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Cover design: **SANDUN DE SILVA**

Dedicated

To my wife, Dayadari

and to

Nalaka, Mihiri, Dinali and Lochana

A Word of Warning

Do not expect too much of this collection of stories. You will not find here words of wisdom; no message, or moral. I wrote these because each event made a strong impression on the man I was, then. Later, it became a pleasant challenge to find the right words to express these experiences. Lastly, I thought that I would reward myself by seeing them in print.

These stories are, basically, true; built upon events that I had made happen or had been wished upon me. In Life I have played many parts – at times the lead, at times the villain; sometime times a bit-part player and at other times an observer – so these events are not linked to each other than through me. But at each event, I was a different man. Each incident made a deep impact upon me and remains burned in memory.

But, of course they cannot make the same impact on you.

Life experiences, if related as such, make pretty dull reading. And so I decided to cast mine in the form of stories and narratives. They are certainly not of a piece throughout. I have tried to steer clear of nostalgia. (Time Past, after all, is another country and, besides, it is dead.) Only one experience, which changed me so much that I became another man, is spread over four stories, because they are different bits of the same experience, written at different times. I hope they read well.

I apologize to friends, and others, whom I have used in these stories, but that is something I could not avoid. I cannot say that my characters bear no resemblance to anyone living or dead: since these are narratives from my life, the characters bear resemblances to many persons who were part of my life. I can only say: *Samaa venna.*

A few of these stories have been published either in the Sunday Times or in the Ceylankan, the journal of Ceylon Society of Australia, to both of which, my thanks.

I must thank my siblings Tissa and Ransiri Menike, who gave me good advice and found fault with me, as siblings always do. To Susan Green, who helped me look at myself critically and dig out a story I was unconsciously hiding; to Dinali, my daughter-in-law who managed to find time during a hectic sabbatical to look these over; and to my wife Dayadari whose down-to- earth evaluation helped be leave out, most regretfully, some of my own favourites; I am greatly beholden. And to Yasmine Gooneratne, from whom I asked for a reader's view, and who ended up editing this collection, my grateful thanks.

Finally, to my friends and colleagues who lived my life and times with me and who are part of these stories, my thanks for being with me when it mattered.

S.D.

CONTENTS

THE HAT

They were exciting days, those days of waiting. Exciting for me, that is: I don't know what they meant to the others. It was my turn – as the third in a family of two boys and two girls – to go from school to university. I had done well enough to get in. Having already changed schools four times, I told myself that going to yet another one – even the 'super school' – was, in itself, no big deal. Still, I sensed that change was imminent: unconsciously, I was looking forward to what we would now call a 'rite of passage'. I did not know the phrase then.

A naïve eighteen-year-old, I was following in the footsteps of my brother, who had just graduated. He had a gift for making everything he and his friends did appear exclusive, adventurous and wonderful. As the younger sibling I drank in the tall tales of derring-do, conjuring up a semi-mythical world of impossibly clever and witty professors, in which rival groups of students represented Good and Evil, and in which my brother's band of companions were the cleverest, the wittiest and the best! That's it – this was Camelot! THAT's where I was going!

And there was more. A brand new campus was awaiting us at Peradeniya, its students drawn from the major faculties in Colombo. We were to be trail-blazers who would set Kandy alight with academic fire. I was leaving home for the first time to fend for myself. It was heady stuff.

I had to teach myself the things I had depended on others to do for me: I learned to sew on buttons, to cut the nails on my right hand (I could already manage the left), to keep *dhoby* accounts for my laundry. My mother took a very practical view about kitting me out. New trousers and shirts, six of each by her reckoning, all white for everyday wear; some casual clothes, most of them inherited or gifted, of good quality though mended, but a few brand-new. Sheets, pillowcases, towels. And other items such as shoes, socks, nightwear, underwear and toiletries. (Years later, setting up house after marriage, it all came back – *Hey, I've been down this road before!).* The new campus, too, was to be 'Tropical Oxbridge': there would be High Table dinners in the new Halls of Residence, at which formal clothes would be worn. So I had to have some white drill jackets, with shirts and ties to match – pretty formal wear for

undergraduates, and even working persons, in those days. What a waste they turned out to be: ending up with the old-clothes man, barely worn!

Peradeniya's seasonal rains required another kind of garb: rain-wear. Umbrellas could barely cope with those up-country downpours, and were so clumsy. Anyway, they were despised by my school friends and myself as unmanly. What I needed was a raincoat and a hat. Girls wore plastic transparent raincoats in rainbow colours, which we heartily approved of – but they were too sissy for us. Lightweight, khaki-coloured, rubber-lined raincoats, complete with caps were the trend-setters' choice. I coveted one, but they were quite expensive, and the family budget couldn't stretch to one. An uncle who was in the public service and thereby entitled to the periodic issue of a raincoat, solved the problem for me. I gratefully inherited his old, but high-quality raincoat, marred only by a few grease stains that resisted all stain-removers.

