thought it an advantageous match for Rani to marry her immediate superior in office. I was invited to dinner at Rani's home so that her parents could get to know me. Rani's father was a bald, fat middle-aged man whom it wasn't easy to imagine as a young Romeo, but he treated me genially and wanted to know my opinion on the political questions of the day, treating everything I said as words of wisdom. Rani's mother, on the other hand, had her daughter's eyes as well as a statuesque figure, and it was easy to guess

how in her youth she could have captured the affections of a lonely Land Settlement Officer in a Polonnaruwa village. Unfortunately, communication with her was even more difficult for me than with Girlie because she knew no English whatever; she made up for this by smiling benevolently and charmingly throughout the evening.

On my side, Daddy would have liked a more highly placed or wealthier daughter-in-law, but he knew it would be just as futile to oppose my marriage as it had been to try to get me into the civil service. But Mummy became quite fond of Rani, and, after we were married, invited us to stay with her until we left for London. We sailed at the end of December. Besides our two families, it was Wije and Girlie who came to see us off on board ship; and Girlie cried as she hugged and kissed Rani before going down the gangway.

Five

THE KELANI GROUP, 1956-58

1

Our six years in London aren't really part of this story, although they were very important to Rani and me.

I remember the Geyser once giving us a lecture on Shakespeare in which he disagreed with those scholars who thought the plays upheld social order. 'Of course, you can find various characters mouthing the Elizabethan commonplaces about order and stability. But what Shakespeare is interested in isn't order but disorder. When order and harmony are restored, in *Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear*, the plays stop, because there's nothing dramatic about them. Who wants to watch a play about how everything was perfect under Fortinbras or Malcolm or Albany?'

So, in the same way, I think there's no story in happiness, particularly the quiet and placid contentment that Rani and I grew into. If, with Marina, I had been a sailor adrift in mid-ocean, if, with Melanie, I had been exploring a new country, with Rani I had come to rest in a tranquil harbour.

Rani's fears (and originally, my own) that her interests might not match mine proved groundless. She loved jazz instantaneously when I took her to performances, and though she never read highbrow literature, she became a more frequent visitor to galleries and museums than me. But above all, it was her companionship and deep affection that sustained me. From my own experience and that of others, I have come to the conclusion that there are only two kinds of happy marriages: those which begin in friendship and grow into a full commitment, and those which begin in romantic love or passionate desire and transform themselves (some would say, decline) into friendship. Ours was of the first kind. It was completed by the arrival of our daughter, born in England. Rani wanted to call her Lilani: with memories of Holmung's Latin lessons, I added Lalage. Two names, four liquid I's. She soon showed signs of bearing out her second name

by developing a smile as sweet as that of Horace's Lalage might have been.

In England, I tried to contact Mark, but at Cambridge I drew a blank. He had completed his doctorate and quit; they didn't know where he was. I wrote to Mr. Watson to ask for information; I had a reply, which seemed to me to reveal his pained feelings. Mark had cast off all links with his family; they didn't know where he was or what he was doing.

But I did meet Daphne. She and her husband were running a sheep-farm in Sussex. She had a bouncing baby boy, and was very happy. She too had tried to contact Mark, but though she had written to him at Cambridge when he was there, he hadn't responded. Rani and I spent a day on the farm more than once, and Daphne and her husband often saw us in London, and we went to plays or concerts together.

There seemed no reason why my term in London might not go on indefinitely, because Mervyn was very satisfied, and I would have been content to stay there. But at the end of 1955 the weekly package from Colombo contained a sealed letter addressed to me and marked 'Private and Confidential.' I read:

Dear Dave,

As I have told you several times before, I have been completely satisfied by the way you have run the London office over the last six years. There is no reason why I should want to move you from there, if it was only a question of your abilities and efficiency. But the political situation in Ceylon compels me to make a new decision.

As you will be aware from the news from Ceylon, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's Sri Lanka Freedom Party has raised the slogan of Sinhalese as the only official language. The United National Party is about to follow suit. It is possible that on the heels of that decision, the Prime Minister might opt for an early general election, though he needn't have called one till 1957.

Ceylon is therefore likely to experience a critical and disturbed period in her politics, and the Kelani Group has to

play whatever role it can to contribute to stability, particularly in the run-up to the general election. I have therefore decided that your services are needed here. There is nobody who can read my mind like you, Dave, and in the months to come we will need your experience and journalistic skills.

James will arrive in London early in January to take over the London office. I want you to hand over to him, and then fly back to Colombo as soon as it is possible.

I look forward to seeing you and working with you closely again, and send my warmest good wishes to you and Rani.

Yours sincerely, Mervyn.

I didn't appreciate the remark that I could read Mervyn's mind like nobody else, even though I knew it was intended as a compliment. But I had to act as ordered. So it was adieu to the theatres and concerthalls, the galleries, museums and libraries; adieu also to the leaden skies, the perpetual drizzle and the grime and the fog of London. We spent our last day on Daphne's farm, and flew back. To Lilani Ceylon was new and strange country. On the morning after we arrived, she came rushing into the house, shouting, 'Ma! Ma! There's an aunty at the door with a basket on her head, and no shoes!'

2

1956. I soon discovered that the country to which I had returned was in some ways as strange to me as it was to Lilani. The air was heavy with the battle-cry of 'Sinhala only!', and with the gathering protests of Tamils against the impending violation of one of their essential rights. Reading the news from Ceylon I had already learnt, while I was in London, that the issue was hotting up, but I hadn't been quite prepared for the intensity of emotional fervour it was generating.

Already, while I was teaching at St. Andrew's, in 1945, the mother tongue — Sinhala for Sinhalese children, and Tamil for children of those who spoke it — had been made compulsory as medium of instruction, and the change-over from English had since

moved steadily upwards through the schools year by year. Even such citadels of privilege as Bethlehem and King's were now teaching, willy-nilly, in Sinhala and Tamil. All parties had agreed in 1943 that Sinhala and Tamil should be official languages of Ceylon. Now, thirteen years later and eight years after independence, that decision was to be overturned by enthroning one language and not two. Apart from the opposition by Tamils, Wije's old party had organised mass meetings to demand parity of status for Sinhala and Tamil, and these had been broken up by thugs.

The day after my return I had a summons from Mervyn. I had seen him thrice in London in the intervening years. He had come, once to attend a conference of an international press organisation, once to the Queen's coronation, and once to negotiate a deal for new printing equipment. Now, when I entered his office, he was visibly flabbier and balder than when I last saw him. When the peon brought in two cups of tea, he didn't add sugar to his but reached into his drawer and brought out a bottle of chemical sweetener.

'Are you diabetic, Mervyn?' I asked.

'Yes, Dave,' he said. 'The disease of sedentary executives in middle age. You have about five years to go before it catches up with you.'

I don't have the satisfaction of telling Mervyn, who died of a stroke in his 'fifties, that I have outlived him twenty-five years without fulfilling his prophecy.

After some personal inquiries ('How are Rani and the child?... Do you intend to set up house on your own?'), Mervyn shifted to the main purpose for which he had summoned me.

'Of course, you've been reading the *Daily Herald* while you were in London, so you'll know where we stand on questions of policy.'

'Yes,' I said. 'But it troubles me that we aren't taking a definite stand against this Sinhala only agitation. Surely it's unjust to the minorities.'

Mervyn shifted his bulk in his chair and took another gulp of tea before he answered.

'We can't be isolated, Dave,' he said. 'The majority agitation is strong. If we oppose it directly, we'll be swept away. See what has

happened to the LSSP, they confronted it, and they've had their meetings broken up. What we have to do is to bend with the current in order to deflect it.'

'How do you propose to do that?' It seemed to me that Mervyn's metaphor was singularly inappropriate: one can't deflect a current without setting up some resistance to it.

'We're taking the line that Sinhala only is inevitable because the majority wants it, and in a democracy the majority must have its way. But no injustice must be done to the minority, so what is essential is that the policy should be carried out by just men. That'll be an argument for returning the government to power.'

He switched to talking of internal office matters, said I would be returned to my post as Features Editor, and that he relied on me to write the main political editorials.

Mervyn hadn't given me an accurate picture of the state of policy in the Kelani Group. As I found over the next week, the newspapers of the group were talking, not merely in, but with three tongues. The Lakmava was editorially celebrating the approaching adoption of Sinhala as the only official language as a great liberation of the language from the inferior status to which it had been consigned by British imperialism. Simultaneously, the *Manjari*, the group's Tamil paper, lamented that the Tamil people were being relegated to second-class status by the non-recognition of their language. The Daily Herald waffled between the two, said that while the rights of the majority must be upheld, the minority were entitled to their just rights, but never spelt out what the latter were and how they should be safeguarded. Justice and fair play to all — these were the empty catchwords which the Herald was adopting as its keynote for the approaching election campaign. I could foresee myself producing reams of this hocus-pocus in the months to come, and wished myself back in London.

When I joined the *Herald* eight years earlier, old Eddie Daniels, who had been writing leaders for years but was now Chief Sub, gave me a piece of advice.

'Let me tell you one thing, son,' he said. 'It doesn't do to get emotionally involved in what you're writing, not when you're writing editorials. Policy is the business of the management, and your job is to give the bosses what they want. If some particular line troubles your conscience, just go to the Press Club after you've handed over your stuff, and have a stiff arrow-and-soda and forget about it. Take it from me, I was in the business when you were running around in rompers.'

I had successfully kept myself remote from what I wrote for the editorial columns of the *Herald*, and I hadn't even needed Eddie's stiff arrow-and-soda: the twinkling of Duke Ellington's keys could put the office behind me. But now I was seriously disturbed, and I could no longer regard my role as Mervyn's dummy with the same comfortable detachment.

3

I grumbled all the time to Rani about the three-faced policy of the Kelani Group, and she agreed with me that it was a shameful business. But the person with whom I most wanted to discuss these troubling questions was Wije, who knew more about politics than I did. But there was a further reason why I wished to talk to Wije. Was it because I belonged to the English-educated classes that I was reacting against Sinhala only? If so, I could count on Wije to tell me. I had written to him from London, saying I was returning and looking forward to seeing him again. But when I arrived, Wije wasn't in the office. He had left a note for me, saying Girlie had been ill with a series of attacks of flu, and he was worried about her condition. He had taken a fortnight's special leave, and had left with her for Bandarawela where she might recuperate her health. In that resort the Kelani Group had a holiday home where executives could stay in return for a nominal charge: it was one of the perks that Mervyn had made available to them — part of his policy, I thought, of tying them down with chains of gold. Wije said he would see me as soon as he returned. In my letter from London I had mentioned that I was concerned about the news from home, and Wije said in his note, 'I also am concerned.'

At the end of ten days, I got back home one evening to find Wije and Girlie in the sitting-room talking to Rani. Wije jumped up

and hugged me as cordially as he had done when he was released from jail. He looked fit and well, but Girlie seemed pale and weak after her recent bouts of illness; still, her old vivacity came back into her face when she talked. She had Lilani on her lap and was feeding her bits of the biscuit that Rani had served. Lilani, who was usually shy with strangers, had clearly made friends with her at once, and they looked so much at home with each other that I remarked on it.

'The other day two of my cousins came home and she wouldn't even talk to them. But there she is sitting on your lap, taking to you like a duck to water! What a good mother you'll make, Girlie!'

It turned out that I had been tactless. Girlie dropped her eyes, Wije looked saddened, and Rani cast a reproving glance at me. The next minute Wije decided to be frank.

'It is our great sorrow, Dave, that we have not yet had a baby,' he said. 'I need not keep it secret from an old friend like you.'

'I am sorry,' I said. 'I thought perhaps it was your choice.'

'Girlie would love to have a baby, and I would love it too. Amma has tried to get us to make vows, go on pilgrimage to Kataragama, and so on. Fortunately, Thaththa does not believe in all that. But what is there to do?'

He turned up his palms in a gesture of resignation.

'Whether you say it is karma or just an accident of nature, there it is, we have to accept it.'

A silence followed. I thought it best to break it by diverting the conversation to what was uppermost in my thoughts.

'Wije, what do you think of the state of things in the country?' Wije's expression grew even graver.

'I am seriously worried, Dave. Of course, I can understand that Sinhala-educated people are frustrated and angry. Independence has not changed anything for them. It is still a small group at the top who decide everything. And they are English-speaking, whether they are Sinhala or Tamil by birth.'

He looked at me and smiled faintly.

'Perhaps I can understand this better than you can, Dave. Because I remember how I was despised and laughed at. Only you and Mark, and one or two others perhaps, treated me in a human way.'

'Yes, but --'

Wije didn't allow me to interrupt him, because, as often happened when he was carried away by passionate conviction, the words continued to pour out like a torrent.

'And that was me, with my scholarship, my top marks in maths and all that. Think of all the hundreds of thousands of young boys who have not had all those advantages.'

'Yes, but —', I tried to interrupt again, and Wije pounced on the phrase.

'Yes, bitt... you're quite right, Dave. All that I said is true. But why are they trying to make the Tamils the scapegoats? Yes, some Tamils have had things easy, like Mark's family, just like some Sinhalese. But why do they forget the peasants and the poor people in Jaffna, why do they forget the Tamil workers on the estates, who do not even have the vote? Why do they forget that these people are just as deprived, some of them even more deprived than them? And why are they trying to hit them by taking away even their right to their language?'

'You think it's just the politicians...' I began again, but Wije brushed aside my phrase.

'No, it is not just the politicians. It is easy, Dave, to put all the blame on the wicked politicians. But if people are led by them, if they vote them into power, they must share the blame for what happens.'

'You are talking like my favourite modern poet,' I said.

'Who's that?'

'Auden. I don't think you know him, but this is what he said:

The politicians we condemn Are nothing but our L.C.M.

I don't need to explain that to a mathematician like you.'

Wije's face brightened with excitement. 'Very good, very good!' he exclaimed. "It is just what I think, only I could not have put it like that.'

But Rani had puckered up her face. 'L.C.M? I vaguely remember doing it in school.'

'Lowest common multiple, Rani.'

'Lowest common... Oh, I see.'

But Girlie was quite baffled by the English, and Wije had to explain it to her.