Next came the hat, called a 'Topee' or 'Pith Helmet' in those days. This was a light, rigid and very respectable type of hat. For rainy weather, a thin waterproof covering was provided that fitted snugly over the fabric of the hat, held firm by a thin elastic cord which ran round the inside seam, somewhat like a close-fitting shower cap. They came in two types: the better, more expensive kind was made of a gabardine fabric and the cheaper one of khaki. I got myself one of the better kind, and was ready for Peradeniya's rains.

This may seem trivial in contemporary terms, but I was deeply conscious that so much capital outlay was costing my parents a lot of money. Their graduate son was still months away from a proper job. Their youngest daughter was still at school, and the child in between was looking around for something to do. So the investment in me put a big dent in the family income. I took what was given to me and it never occurred to me to ask for what I really wanted (a new raincoat, Arrow shirts, John White shoes) as I knew this would be unreasonable. There was the question of pocket money, too. I had never had pocket money, but it would become a necessity now. I could only be spared ten rupees a month, which was a pretty modest sum even in those days. But I had never had ten rupees a month before, and I was sure that I could stretch it to meet my needs.

However, ready though I was to conquer Peradeniya, there was a term to be spent in Colombo, as 'bloody freshers'. We herded together nervously, an amorphous group looking exactly what we were – fit for nothing but ragging. In a week or so we had coalesced into

smaller groups. We began to pick up University slang, practising it assiduously. Cautiously we eyed the girls, seeking excuses to speak to them. We hung around the tuck-shop, ogling with awe the seniors who, wreathed in cigarette smoke over long-cold cups of tea, dissected their lecturers so very knowingly. Soon, we would be seniors ourselves! Confidence grew, and we began to feel that we were University men! And then, the Colombo term ended. After the vacation, we would meet again….in Peradeniya.

We all travelled in the same train, lugging bulky suitcases proclaiming the names of our assigned Halls of Residence. In this landscape of hills, river and trees, the very faces we had seen in Colombo were transformed. All my friends looked happier, more adventurous, more devil-may-care, more worldly-wise. And all the girls looked prettier than they had before, and much more desirable. The new, 'purpose-built' campus was picture-postcard beautiful, with imposing buildings on different levels of the rolling hillocks bordering the river, the winding roads and secluded parks. There was a newness, and a delicious nip in the crisp, resinous-tangy air, which I drank in deeply, following with relish the cool shock of it passing through the warmth of the spaces inside me. All of us, seniors and freshers, were new arrivals here, companions on a voyage of discovery. Barriers broke down, adventure beckoned – this brand new world was ours!

The initial thrill lasted, with some intensity, the first few months. There were acres of park and miles of road to be explored. Kindred souls banded together, weaving their own myths. Kandy demanded to be visited, the hills of Hantane to be climbed, the river to be bathed in. There were picnics to go on by day, and momentous matters to be discussed each night. There was the serious business of Student Council elections. I relished the company of peers, the exposure to radical new thinking as everyone argued and attempted to defend, deep into the night, the rightness of his own prejudices. We debated emerging political problems, yet indulged in rambunctious schoolboy escapades. And all the time, providing a subtle counterpoint to this wild, exultant peal of the jazz trumpet was the more serious world of study. In the lecture halls, the tutorial classes and the library, routines soon set in. Exams crept silently nearer, and the general mood mellowed.

But not mine. Exams would come, of course, but in their own time. Meanwhile, there was the Present to be savoured! So my lotus-eater syndrome continued: and with a mixed group of friends, I enjoyed myself hiking, picnicking and exploring the district around the campus. Amid

the fun and games I didn't notice one thing that all my friends had in common: they found time to mix their fun with study, while I continued to live in a state of suppressed tension. Even the looming examinations didn't arouse me. Hadn't I passed all my earlier exams without really trying? Exams, I told myself, were nothing new.

On the day of my awakening, we had gone on a picnic: finally, we had conquered the heights of Hantane. Having climbed, sung, eaten and horsed around to our hearts' content, we started back down. Only then did we discover that though we might have conquered the hill, it was in no forgiving mood. Soon we were lost, and forced to seek out faded footpaths in the late afternoon – the least pleasant of times when one is tired, and the euphoria of the morning is waning. Stops for rest became frequent. At one such stop I bagged a good rock and stretched out wearily on my back, rucksack and hat by my side. Soon a member of our party hailed us: he had met a villager who had offered to show us the way down. What a relief! Our spirits rising, we scrambled hastily to our feet and followed our guide down the hillside, passing an area that we had never seen before, and striking the main road at an unexpected point. Having thanked our saviour profusely, and regained some of our lost bravado and high spirits, we caught a bus back to the University campus and walked the rest of the way, well satisfied with ourselves.

A couple of days later, the first rains arrived. I reached for my hat, but – where was it, damn it? I was sure I had put it in its usual place. There was no time to look for it: lectures were about to begin. By evening, worry began to set in since, in spite of a careful search, the hat was still missing. I had to have a hat. Had someone accidentally taken it, mistaking it for his own?

Suddenly, the truth dawned: I had left it on that rock up on Hantane. The hill had claimed its sacrifice.

For I had lost more than a mere hat. I could weather the rain or the sun, but this was a major calamity. The hat had been bought specially for me, and it was my duty to look after it. If I told my parents of my loss, what would they think of me? How could I admit to the family that I had lost the hat? They would all consider me a failure. To ask for another hat was out of the question.

I was devastated, burdened with a problem I could share with nobody, a problem that I had to solve by myself. My newly acquired self-confidence was sorely tried, but it held: on no account,

I was determined, must the family learn that I no longer possessed a hat. After a night of troubled dreams, I resolved to dedicate all my pocket money to buy myself a new hat.

The mere making of the resolution seemed to absolve me. It was a way of punishing myself.

So I took a bus into Kandy, and walked the shops that sold hats. I was hoping to find a bargain, but there was none: all hats on display were priced alike. The gabardine type was universally priced at fifteen rupees and the more pedestrian khaki one at ten. My heart sank. TEN RUPEES! A whole month's pocket money! And barely two-and-a-half months' pocket money was my only income.

But there it was. I had no choice: it was clear to me that budgeting, scrimping and scraping were called for. In that way, I told myself, for someone used to making a rupee stretch like rubber, it might just be possible. But strict rules had now to be imposed on a hitherto happy-go-lucky way of living. There would now be more 'Don'ts' than 'Do's' in my daily life. For a start, the tuck-shop – seat of socializing – must definitely be avoided. This was difficult, for it called for some diplomatic lying to enable me to break away from friends heading in that direction.

Films at the University Cinema were next on the list. A ticket cost fifty cents, which was cheap at the price, but from now on it would be a case of '*Machang*, I have some heavy catching up to do', whenever a film was showing. Fifty cents saved.

'Aren't you coming with us to Kandy? We'll be lunching at the Chinese joint'. No way. 'Stomach a bit *haramanis* today – going *guru-guru!* Next time, okay?' A whole rupee or more saved.

It was all done with deadly seriousness. For the first time in my life I had set myself a target, and I felt that my standing, in my own eyes, was at stake. Scrooge-like, I counted my savings every day, and every day, the target seemed still as far away as ever. My excuses were running out, so drastic measures had now to be taken. Cups of tea offered by my friends were shamelessly accepted, and their generosity never returned. Another rupee saved. My toothpaste finished, and I took to borrowing from others: this is not a crime when one is living in a hall of residence, but it's not really my style. Shoe-polish *ditto*: when mine ran out, I airily dipped into my room-mate's supply. Razor blades were used and re-used till there were more cuts on my

face than hairs. The ways of a miser became familiar to me, and I found I could dissemble easily enough.

It was as if I had embarked on a quest for the Holy Grail. The grim shadow of my self-imposed task so haunted my waking hours that even the impending examination failed to make an impact on me. Studies took second place: I granted that they were necessary, but gave them low priority. This was not a conscious decision on my part, but an inevitability.

Gradually, the target drew nearer. On the momentous day that it was reached, I went alone to Kandy. I did not go furtively, like a bargain-hunter, but as one who had TEN RUPEES in his pocket with which to buy a hat. Once in the shop, I confidently tried on several hats: I wanted, I said, a perfect fit. I insisted that the all-important waterproof cover be also fitted for inspection. When at last I walked out, hat on head, light in spirit and in purse, a heavy load of guilt had lifted.

I slept well that night: the long twilight of despair was over. I could now go home without a care in the world, hoping only that my siblings' eagle eyes would not notice that there had been a (slight) change in the colour of my hat. I must have been the life and soul of our nightly gatherings in the hostel – it all happened too long ago for me to remember.

But all this had taken its toll of my studies. Early neglect, born of over-excitement and over-confidence, had been compounded by the devil on my back – the hat I had lost. I returned to my studies, and did what I could. Then at last the term was over, vacation began, and I went home for a three-month break, without a load of guilt.

Came the day of reckoning, however. As I must have unconsciously expected, I had failed the exam. My failure was a greater disappointment to the family than to me. My parents' disappointment was unspoken, but my siblings' reproaches were sarcastic and unrestrained.

And I couldn't even justify my failure with a saga of heroic self-sacrifice.

"HE WAS A GOOD BOY"

Trincomalee. A hot April afternoon. Far up, near the ceiling, the fan whirrs busily, impotent in this stifling heat. The heat and glare are a smothering blanket: hostile, claustrophobic.

I walk across to the Commanding Officer's office, just to get away from my own. He is seated in an armchair, listening, absorbed. Nearby, stands a figure I recognize: Sudubanda, the carpenter from Diyatalawa. *(Ah! To be back in Diyatalawa's clear, bright mornings and chilly, misty nights!* I drag myself back to reality*)*

"I am sorry about your son, Sudubanda. What happened?"

His face is not an expressive one and, and the expression hardly changes. Under the initial impression of benevolence there's a hint of unquestioning, non-combatant resignation in the sunken eyes. No, it's nothing new - just the landscape of the face at rest. A man with a large family yet dependent on him and unwelcome retirement uncomfortably close. Comfort and Prosperity have passed him by; tiring, but not embittering him. The resignation had lived in the eyes for many years.

"He had been swimming with his friends, sir, in that lake, you know, the one near the Power House. After they had all finished, he had wanted to dive in again. The others did not want to; so he went in alone. There's an old gem-pit on the bed of the lake, and that's what got him.