'But I think people want a change anyway,' Girlie said in Sinhala. 'It's not just language. We saw it while we were in Bandarawela. People remember how the government took away free buns from schoolchildren, how they increased the price of rice. Even without Sinhala only, people would vote against the government.'

'Yes, maybe that is true,' Wije said doubtfully. 'Perhaps for cheaper rice and free buns people might vote, but even more people will vote for rice, buns and Sinhala only. Because they think Sinhala only means more jobs — for Sinhalese.'

He turned back to me, and added in English:

'That is why I cannot believe in changing things by politics alone, Dave. We have to change people.'

I said, 'You must he having a tough time writing editorials for the *Lakmava*, thinking as you do?'

Wije made a sweeping gesture with his hand.

'Let us not talk about that, Dave. That is my daily nightmare.'

3

The night of 5 April 1956, at the end of the first day's poll in the general election. As the radio announced the fall of government seat after seat, at the Kelani Group offices we could hear the crackers going off, like rounds of machine-gun fire, in the tenements and shanties of Grandpass. Wije came into my room, peered out into the night, and said, 'How I wish I could celebrate like them. with no doubts and fears!'

Δ

I came back to my room one morning in May after an editorial briefing by Mervyn. Prime Minister Bandaranaike was struggling to reconcile his liberal convictions with his election campaign promise to make Sinhala the only official language in twenty-four hours. The twenty-four hours had long expired, and Sinhala nationalists, within his party and outside, were resisting his attempts to include concessions to Tamil in the language bill. He had just negotiated with two extremists, individuals of no political consequence, and persuaded them to call off an ostensible 'fast unto death'. The parley seemed to herald a retreat.

Mervyn had asked for a strong editorial, criticising the Prime Minister's tendency to listen to every pressure group in the effort to conciliate each one of them. As often, he had made notes on a writing-pad of the main points to be orchestrated in the editorial, and he now read from them. 'Democracy must uphold the wishes of the people, but it does not mean bending with every little eddy and fluctuating current of opinion.' I could have reminded him that bending with the current was just what he had thought the Kelani Group should do, but I didn't give voice to my thought. The high flute-like voice continued to read: 'The role of leadership is not to make concessions to what every agitator and lobbyist demands, but to convince, direct and shape public opinion towards what is best for the country. The Prime Minister must not play Father Christmas, trying to fulfil everybody's wishes. He must govern.'

'You get my point, Dave,' he said, putting down the pad, his face full of satisfaction with his own argument. 'Perhaps I should give you these notes to guide you.' He tore off the sheet and handed it to me. 'But I know you'll put it even better than I can.'

Returning to my room, I was filled with an intense revulsion against the job I had to do. There was nothing wrong with Mervyn's brief; its substance was in accord with what I would have said, left to myself. But I needed only to look at the files of the Kelani Group newspapers on their stands across the room to be convinced I was a mere pawn in a cynical power-game whose strategy was being worked out far above my head. Yes, across the room I could read the frontpage headlines of the *Lakmava*, in their large heavy type, publicising stridently the demands of those who were fasting, and dramatising them with photographs composed so as to confer on them the aura of martyrdom. And Wije had told me the *Lakmava* editorials were also, though more subtly, slanted in their favour.

How feeble my editorial, whatever verbal craft I might put into its shaping, would be against that trumpet-blast of publicity! I had once guessed that less than 1 per cent of readers even glanced at editorials. But the one that Mervyn had just ordered would earn him kudos from his élite friends: they, alarmed themselves at the rising power of the 'yakkos' (as they called them), would congratulate him in the evening at the Napoli or other upper-class club: 'Good show, Mervyn!' But the 'yakkos' didn't read the Herald or its editorials, it was the clarion call of the Lakmava's front-page headlines that would resound in their ears. But these two discordant voices of the Kelani Group (and I didn't know what the Manjari was saying) weren't merely, I thought, a way of satisfying the wishes of different groups of readers for circulation. I sensed a deeper, machiavellian strategy: Mervyn, by upbringing and training hostile to Sinhala nationalism. was exploiting its demands to embarrass the government in the powerinterests of his political friends, cut down to eight seats in the legislature at the general election.

I felt a physical sense of nausea, as if I had just swallowed a morsel of stale food. How could I, thinking what I thought and suspecting what I suspected, sit down at the typewriter and perform that day's portion of my bonded labour? I can't go on, I said to myself; this is the end.

I sat down at the typewriter to write, not the editorial, but a letter to Mervyn:

Dear Mervyn,

I find the political policies of the Kelani Group increasingly unacceptable to me. While the *Daily Herald* continually makes liberal (if evasive and ineffective) utterances on the language conflict, the *Lakmava* promotes the most intolerant Sinhala nationalist positions through the emphasis it gives them in reporting the news, and often expresses views sympathetic to them in its editorial columns.

I cannot help drawing the conclusion that the management of the Kelani Group is exploiting the language issue to weaken

and create difficulties for the present government, for entirely different political purposes.

In these circumstances I find the role I have to play as principal leader-writer on the *Herald* repugnant to my conscience. Please accept my resignation with immediate effect.

I signed the latter, 'Dave', and, on further thought, added a handwritten postscript: 'I am returning the notes for tomorrow's editorial you gave me.'

I put the letter in an envelope, together with Mervyn's notes, addressed it to him, and was about to hand the letter to my secretary (my new secretary, who was sitting at Rani's old desk and was now examining her fingernails), and walk out of the office. 'Doreen, please send this to Mervyn,' I was going to say, when, in the very action of rising to give her the letter, I stopped. Had I the right to take this step without consulting Rani?

For weeks now Rani had listened sympathetically to my complaints of the intolerable moral burden of my role. If I went home that day and simply announced to her, 'Rani, I've thrown up my job,' she would, I knew, accept my decision; she wouldn't weep and wail, she would set about trying, in a spirit of practicality, to salvage our life. But had I the right to demand from her the sacrifices that would entail?

A month earlier we had moved into a house in Bambalapitiya, for which I had paid six months' rent: it was Mervyn who had arranged that the office should lend me the money. I had obtained for Lilani admission to the kindergarten of St. Bernadette's, Rani's old school, and we were paying fees for her. Rani hadn't wanted to return to the Kelani Group, and she had found a lighter job in an office nearer home, but her salary made only a third of our income.

I had thought a moment earlier that I had no right to act without consulting Rani. But had I the right to confront her with so difficult and painful a choice even by consulting her? If I knew Rani, she would say, 'Do what you think is right, Dave, I'll accept it.' But that wouldn't mean that I would be any the less culpable for any consequences that might follow.

If I walked out of the Kelani Group building that morning, as my soul cried out I should do, it was certain I couldn't get a job on another paper. There were only two newspaper establishments that mattered, and they had a compact with each other not to take journalists who left the other or had been sacked by it. I could do other things, of course: I could return to my old vocation and teach. But living on a teacher's salary and Rani's earnings would mean changing drastically our life-style. Was I entitled to impose that on Rani and Lilani?

I had never regretted marrying Rani, but at that moment I recalled wryly Francis Bacon's line: 'He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune.' Could I ask those hostages to pay for the luxury of keeping intact my self-respect and my moral integrity (already dented by writing so many editorials which I didn't believe)? And even if Rani self-sacrificingly agreed to pay that price, what would the strain of living on a smaller income do in the long run to our marriage?