"He was a good boy. Could do a man's work. The Nuns at the Convent were so surprised at the work he could do! Only fifteen years old; but he could match his master!"

A slight smile of pride.

"He was so good at rattaning chairs. The Nuns came to the funeral, too. They gave seventy-five rupees."

The recital is unhurried; the mind travelling, lingering over familiar details. A monologue, full of the unstated sorrow, now a familiar face.

"Everybody was very good to us, sir. Though I was here when it happened, others did everything for me. The Navy gentlemen gave me sixty rupees and so many others collected money for us, and everybody came for the funeral - see, sir, for the funeral of this boy! Us sixty-year olds can never hope for that!

"From the school and the Services they all came - and the Nuns and the Buddhist Priests also. At other times you can hardly find one priest to come to our house. And this time, fifteen came. He was a good boy."

He is sitting on his haunches now, staring at the floor, deep in the recent past.

"He was like a girl, sir, before he started going out to work. Always touched his mother's hand before going out. He made little things in his workshop to earn some extra money. We found thirty rupees he had saved, in a hole in the wall. He was saving up for New Year."

Absently, he brushes his eye, with the back of his hand.

"His brother wanted him to walk back home with him that day, but he set out alone, along the railway track. When the brother came home, he hadn't yet returned; and he went alone to work our in garden - we have planted some potatoes - when a Policeman came, saying that a boy from the village had died.

"Some of the boys had been frightened and wanted to run away. But the others said 'He came with us: how can we go away without him?' So they ran up to the Army camp and told the officer gentleman there. He had rushed them to the Police Station. The Police had gone to the Navy holiday Bungalow to see whether they had a boat. The Petty officer gentleman there took a lot of trouble to help us. The Army officer went swimming around looking for the boy, but he couldn't find him. Then a white gentleman and his lady came with their masks and he also looked for him. He came up, later, and told the lady he could not find him and that the water was too cold to swim in. She told him, 'If you cannot go in, I will.'

"But he went in again; and found him.

"He was a boy, but he helped us like a man. The doctor who examined him said, 'How difficult it must be for the mother - he is almost fully grown.'

"I went to meet the white man later. I took a tray of sweets, a packet of cigarettes and a box of matches, and twenty-five rupees. He took the cigarettes and the matches and told me to take the rest back"

A smile at the white man's gesture.

The heat smothers us and the fan, up above, whirrs on: industrious, impotent, futile.

THE POT OF GOLD

A letter to a young grand-niece in America

(Before you read this, let me tell you how I know. None of Peter's children - not your Aachchi, not Punchi Aachchi - knew this story. They only knew that Peter did not speak to them about his childhood or his parents or even about the house he had grown up in. Then, one day in the middle 1960s, Punchi Aachchi and I happened to be holidaying in Galle. Those holidays were great fun because the house full of children, and the big dining table was crammed full. Galle Muththa (Peter) was in a mellow moo, discussing the prices of fish and vegetables with Punchi Aachchi, because they both loved to bargain. I chipped in, saying that I couldn't be bothered about a small difference in prices. That touched a raw nerve. "You can say that", he said, "because you did not have to live with little money. I am like this because I had to manage with little money. Listen……"

Never before, and never again, did he tell this story).

This is the story of your great-grandfather, Peter, and his sister, your great-grandaunt Emily. It really starts with their parents: Simanhamy, their father and Sanchi, their mother, so I will begin with them.

Simanhamy was a gemmologist who was highly respected. His sister was married to Don Theodoris Weerasiri who had his own Jewellery firm. Simanhamy was a partner in the business, which had won awards at international exhibitions in Europe and even in America.

Anyway, Simanhamy was very clever, and made a lot of money but he was a *bit* too fond of whisky. Very often, he would come home, have one too many drinks and fall asleep before he could even change into his night clothes. Sanchi - clever as any wife - would then search his pockets. Because, inside them, she would find money, often find gold sovereigns. (These are almost pure gold coins minted in England which are still, melted down to make jewellery. Simanhamy always had some on him and the family believed he was paid in gold sovereigns.) But Sanchi did not use these to make jewellery for herself. She was collecting them against a rainy day. So she collected them till she had a whole lot of coins.

Then, one day, she called her daughter, Emily, to join her in a women-only secret. She had a clay pot which she showed Emily. “Now”, she said, “Some day it might be that we will be in need of money. It may not be soon, but when you have grown up. So I want this to be a secret between you and me. I – no, we – are going to bury this pot so that, when the bad times come, you or I will know where to find the money.” She showed the pot, which Emily saw was brimful of shiny silver rupee coins (a rupee, in Sri Lanka, is a coin that is like a dollar in America). So the two of them went to a particular spot in the house, removed a brick from the floor, dug a hole, buried the pot, covered it and put back the brick.

Some time later, Simanhamy died. They were comfortably provided even after that. Sanchi took over as head of the house and started to expand the house. It was she who completed the big Galle house in 1913. But soon after that, poor Sanchi also died, leaving the two children orphans (Emily may have been 9 or 10 and Peter about 7 or 8.)