I thought next of walking across to the *Lakmava* office and consulting Wije. But Wije's struggles of conscience must be even greater than mine. What I had to write that day, at least, was an editorial with which I agreed; it was the Kelani Group's larger policy that was distasteful to me. But Wije had perforce to be the mouthpiece of the vociferous nationalism of the *Lakmava*, which appalled him. How could I take my lesser dilemma to him?

I opened the envelope, took out Mervyn's notes, tore up my own letter and put the pieces in the wastepaper basket. I put another sheet of paper in the typewriter, and typed the heading, 'THE P.M. MUST GOVERN'.

4

1957. I was about to leave home for office one day when the postman rang his bell at the gate. I looked quickly through the envelopes of the letters he handed me, when my attention was taken by one of them, a fat airmail envelope with French stamps on it and a large, rather ornate handwriting that seemed vaguely familiar to me. It had been sent to my parental home and been re-directed. I flipped the envelope over

and, to my astonishment, read the sender's name: A.M.B. Watson. It was Mark — Mark writing to me after ten years!

There was no time to read it then and there; from its feel, it must be a long letter. I thrust it into my pocket and drove off, but when I reached my room, the first thing I did was to tear open the envelope.

Dear Dave,

I am sure you will be most surprised on receiving this letter. It is more than ten years — is it not? — since I said goodbye to you at the end of our evening together at the Napoli. Although I did answer some of your subsequent letters (briefly, I admit), it is a long time since I wrote to you at all. There is little point in my apologising to you for what must have seemed discourtesy or indifference or even conceit. Believe me, there may have been something of the first in my failure to write, but nothing of the second, and, I hope, not of the third. I can only explain that in the way i was living then, I was too occupied with my immediate concerns to want to write to anybody at all. I have been equally guilty of discourtesy in not replying to a most kind and generous letter from Daphne soon after I arrived at Cambridge.

But you, and the times we spent together at Bethlehem and at the varsity, have often recurred in my memories. How are you, Dave? I know nothing about what you have been doing over these ten years. Are you still teaching at St. Andrew's, or have you found another vocation? Have you been, and are you, happy and well? And what has happened to Wije after he got out of jail?

But you will want to know about me and why I am writing to you after a decade's silence.

When I talked to you that evening ten years ago, on the way to the Napoli, I told you that I was going to Cambridge, and that I didn't intend to return to Ceylon if I could help it. I also told you the reasons why I had turned against Mum, Dad and home. But I didn't tell you what had made it possible for me to come to England. An unmarried aunt of mine, my

mother's sister, died a little while before that. I had always been her favourite child, and she left me a legacy, all her money and all her property. I sold the property. That was how I was able to leave Ceylon. I put all my money in a British bank, and I decided that I would never take a cent of Dad's or Mum's money, and that I would have nothing to do with them any more.

I had three years at Cambridge. I divided it between boozing, fucking and even gambling on the one hand (fortunately, I never really got addicted to the last) and working solidly on my doctoral dissertation on the other. It was a strange Jekyll and Hyde existence: scholarship by day and Bohemianism by night. There were also one or two emotional involvements during those years, but shortlived: I always made sure my feelings were never so much in command that I couldn't extricate myself. That was the time my correspondence with you briefly flickered and faded, so now you will perhaps understand better why it did.

I wasn't really interested in an academic career, so there was no reason why I should have completed my work for the doctorate, but once started, I went on with it, perhaps to prove something to myself. While at Cambridge, I had taken short vacations on the Continent, and loved it. But when I finished, and was Dr. Watson (it sounds like something out of Sherlock Holmes, doesn't it?), I decided Italy, Spain and France were the places for me, and that's where I spent the greater part of the next seven years.

It was a nomadic existence, a continual change of scene and a continual exchange of one set of sensations for another. It amused me to think I was living like Byron, because he was the star exhibit of my dissertation. I told you it was about 'the colloquial tradition in nineteenth-century English poetry', didn't I? It may entertain you to read it some day. It was brought out as a book by a small Cambridge publisher, and I sent a copy of it to the Geyser. He wrote, congratulating me on it, but I don't suppose you or anybody else in Ceylon has even heard of it.

So I burned the candle at both ends. You must remember, Dave, it was only a few years after the end of the war, and particularly in France and Italy, social norms and moral codes had been shaken up by war and occupation, so, particularly if you had money, you could live pretty much as you liked. I was far away from English puritanism and English colour prejudice, and with my money, doctoral status and (I flatter myself) my good looks, I could gain entry into all kinds of social circles. And I sampled life of so many different kinds, Dave. I have greeted the dawn in a chambermaid's bed in an inn high up in the Pyrenees and in a contessa's in a palazzo in Venice, and at so many levels in between.

It couldn't have lasted, but the way it ended was unexpected by me. I was in Paris at the time, and I fell, really and truly fell, for a woman whose name was Joséphine. She was a year or so older than me, not only lovely but also an inexhaustible centre of life and energy, like a perpetual Catherine wheel, always throwing off a shower of fire and light. I don't know whether it was simply because she was enchanting, or whether it was that I could see over the horizon the approach of middle age, and as with many men at that time of life, something in me wanted emotional security. Anyway, until then I had always been able to keep a core of detachment within me, even when I would have said I was in love. There had been a few occasions when I had problems with a woman who didn't want to give up when I wanted to break off. There was even one in Seville who tried to stab herself. But in the end I always succeeded in moving on. Now the tables were turned. I desperately wanted to keep Joséphine, but she made it quite explicit from the beginning that she would never be mine longer than it pleased her.

The crisis came when she actually entered into an affair with another man. I think Joséphine did like variety, and he was as different from me as could be imagined — a large blond Scandinavian, not tall, but broad and burly. And he

wasn't in any way intellectual: he was fond of football and horse-racing, and was said to be an aficionado of the bullring. For three months I endured anguish while Joséphine oscillated between me and Knut, but the climax was when she announced to me that she was leaving with him for Norway.

I had a last meeting with her in the Bois de Boulogne. It was a lovely spring day, but I could feel nothing else but my misery. I was so much out of my senses that I even offered Joséphine marriage, at which she laughed. If it could have changed her mind, I would even have gone down on my knees (not as an act, as for Daphne, but in earnest), I would have worshipped her or kissed her feet and implored her not to leave me, but any of that would have been futile.

When it was all over, I walked to the nearest metro station, and mechanically bought a ticket. But when I descended to the platform and the train came clanging in, I asked myself, 'What was the point of going to my flat? What was the point of going anywhere?' People got out and others got in, the doors slammed shut, but I stayed on the platform. I decided I would wait for the next train and throw myself on the rails before it.

I moved a few feet nearer the edge, and braced myself for what I was going to do, and stood there, fixing my eyes on the rails. Then I felt a hand descend on my shoulder, and I heard a voice say softly in my ear, in French:

'That's no answer, you know.'

I looked up, dazed, and found myself looking into a pair of eyes that held me by their penetrating gaze. They were those of a middle-aged man, shorter than me, in a cloth cap and an old brown overcoat. I would have taken him for a factory worker.

He continued:

'You may think your problems are all over when the next train runs over you. But what if you wake up to find yourself in a worse state, and even unhappier than you are?'