The really sad part of their life began then. They were looked after by an Uncle who did not really like them, but because he could use their money as long as he looked after them. He was interested only in their money, not in them. So they lived with this Uncle and his wife for seven or eight years, till Peter was fifteen years old. Although they had had money when they were orphaned, the Greedy Uncle finished it little by little. The children were always being told that there was no more money to look

after them. Then he would take a piece of the jewellery that Simanhamy had made for Sanchi, or Emily, and sell it. But he could not sell the houses and lands because they had been willed to the children.

One such day, the greedy Uncle and Aunt took a necklace of Emily's to sell it. It was a string of matched pearls that Emily had been given as a birthday present. She begged of them not to sell it.

> "Oh! Please don't sell it!" she cried, "This is the last thing I have to remember my mother and father by".

But they only repeated:

> "We can't look after you, buy you clothes, give you to eat and send you to school if we don't have the money."

It was then that Emily remembered the pot of money Sanchi and she had buried years ago.

> "If you want money, I'll show you where it is – but you must give my necklace back to me" she said.

So the greedy pair followed her to the place where the money was. Emily knelt down, scraped round the brick, removed it, and dug up the pot. She could still see the silver rupees up to the brim. She stood up, holding the pot up high.

> "Here's your money!" she said,

- and dashed the pot on the floor!

Her heart sank! It was not silver rupees that the pot had been full of, but gold sovereigns that glittered and bounced and rolled all over the floor with the greedy pair scrambling after them. Sanchi had only covered the top of the pot with silver rupees.

Anyway, some good came of it because, for a couple of years, the children were looked after. But even a pot full of gold can become empty if not used wisely. So there came the day when the last of the sovereigns had been sold and bad times began again. The children were going to school at that time and the fees had to be paid regularly. In those days, if you did not pay your fees, you could not go to school. The greedy uncle paid the fees only once in a way, and that also, not in full. So day by day, the money that he owed the school became bigger and bigger. One day the Principal of Peter's school called him up and said that he could not come to school again till he had paid the fees.

Poor Peter! But Peter was not to be defeated. He set out to see whether he could find some money. You remember the Galle house that Sanchi built? Well, that had been given out on rent and that

was one of the ways in which money came to the greedy Uncle. (There were other houses, too, but this was the biggest.) So Peter went there, with his school books in hand, and asked to see the tenant, a Mr. De Silva. Now, Mr. De Silva was a very important man. He worked in the District Court as a Registrar and most people called him "*Kotuwey rajjuruwo" (the King of the Courts)*! That day, for some reason, he was going to Courts late and was seated outside, in the verandah pulling on his boots. He looked at his young visitor curiously.

"Good morning, Mr. De Silva" said the visitor

"Good morning to you, too, young man, and what brings you here today?"

"I've come for the house rent, Mr. De Silva", said Peter.

Mr. De Silva paused. There was something funny here, and he wanted to find out.

"I'm sorry, son, you know it is not due today and I don't have the money. But tell me……why are you not at school today? You have your books with you – you should be in class. Have you been skipping school?"

Peter was not annoyed. He was a good student, and he was desperately sad.

"No Mr. De Silva, it is not that. I go to school every day. But..but today..today I was told not to come till I can pay my fees. That's why I came here to collect the rent."

Mr. De Silva was a strict but kind man, who had children of his own. He was determined to get to the bottom of the story.

"Hmmm…. I don't have the money to give you now, but come here tomorrow at this time and I'll have it ready for you."

Peter had nothing to do but go home. But Mr. De Silva found a lot of things to do. As soon as he went to Courts, he called all the people who worked for him and gave them special work to do. One person was to find out all about the greedy Uncle. Another was told to find out about any other Uncles or Aunts of Peter and Emily. Still another was to find out the extent of property and wealth that they had. He, himself, telephoned the Principal of Peter's school and checked the story about the fees. He learnt that the boy was a clever student who studied hard.

When he found out all that, Mr. Silva asked the District Judge whether he could speak to him privately. In the Judge's Chambers (which is the word for a Judge's private office) Mr. Silva explained the

situation of Peter to the Judge and asked him for advice. The two of them examined the problem in detail and, finally, came up with an answer.

The next day – which changed Peter's life – Peter came to Mr. Silva's house at the correct time. Mr. De Silva was dressed and waiting for him.

> "Son, I now know how difficult things are for you. I am sorry I did not know this before, because I could have helped. Now, we are going to do something about it. But you have to make me a promise. You must give me your word that you will study hard and that you will carry out all the other work I am going to give you. And you must promise that you will look after your sister well, even if she is older than you. Don't worry; I will be keeping an eye on you. Do I have your word? Hmmm?"

Peter was bewildered. He could only nod, silently.

> "Right. Now get into the carriage with me. We are going to meet a very special person."

Mr. De Silva and Peter clip-clopped their way in his carriage to the District Court. There, they went into the Judge's Chambers, where the Judge, in wig and gown, was awaiting them.