I could only stare silently at him. He took my arm, and said:

'Come with me.'

He steered me out of the station and to a neighbouring café. There, over a glass of wine, I told him, as if he were a father confessor, all about Joséphine, and, then in answer to his questions, something of my story of the previous few years.

He said at the end of this recital:

'You need to heal yourself. I will help you to do so.'

He took me back to my flat, and asked me to pack some things, say, for a week. I obeyed him dumbly. Then he took me to the hotel where he was staying, in a not very affluent quarter of Paris, and engaged a room for me. We had dinner, by which time I had learnt his name was André, but little else. 'I have spent some years in India,' he said, 'but I've never been in Ceylon.' He asked me about Ceylon, and about Buddhism and Hinduism in my country, on which he found me mostly ignorant.

After dinner he took me up to my room. Before leaving me, he said:

'I'll be in Room 34 on the same floor if you want me. But mind you, no games tonight. Don't try cutting your throat or hanging yourself. Promise?'

I nodded. But the commanding influence he had gained over me wasn't the only reason for my agreeing. A friend had once told me of his own experience, that after a failed suicide attempt, he had such a feeling of emptiness that he couldn't attempt it again. That was how I felt, drained of any feeling, whether love or despair.

In the morning, after breakfast, he told me, 'We're leaving.'

'Where to?' I asked.

'To a village on the coast of Bretagne, where I live.'

Bretagne? Ah yes, that was the peninsula in the northwest of France jutting out into the Atlantic. Dave, do you remember the Grinder talking about Breton Lays when he was doing the *Franklin's Tale*? All that has quite gone out of my head a long time ago, but this is the part of France where

the Breton Lays came from. And a lot of people here, particularly the peasants and fishermen, still speak Breton, which is a Celtic language, very different from French.

I have been living here for six months, Dave, in an old converted farmhouse a few miles from the coast, which André and the community he has gathered round him have made their home. If I tell you that this is a kind of monastery, or ashram, you will get an entirely wrong idea of it, but I don't know of any other way to describe it either. But there is no ritual, no enforced discipline, no collective prayers or worship, no dogma to which one has to subscribe. The people here are all engaged in an endeavour to cleanse themselves through contemplation and meditation, and in that process to discover whatever truth there is to be found, about themselves and about life.

There are only four people, not counting André and me, who live here continuously — two men and two women. There are six others who come and go, sometimes staying away for weeks or months, because they have commitments in the world outside. They are all European or American; so far I am the only Asian. Everybody living here, for any length of time, shares the work of the community — cooking, washing up, cleaning, and tending the large garden where vegetables and fruits are grown. There is a library, with books on religion and philosophy but also on horticulture.

There are no external rules, as I told you; if, for instance, any of the men and women wanted to go to bed with each other, nobody could or would stop them, though I haven't known of that happening. Once a week we meet as a group, and then anybody can raise any question, whether it is a problem of interpreting something he or she has been reading, or a question of the behaviour of somebody else in the group. Last evening, for instance, when we met, Sophie complained that Pierre's habit of picking his nose disturbed her, and there was a long discussion about whether Pierre should control that habit in the interests of the equanimity of other people,

or Sophie should control her feelings of disgust in order to respect Pierre's freedom. In the end there was a compromise: Pierre agreed to abstain from nose-picking when Sophie, or one other person who felt like her, was around; otherwise, he was free to indulge his little pleasure, or to grow out of it in time.

André had originally asked me to come for a week, so that I would be at liberty to go away if I wanted to. At the end of that week I said I would like to stay on, so I made a trip to Paris, sold my furniture, vacated my flat, and brought back the few personal things I needed.

I am writing this letter to you sitting on the top of a cliff that falls sheer some hundreds of feet to the ocean: a typical Bretagne land-and-seascape. I have had to weigh down each page as I finish it by a heavy stone so as to prevent it being blown away by the sea-wind. Far below, the waves seem to crawl quietly by inches, though I know that in fact they are pounding the foot of the cliff in full fury. It seems to me an image of the way I see my own passions in retrospect, calmed and spent by distance, not of space but of time, and by solitude.

The six months here have taught me and changed me a great deal, though I am still far from the complete inner tranquility I would like to achieve. But I am returning to Ceylon, Dave, in a few months. There are several reasons for that decision. I reached it by myself, though subsequently I discussed it with the group, and they approved it.

One reason is that for my future growth I need, above all, to accustom myself to a simple way of life, since I was brought up in an affluent home, pampered with all kinds of luxuries. In this community I have learned to do without these. But what irks me is that, living here, I can't do without a mass of clothing to keep me warm (and on the Bretagne coast it can get quite cold when the Atlantic winds blow): I need sweater and overcoat and woollen underclothing and gloves and shoes, at least a good part of the time. To people like

André, who have been accustomed to these as part of normal living in a western climate, they are simple necessities; but to me, they seem an external imposition that circumscribes the freedom of my body and detracts from the simplicity I want to maintain. In Ceylon I could go about in shirt and trousers and sandals.

Another reason why I want to come back is that I must face the challenge of meeting my family. I don't want to live with them; they would strongly disapprove of the path I am following, and of the present direction of my existence. And living in that house in Rosmead Place would negate all my desire for a simple life. But I have come to see that I must overcome the anger and bitterness against them that drove me out of Ceylon: that is necessary for my own growth. And I can do that only by meeting them, at least occasionally, provided they are willing to see me. It is unlikely that they will accept or even understand the mode of life I am going to embark on, but I must learn to tolerate their differences from me, even in living apart.

But perhaps the most important reason why I want to come back is that I agree with Milton (you remember the *Areopagitica*), 'I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue.' These six months and any more I may spend here are only a training ground; for me, whatever change I may achieve must be tested in the world — and in that world that, for all my uprootedness, is still the closest to me.

As you can imagine, in several years of dissipation and prodigality, I have spent the greater part of my aunt's legacy. Still, something remains, and with that I can hope to maintain myself a few years in Ceylon in an austere and economical mode of life. It doesn't worry me what I shall do when that is gone: I am quite prepared to take what may come, to live, for instance, the homeless and begging life of the sanyasi that so many in India and Ceylon have adopted down the centuries.

This is a long letter, Dave, but I wanted to explain to you as fully as is possible in a letter what happened to me since

we parted. I shall see you, I hope, when I come back, which may be by the end of this year. You need not be afraid that I will try to convert you to my present way of thinking and living: in the first place, I have no creed that I have accepted, only an activity; and secondly, the community sternly discourages proselytisation, believing that when people feel the need to change themselves, the opportunity will come to them if they are fortunate. As happened to me.

While I was in Paris last year I read in Le Monde that in Ceylon the bill to make Sinhalese the only official language had been passed, accompanied and followed by violence. More recently, my friend Adrian at Cambridge, who is the only person with whom I have had intermittent communication over the years, sent me a clipping from The Times which said that there was some hope of communal peace in Ceylon since the Prime Minister had entered into a pact with the Tamil leader to grant certain rights to Tamils. But it also said that these concessions were being strongly opposed by Sinhalese extremists. I suppose if I returned to Ceylon and there was some outbreak of communal violence at some point where I was, I could be a victim merely because I would be labelled a Tamil, though I feel no more Tamil than Sinhalese or Patagonian or Eskimo. However, that possibility doesn't and won't trouble me: I am trying to live without attachment to life.