> "Young man," said the Judge, "I've been hearing a lot about you. Now I want to hear all about this from your own lips. Tell me everything from the time your mother died"

Peter was scared, felt very lonely and tongue-tied. But Mr. De Silva spoke to him kindly and, finally, he found himself speaking.

The Judge listened carefully. When the story was over, he said:

> "Well, Peter, we are going to change all that. In future, you will not stay with your Uncle. We have found that you have another Uncle, a kind man though he is not wealthy. He has agreed to look after Emily and you. But even a good man can become greedy if he suddenly gets money. So all your parent's wealth and property will, in future, be controlled not by this Uncle, but by YOU. Today, even if you are only fifteen years of age, you are going to become a MAN. Now, stand up!"

Peter stood up. And so did the Judge himself, adjusting his wig and gown and assuming a solemn face.

> "By the powers given to me under the Law, I hereby proclaim you a MAN. You will be responsible for your own future and you will be responsible for your elder sister. You will have

to report to ME, in the Courts, how you spend money, how you look after your properties and how your sister and you are progressing in your studies. Do you understand? And do you agree?"

Peter nodded, nervously.

"Yes, Your Honour" he said.

The Judge called for an impressive looking document and, dipping his pen in the ink-well, signed the document which proclaimed that Peter Dantanarayana, 15 years old, was a major in the eyes of the law.

"Good luck, Mr. Dantanarayana, and May God bless you," he said.

Peter and Emily were sent to the home of the kind Uncle and back to school. He reported regularly to Courts, teaching himself to keep accounts and to stretch a rupee like rubber. He saw to his sister's education and, when it was time, helped her get married. But poor Emily died not long after. In time he graduated from University and worked as a teacher and Vice Principal of the very school where once he could not pay his fees. It was only after he died, that we knew the number of students he had helped financially in their times of need. He never talked of the good he did, or the hard times he had gone through – till a chance, flippant remark freed moved him to speak on that one and only day.

A PLACE OF REFUGE

["… oh, is he dead, then?/ My duty all ended"…?]

A quartet

Tap on the shoulder

Second chances

The cross on my shoulder

"Vultures….VULTURES!!"

1. TAP ON THE SHOULDER

A sudden, inky blackness. No reassuring star, no dim-lit lamp at a window. Driving along back roads of a totally unknown area, evening swiftly turning to night, the car abruptly died on me. No forewarning splutter or cough; no hiss, no judder. Just an unnerving, silent stop. Just this sudden darkness and the mocking shrilling of the cicadas - not the very stuff of confidence.

Something, though, had to be done. I conferred with Mervyn, seated by my side, but we could not come up with anything useful. Scratching my head for ideas, I turned off every light I could think of, and turned on the ignition key. But no ignition light came on, nor any sound of the starter motor. I switched on the headlights. Again, nothing. Asking Mervyn to keep a tight grip on the parking brake, I pulled open the bonnet lock, opened the door and carefully inched my way forward, clinging on to the car for reassurance. Opening the bonnet, I gingerly felt around for loose wires, but it was too risky. Then, from down the road, a small light appeared, coming towards us. Too small to show what was behind it, bobbing, wavering, flickering its was till it reached us. A little kerosene oil bottle-lamp with a naked flame. Behind it, a man from just beyond the bend in the road who had seen a car lights go off, and had come to investigate. Even with this speck of light, some confidence returned. It was risky, to take the naked flame inside the open bonnet. But "I had promises to keep", and few options. Taking the risk, I peered hopefully into the engine. Nothing wrong there, that I could see. What next?

By this time a few more people had materialized out of the darkness, and gathered round. "Let's give her a push", I said.

Getting behind the wheel, I switched on the engine again: still no ignition lights, no headlights. On an unknown, unseen road, I asked my unknown helpers to push the car and, taking my bearings from the little bottle lamp, I put her in second gear, got just enough motion, and let out the clutch. The engine roared into life, the lights blazed, and with that, much relief and smiles all round. We shouted our thanks to all our friends over the roar of the engine I kept racing. Mervyn and I looked at each other silently, each recognizing that we had received a summons.

"Let's get back," our eyes spoke to each other.

We reversed carefully in a tiny lane and went back. Back to the man who had reached out and tapped us on the shoulder.

Our mission had been a desperate one from the start: a quest for a night attendant who would look after a patient in hospital for a few days more. The man I called "Uncle" because he had been a close friend of my father was recovering from surgery, for cancer. His condition was terminal, but surgeons had felt it was justified, knowing that he wished to live a little bit longer to complete some task. Yesterday, he had been well enough to get of bed and joke with us about his experience. But today he had worsened and was, visibly, dying. His daytime attendant had completed his shift and gone home. His night attendant had kept away, sensing the inevitable. Asking from all and sundry, we heard of one who might be available, but who lived some distance off the main road. Leaving our families with the patient, Mervyn and I set out on our quest. Mervyn, native to the area, acted as navigator asking directions from people on the road, understanding the jargon of the Roman Catholic heartland we were in. But it was getting later by the half-hour, the light was fading faster and with it, the chances of finding a man who would take up an unenviable job at no notice whatsoever. We had been on a losing streak, anyway, when the car had stalled.

"Uncle" was a bachelor, full of new ideas, new enthusiasms, fond of thought and talk, one whom tuberculosis changed from school principal to chicken farmer. After my father died, he continued to be close to us, one of his many surrogate families. He was a delightful and provocative companion. Though my father's age, he could understand that we, whom he had known as kids, were now adults, and he talked to us as equals. A strange man in many ways much loved by us but warily and defensively reacted to by his own family. His life had been a fascinating roller-coaster ride. As a schoolboy, he had followed his "guru" from Galle in the very south, to Jaffna in the very north, and later, followed him across the strait to India. There, he contracted a heavy dose of Theosophy from Blavatsky and Krishmanurti , Education from Maria Montessori and others in the heady 1930s in "Rishi Valley", the Vatican of the Theosophists. The visual image of this beautiful retreat was to haunt him all his life. Lean and wiry, he had tramped the foothills of the Himalayas, where the disembodied "Masters" of the Theosophists exist, meeting and talking to many Indian Rishis along the way, but mainly, I think, for the sheer, physical joy of living. He qualified and worked as a teacher, noted as a fierce tiger in the Polo and Hockey fields, and called "Sher (Tiger) Perera" in admiration.

He came back, finally, still with the idealistic fires burning in him (they never left him) but disillusioned with the Theosophists. Like Krishnamurthy, himself, who cast aside the cloak of the Messiah they had dressed him in, but who continued to be a philosopher and thinker in his own right. Working as a school teacher and eventually a school principal, he was noted for his love of the arts, for encouraging creativity among his pupils. Involved with others at the cutting edge of the intellectual movement in the 1930's, idealism pervading every fibre of his body, he was fiercely loyal to his friends. From them he demanded no less.

It was in the midst of this, his most creative phase that tuberculosis had struck him. A dreaded disease then, he had to enter a sanatorium. Many of his 'friends' now stopped calling on him, relegating him to limbo, leaving him with a very, very few. Among them was my father. In the end, Uncle had a lung removed and was told to lead a physically active, outdoor life in a dry climate. Dedicated teaching, impassioned debate, the rough-and-tumble of the sports field, all these were now denied him.

But the challenge - to build a new life - he now took up.

And now, again, he was in hospital and this time, he knew, there would be no second chance. The few friends who had rallied round him during his last illness had gone, long before him. Only their children and the handful of younger, newer friends were there with him. He looked around, looking at their faces. Where was Mervyn? Where was Somasiri? There was something he wanted done. Why had they left him? Had they, also, deserted him? He was agitated, irritated. "Where's Somasiri?" He had gone to bring the attendant, someone said. "What's taking him so long? Tell him to come back! I must speak to him. Send him a message – get him back!" Others looked on speechlessly, trying to calm him. He called for a Nurse and dictated a letter to me.

He had relished the active life, after being so long an invalid, and the challenge it posed. Buying a tree-less, grassy knoll in Welimada, some acres in extent, he began again. He built himself a shack, then a little house of the sun-baked bricks he made himself, at the end of a curving drive, which he bordered with the infant Conifers and Tulip trees he had loved at "Rishi Valley". At the beginning it was a poor-looking plot, but he worked hard at it, and at his own rehabilitation. He planted some tea, vegetables and potatoes, kept some cattle, started a chicken-farm and became quite the enlightened farmer. The eggs from his chicken farm soon found a ready market in town and the buyers, knowing nothing of him, dubbed him "Kukul Perera". "Sher Perera" went underground, lurked in the shadows.

We would visit him from time to time and it was always an adventure. After an hour or two of talking and laughing, he would say:

"Hmm. No-ow……..let's see what we can find to EAT!!!"

But it was not in the larder that we searched. We would walk with him round the hillock, picking herbs and semi-wild vegetables, digging up some potatoes, visiting the hen-coops for freshly-laid eggs, the cattle shed where he would milk the cattle to churn the lovely, light butter he made. Lunch, eaten before a large picture window overlooking the rolling hills and pine forest, with cumulus clouds towering above them was, somehow, always delicious.

As the plantation prospered, and the conifers grew tall and, with them, the fruit trees he had planted, it became a "desirable property" and more friends and family began to visit him. It was then that we began to notice a change coming on, a strange thing we privately made fun of. He was generous in giving the fruits from his trees; but only he should pluck them. Nothing should be taken without asking him. With us, these idiosyncrasies didn't really matter, as we went up seldom and he was more often down with us. But of his nephews and nieces, our schoolboy sons who spent holidays with him in a pack, and even friends and neighbours who visited him of an evening or spent long spells with him - he was hospitable, but watchful. Even a chance remark: "Isn't all this work tiring for you?", or "Mmmm…the avocados are coming on nicely!" would make him suspect someone was trying to take something – particularly the property – away from him. Generous in giving, he was ferocious in protecting. "Sher Perera" had moved to only one step behind "Kukul Perera"!