Forgive me, Dave, for this long scrawl I have inflicted on you, but the fact that I felt impelled to write it is a proof that you are still as dear to me as you always were.

> Yours ever, Mark

This letter confounded me. How was I to take Mark's turning to religion? For it was that, I thought, even if it was to no orthodox creed. Not that I doubted his sincerity: the anguish and despair that had driven him to attempt suicide were all too real in his account. But

was this unexpected quest for truth through contemplation and meditation a re-making of himself, or was it the same Mark who was expressing himself in a new guise? Mark had played Byron, and that had led him to a dead end; was he now going to play St. Francis, in the dedication to renunciation and the simple life? I didn't think he was merely playing a role or striking a pose before the world: that would have been unfair and wrong. But I wondered whether the audience before whom Mark felt a necessity to cut a dramatic figure wasn't simply himself.

Of course, my reaction to Mark's letter was affected by my own inclinations. I had come a long way since I told Mr. Wijeratne that I believed the Bible because it was the word of God. I was, and had been for many years, a sceptic in matters of belief, but not only in respect of religion. There are, I told myself, people who feel a strong need to find the high road of a secure and certain faith which gives them answers to all questions. Wije in his Marxist days was one such, and having lost that belief, he was searching for another to take its place. Mark, unexpectedly, had now developed the same hunger. But there are other people who tread the low road of uncertainties, compromises and imperfections that living in the ordinary world involves, and I thought I would always be one of these.

But I wasn't going to express to Mark any of my reservations, particularly because I was genuinely glad to regain contact with him, and happy that I would be able to see him when he returned to Ceylon; I would write to him in those terms and tell him of all the changes in my own life. Meanwhile, I walked across to the *Lakmava* office, and told Wije I had had a letter from Mark.

'From Mark?' Wije almost gasped the words, as if it was news too wonderful to be true.

'Yes,' I said, and told him of the new way of life Mark had adopted.

Wije's eyes were shining by the time I finished my narrative. 'I am so glad he is coming back to Ceylon,' he said. 'I will be able to learn a lot from him.'

I could see that in his mind Wije was already casting Mark in the image of a future guru.

One afternoon Victor came into my room. He was a senior reporter on the *Herald*, and a confidant of several politicians from whom he got inside information about the goings-on in the political world, and in return secured publicity for them in the news columns. I didn't like Victor because he was virulently anti-Tamil, and now, anti-Bandaranaike because of the pact the Prime Minister had made with the Tamil leader to try to resolve the conflict. I had, in fact, had a rather heated argument with him once over the pact. Victor was, on the other hand, a great admirer of J.R. Jayewardene, the politician who had tried to lead a march to the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy to protest against the pact, and had been turned back when the road was blocked by government supporters.

'I have great news,' Victor announced when I looked up from my typewriter.

'What's that?'

'You know the letters on the number-plates of cars, CE, CY, CN, and so on?'

'Yes. What about them?'

'You know they are all letters from the name CEYLON, and each series has 9999 numbers.'

'Yes, yes. So what?' I asked, rather impatiently.

'Well, now the EN series is coming to an end. So what's the new series to be? It can't have an English letter or letters, because, whether you like it or not,' (he leered at me as he said this), 'Sinhala is the official language.'

'Yes. So?'

'So the new series will have the Sinhala letter 'Sri'. Sri for Sri Lanka.'

'What's hot about that?' I was about to turn back to my typewriter in irritation, when Victor stopped me.

'You'll soon find out what's hot. Because buses with the Sri letter on their number-plates will be sent to Jaffna.'

'But that's daft! There'll be protests, perhaps even violence.'

'Ah ha!' Victor had a satisfied grin on his face. 'Yes, they might even burn some buses. That'll cook Banda's goose. What price his pact when there's violence in Jaffna?'

'But that's irresponsible! Who's the damn fool who took that decision?'

Victor's grin became even more triumphant.

'Not everybody, even in the government, loves the pact as much as you do, Dave.'

6

1958. Mark arrived early in the new year. One morning he rang me when I was in office to tell me he was in Colombo.

'Where are you?' I asked.

'I had to stay somewhere for the present. So I'm at my cousin's, at Barnes Place. But I'm not going to stick there, Dave. I'll have to find a place and move out.'

'When can I see you?'

'When you wish.'

I thought for a moment. 'Why don't you come home tomorrow evening, to dinner? Then I can also ask Wije — and Girlie. I know Wije is waiting to meet you.'

'Okay.'

Mark, when he came next evening, was in an open white shirt and black trousers and a pair of sandals. He was as lean as I remembered him, but his hair was thinning and a few hairs were greying at his temples. He hugged me when I opened the gate for him, and said:

'How marvellous to see you again, Dave,' The oldest friend left to me, do you know that?'

'It's great to see you, Mark,' I responded.

I was surprised to see there were actually tears in his eyes. We went in, and he embraced Wije too, and in this case, the tears were Wije's. He kissed both Rani and Girlie on their cheeks, and after greeting Girlie, he stood back, looked at her and said:

'How you've grown since I last saw you, in that white school uniform on the veranda of the secondhand bookshop! But it's twenty years since then!'

We sat down, and Mark said,

'Girlie. That's how I remember you. But is that your real name?' Girlie said:

'My real name is Padma.'

'Padma! Why call yourself Girlie when you have such a wonderful name?'

Girlie said in her slow, hesitant English:

'My father called me Girlie when I was small, and he... he used... he got used to calling me Girlie. Even when I was big. But my mother called me Padma.'

'But Padma is such a fine name. The lotus — it's such an important symbol — it means so much in Hinduism and Buddhism.'

Girlie looked puzzled, so Rani translated for her.

'I think I shall call you Padma,' Mark added.

'Thank you very much,' Girlie said, smiling broadly. She turned to Wije and said in Sinhala:

'Now you'll have to call me Padma also.'

'Alright,' Wije said.

Of the evening's conversation two things stand out in my memory. One was that when it turned to the political happenings, Mark showed himself completely uninterested and unconcerned. After Wije and I had been discussing whether the Prime Minister would stick to his pact in spite of opposition, Mark said, 'It's not important: let's talk about something else.' That irritated me. I burst out:

'You can't take that attitude, Mark, not when people's lives are involved. If this pact breaks down, there'll be violence sooner or later, that's sure. It's alright for you to say that you aren't clinging to life. But what about all the people to whom their lives are precious?'

Mark smiled, a slow, gentle smile, and said quietly:

'I don't expect you to agree with me, Dave. Because you think the individual life is all there is. If you think that, of course, then this life is precious. But what if this life, yours and mine and everybody else's, is only a drop in a vast ocean of innumerable lives, past, present and future? Then does it matter very much if I die tomorrow at the hands of a thug, or forty years later of a heart attack?'

'I don't like that attitude,' I said. 'I think it can lead to callousness and inhumanity.'

'Dave, you shouldn't say that,' Rani intervened. 'That's unfair.'

'Yes, that is so,' Wije supported her.

'It's alright, Rani,' Mark said. "It's natural Dave should feel like that.'

The other, and more decisive, event of the evening happened right at the end when Mark was leaving. I had offered to drop him in the car at Barnes Place, but he insisted on taking a bus. Wije asked with whom he was staying, and Mark told him, and added that he would have to find some place of his own soon. Wije said:

'Why not come and stay with us, Mark? With me and Girlie? Ours is only a small house, but we can give you a room. What do you say, Girlie?'

'Padma,' Girlie corrected him.

'I am sorry. Padma.'

'Yes, I agree.'

'That's an idea,' Mark responded.

'It is not the kind of place you are used to —' Wije started saying, but Mark cut him short.

'I have got used to many different kinds of life, Wije. Don't judge me by what I was when I was Mark Watson of Rosmead Place.'

'Then it would be wonderful if you could stay with us and teach us meditation. We will be your first disciples, Padma and I.'

'I'm still learning, Wije, I can't set up as a teacher with disciples. But I'll be glad to help you learn too.'

'Then will you come?' Wije's eyes were as bright as when I had told him of Mark's impending return.

'Yes. I think one should never refuse the unexpected opening of a door. Did Dave tell you of my first meeting with André on a platform of the Paris Metro?'

'Yes.'

'Well, that changed my life. Who knows, my coming to stay with you might be the beginning of another change?'

After Mark had left and Rani and I had retired to bed, I said:

'How strange to find Mark talking of symbols in Hinduism and Buddhism! I could never have expected it from the Mark I knew.' 'Well, people change. But you shouldn't have got into an argument with him, Dave.'

'Why not?'

'He has been through a hard time. If he has found some comfort in what he believes, why try to undermine it? Each person must decide what is important for him or her.'

'Perhaps.'

7

Within three days of Wije's offer, Mark had moved in with him and Girlie. I used to hear from Wije in the office how he was faring in his new habitat. Wije and Girlie lived in a small house in a Colombo suburb, Pamankade. They had no servants; Girlie had done all the cooking, but Wije had always helped with the washing-up and other housework. Now, said Wije, Mark, who had learnt to cook with the community in Bretagne, was doing some of the cooking, and helped with the other housework and the marketing.

'That won't leave much time for meditation,' I said, with some irony.

'No, that is not true,' said Wije. 'He meditates every day and teaches us also. He says that working with his hands is one way he can progress. That is because he had a soft life earlier.'

'And how does he teach Girlie when he doesn't know Sinhala?'

'That is not a problem, Dave. Padma knows some English, and when she cannot understand, I translate.' He hesitated, and added, 'You should come and join, Dave.'

I knew Wije's happiness would have been complete if I had, but I shook my head. Another day he told me of a yoga exercise called the death pose, that he said had a marvellous effect of tranquilising both the body and the mind, and wanted me to try it. I didn't.

I knew I should visit Mark, or invite him again home, but I shrank from the possibility of being drawn into a conversation that would irritate me, or an argument that I would later regret. The result was that three months passed, and I hadn't seen Mark since the evening he spent at home.

Victor had been right. In March buses with number-plates bearing the Sinhala letter 'Sri' had been sent to Jaffna. Tamil nationalists protested by tarring this letter on the plates. The news set off a wave of emotion in the Sinhala areas, particularly because 'Sri' was a sacral symbol. (I hadn't realised that aspect of the matter when I talked to Victor, but no doubt whoever sent the buses to Jaffna knew.) Within days there was a counter-campaign in Colombo of tarring the Tamil letters on street nameboards; overnight these were obliterated throughout the city, and the campaign spread to other towns. I think some group must have organised the tarring initially, and then it snowballed.

In April a group of Buddhist monks staged a march to the Prime Minister's residence to demand the abrogation of the pact, and when they were stopped by the police, they sat down where they were and refused to move unless the Prime Minister conceded their demand. The Prime Minister gave in. The surrender, instead of appearing the extremists, encouraged them. Events were moving towards their bloody denouement.

9

One evening in May, I was in office when Rani rang. Her voice was tense.

'Dave, can you come home as soon as you can finish and get away?'

'Yes, of course. What's wrong?'

'You know the Tamil couple next door?'

'Yes. Mr. and Mrs. Sathasivam?'

'They're very worried. They've heard all kinds of rumours of trouble, and they're very frightened.'

'I'll come in half an hour, Rani.'

'Thanks, Dave.'

I rushed through whatever had to be done urgently, and drove home. 'Now what exactly is the trouble, Rani?' I asked, as soon as I entered. 'Mrs. Sathasivam had gone marketing this afternoon, and she had been told dreadful stories about what is supposed to be happening to Sinhalese in Trincomalee.'

'What sort of thing?'

'That women have been killed and their breasts cut off and packed into boxes to be sent to Colombo.'

'That's just the kind of fantastic lies that some people are spreading. So what do the Sathasivams feel?'

'They're frightened there'll be violence in Colombo, and they'll be in danger. Dave, I want to ask you, can we put them up here for a day or two, until things blow over?'

'Yes, of course.'

'I could have done it already, but I didn't want to without asking you.'

'No problem, Rani.'

'Then I'll go next door and ask them to come over. They'll be so relieved.'

The Sathasivams were a young couple, recently married, and this was the first place in which they had set up house. They arrived with the husband carrying a single suitcase containing some of their clothes, and the wife bearing a large basket.

'Shanti had already made dinner, so we thought we could share it with you,' said Mr. Sathasivam.

'Thank you,' I said. 'We'll eat your dinner, and you can have ours.'

10

The following morning I was shaving when Rani came into the bathroom.

'There's a lady to see you, Dave,' she said. 'She's a Mrs. Edwards, but she says you'll know her as Marina. Is she *the* Marina?'

'It must be, Rani. I don't know anybody else by that name.'

'She's certainly beautiful.'

I went into the sitting-room. I had never met Marina since I left the university, though I had heard that she had married a wealthy Tamil businessman, and I had sometimes seen her photograph in the fashion pages of the Sunday papers. Rani was right: her beauty hadn't faded but had rather matured.

She came straight to the point. 'Dave, I came to ask you to get Mark out of the place where he is.'

'Because of the danger of a riot?'

'Yes. Yesterday, my cousin and I went there, and tried to persuade him to come with us. If he didn't want to go to his parents' house, my cousin would have taken him home. Or he could have come to me. He would be much safer in Cinnamon Gardens than where he is.'

'But did he refuse?'

'Yes. He has some absurd idea of not giving in to fear. He told me life wasn't worth living in that state. But it's highly dangerous, Dave. You haven't yet been out of the house this morning, have you?'

'No.'

'I'm told there are gangs roaming the streets today, and that some of them are armed. And that place where Mark is living is close to the canal banks. That's the kind of shanty town where the thugs come from.'

'What do you want me to do, Marina?'

'Please, Dave, go to Mark. Please try to persuade him to give up his pride and come to my house or my cousin's or Mum and Dad's.'

'Okay. I'll do that immediately. I'll try to bring him with me, if he'll come.'

She gave me, from those marvellous eyes, a grateful look that would have set my heart on fire in the old days.

'Thank you ever so much, Dave. You're his oldest friend, so he'll listen to you.'

She gave me her cousin's address in Barnes Place and her own in Green Path ('Dad's house in Rosmead Place you know'), and got up to go.

'How did you come, Marina?'

'I have a car. And a chauffeur and a security man.'

She left after saying goodbye to Rani and me. Rani said, 'It's a good thing that Mr. and Mrs. Sathasivam are still asleep. They wouldn't have heard the conversation.'

I was getting into the car, after I had hurriedly changed, when Rani came running out.

'Dave!'

'Yes?'

'If Mark won't go to his relatives, bring him here. We may as well take a risk for three as for two.'

11

I got to Havelock Road and drove in the direction of Pamankade. All the street nameboards I passed had their Tamil lettering blotted out, but on one, which I knew read 'Ramanathan Lane', the tarbrush artists had done a more complete job than elsewhere. Not only had the Tamil lettering been covered with tar, but the name 'Ramanathan' had been obliterated in both the Sinhala and the English. As I approached the outer suburbs, the signs of violence became evident. At Thimbirigasyaya a shopfront that had been boarded with planks had been smashed in, and a crowd of looters was busy gathering the spoils. A police jeep came round the corner as I passed, an alarm was raised among the looters, and in the car mirror I saw them running helterskelter, some still clutching their gains. Further on, a whole row of small tenements had been gutted by fire and was still smouldering. It struck me that while envy of the rich may have helped to fuel the violence, it was the poor who were most vulnerable and would lose what little they had. I saw one such gang as those Marina had spoken of; some of the men wielded clubs and crowbars, and they were walking away from a wayside stall that lay in ruins.

Approaching Wije's house, I saw a small crowd gathered outside. Could they be attacking the house? But no, there was a police jeep stopped a few yards on. What could have happened? I steeled myself, parked my car and walked to the gate. The crowd let me pass. As I opened the gate, I saw a police officer in the garden; he came running up and stopped me.

'Who are you?' he asked me.

'I'm a friend of Dr. Watson, who lives here. I came to take him to a safer place.'

The police officer looked sadly at me. 'You're too late,' he said.

He took me by the arm and led me inside. There were two other policemen on the veranda. As we entered the sitting-room I saw the two bodies. Mark's was on the floor, covered up to the neck with a sheet, which was reddened by the blood flowing from his head. Girlie's body, also covered by a sheet, was lying on the sofa; her face and head were uninjured, but there was a large red patch of blood on the sheet over her chest. Beside Girlie's body was seated Wije, weeping bitterly. I went across and clasped him, and we wept together.

12

Later, I learnt from the police inspector what had happened.

Early that morning Mark had set out to buy some bread. As he opened the gate, a gang of men were passing, returning from a night out, during which they had looted some Tamil houses, and later they had been drinking. As Mark opened the gate, one of the gang saw him and said, 'That's a Tamil!' The men surrounded him, and, according to the passer-by who told the police the story, they asked him, 'Are you Tamil?' Mark had drawn himself up and said, defiantly, 'Yes, I'm a Tamil.' One of the men had hit him on the head with a club, and he had fallen. By this time, Girlie, who had seen the gang surrounding Mark, had come screaming on to the road, but she never reached Mark's body. Another man stabbed her with a sword. She must have died instantaneously.

'We've got the man who killed her,' the police inspector said. 'The rest of the gang seem to have run away, but we'll track them down. The man who stabbed her was drunk. This is what he said: "When she came screaming out of the house, I thought she was his wife, and that she was a Tamil woman." I said, "Sinhalese or Tamil, a life is a life."

Wije, meanwhile, had been in the bathroom. He had heard Girlie's cries, and had come rushing out of the house, but when he got to them, both Mark and Girlie were dead.

He told me, sobbing::

'Mark always went out in the morning for bread. We told him not to go that day. When he said he must, I offered to go with him. But he refused. He insisted on doing everything normally. He said that was the only way to live, without fear.'

13

Mark's body was taken away by his parents after the inquest, and they arranged for a quiet funeral at which only the family were present. After the cremation of Girlie's body, Wije's parents took him to their home. But he remained withdrawn into himself, rarely speaking, and even answering a question only in monosyllables. He didn't come back to office.

A week passed, and there was an almsgiving for Girlie. The next day Wije disappeared. Both his parents and I were very anxious, thinking he might have committed suicide. The police were informed, but all they were able to discover was that Wije had been seen by one of his neighbours at Pamankade. He had come out of his house there carrying a small bag. The neighbour had spoken to him, and Wije had said he was going on a journey. That was all either the police or his parents and I could find out at that time.

But two weeks later I had this letter through the post: the postmark was illegible:

Dear Dave,

I know I must have caused you some worry by what I have done. Also my parents. But I had to do it, and I did not want anybody to stop me. That is why I did not tell you or my parents of my decision.

I wanted to go away, Dave. There is nothing I have to live for in the ordinary world. That is why I have left it, and gone to a place where I can try to find peace, and deliverance from suffering.

The men who killed Padma and Mark were victims of ignorance, anger and hatred. The best way in which I can mourn

for the dead is to rid myself of these evils. That is what Mark would have wished, and I think it is what Padma would have wished.

You must not try to search for me because I shall not come back. I am writing another letter to my parents telling them the same thing.

Goodbye, Dave. You, Padma and Mark are the only people I have truly loved. May you and Rani be happy.

Your loving friend Wije

EPILOGUE, 1997

The personal story I set out to write is finished. All the people who mattered in that story are now dead, except for me, who linger on, and perhaps Wije, who may be living or dead, but of whom I have heard nothing since that last letter.

But the larger story is unfinished: the story of injustice, hatred, killing, and then war, the story that began in my youth and continues into my old age. It is the story of the victims of one generation becoming the aggressors of another, and vice versa, in a recurrent cycle of violence and counter-violence. I know I shan't live to see the end of that story, and I can't foresee what the end will be.

Yet it isn't with a feeling of despair that I want to close this book. Unlike Wije earlier, I can't believe in perfect societies; unlike Mark and Wije at the end, I can't believe in the perfectibility of individuals. But I haven't lost faith in people, and I am not sorry that I have lived. No one will write an epitaph for me, so I had better write it down myself. It consists of four lines from a poet with whom I have recognised a deep affinity of temperament ever since I read him at eighteen:

And yet I still am half in love with pain,
With what is imperfect, with both tears and mirth,
With things that have an end, with life and earth.
And this moon that leaves me dark within the door.

An old man, David Shelton Gunawardene, looks back in 1997 on the memories of his youth and on the people who affected most deeply the shaping of his own self, in school, at university and on a newspaper. That narrative, spanning the years between 1936 and 1958, intertwines the destinies of the characters with the political events and social divisions of that time, containing within them the seeds of conflict and violence.

Among My Souvenirs is a novel that blends entertainment and significance, with a wide variety of incidents and character relationships, moving between the actual and the imagined, the personal and the political, comedy and tragedy.

Although Regi Siriwardena emphasises, in his prefatory note, that this is not an autobiographical novel, the experience of his long life and his personal knowledge of the period he is writing about have gone into the making of it. The book is the culmination also of a career in writing, in which, beginning as a critic, he progressed to be translator of poetry, then poet, playwright and fiction-writer. *Among My Souvenirs* is his second novel, and one so different from his first that readers may find it surprising that it is by the same writer

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