Lacking neighbours who were attuned to his intellect, he would visit us in Colombo for "large releases of talk" as he put it. We would talk almost the whole night through – about Krishnamurti, the newest stage-plays and books, dialectical materialism, astrology, poetry, the adventure of growing things, the problem his cow had in calving, his relations with the villagers nearby. Little by little, more mundane things, niggling criticisms, began to creep in: the thanklessness of the villagers, a friend's wife who cast a 'calculating' eye on the avocados, and family members who were waiting in the wings for him to die, to inherit the land. Some once-good friends became suspect. We put it down to the aging process, even when it became embarrassing. One day, when one of us got a garbled Police message about a death – that <u>might</u> have been his – we mobilized all our friends and official contacts to visit his house and see whether the message was about him. He met them with unbridled ferocity: "Vultures! VULTURES!" he fumed. "You can't even wait till I am dead! You are all trying to kill me!" – immediately assuming that family members had hatched a plot to get his land – and it took our personal explanations to calm him down. Ownership of land had unleashed the tiger. By this time he had traded his chicken farming to potato farming: so perhaps "Kukul Perera" had retired!

Even when the property became too much for him he still held on grimly to it - his trump card. He would still checkmate his family who, he firmly believed, were "waiting like vultures" for the land. He sold the now beautiful land to a local man, and retired to Colombo, to live among the last few friends.

Colombo brought out the other man in him. He was back among his intellectual equals. The suppressed philosopher-poet emerged. He would drop in and stay some days with us, and we found books that spoke to him. Robert Gibbings' "Sweet Thames Flow Softly", Kalil Gibran's "The Prophet", Robert Frost's poems. He would copy out verses from various sources that articulated something in him. He would recall sitting in his house, watching the winds sway his beloved conifers and seeing in them the graceful pirouettes of the "Bharatha Natyam" dancers. Of Krishnamurti, the philosopher, with whom he took us to share an evening of meditation.

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But, unknown to us, he was wilting under the weight of a cross he had chosen to bear: the care of a schizophrenic nephew, orphaned in childhood and haphazardly brought up by the extended family. Uncle was the only

adult in that family who had no-one but himself to look after. When? Why? I did not know. Whatever the reasons, Uncle decided to give his nephew another chance in life. He was no longer a boy, but a fifty years old man, who had thrown away a chance to study, and abruptly left the country to build up a life in England. Many years after, his schizophrenia had worsened; he had abandoned all his labours and had been brought back home. Withdrawn. Uncommunicative. Totally unconcerned with himself. Why did Uncle feel responsible for him? We could only speculate, as this was something he did not talk about. Perhaps it was compassion; perhaps family pressure. He had tried to rehabilitate him on the farm, but failed. Now, in Colombo, no longer able to do much more, he had him admitted by Courts to a sanatorium, with himself as the guardian and administrator. He had discovered that the nephew had respectable assets in England which was trying to have repatriated so that he could set up a Trust for him The work was coming to an end, and Uncle wanted to prolong his life just long enough to set it up. As always, he decided alone. One day he called me, explained his plan, made me a signatory to the Bank Account through which the nephew's hospital bills were paid, and entered hospital.

But the gamble had not paid off. And now, he was dying, and his task yet undone. Impatient, irritated, he called for me again. Upset at our delay, he called a Nurse and dictated a letter to me. Perhaps it was then that the car stalled: to Mervyn and I, it was clear that our quest was ended. So, when he looked at me questioningly, my eyes just said "Yes". We turned round and drove back knowing, even without talking, what we were going back for.

Our arrival was welcomed with relief by our families and with more than relief by Uncle. He quieted down and the irritation that had driven him disappeared. Calling the Nurse, he asked for his letter and asked me to read it. It was a set of instructions how his few assets were to be disposed, but that I had to do this without telling anybody, least of all the beneficiaries. But he had held on so long and irritably because he wanted to ask me something more. Motioning me to bend down, he whispered, "After this, will you look after Wimal?"

This, I was not prepared for.

Who was Wimal to me and who was I to him? Did I want to be saddled with the cross he was shifting onto my shoulders? Am I his nephew's keeper? No way! But….. what alternative was there? What answer could I honestly give this dying man? Questions and doubts crossed and ricocheted in my mind, compressing infinity into a split second. And, without pause, I knew there was only one thing I could say. My life had prepared me for only this answer, hard even to articulate.

"Yes, Uncle, don't worry".

He relaxed then, at peace at last. In the last few minutes remaining, life draining from his body, he spoke a little: about himself, somewhat wryly. Stitching past and present together he murmured, "When I had tuberculosis…..it was your father ….and now….you, you…..". Sentence unfinished, holding my hand, he died.

The cross settled itself comfortably, heavy, on my shoulder.

2. SECOND CHANCES

"Welcome to Pu'uhonua O Honaunau, the Place of Refuge of Honaunau, the sanctuary that provided people with a second chance for life itself … "

Carefully modulated words spoken by a young Hawaiian girl of the National Parks Service. She was addressing us, a not-unusual multi-national group on an end-of-conference tour.

"You will wonder who sought refuge here, and what danger faced them. In the old Hawaiian way the danger they feared was Death itself and what they sought was a second chance for Life …"

I'd heard such words – or something like them – before, hadn't I? I knew I had, but the memory was too vague to disturb me. Besides, on this sunny-drizzly morning, and being on holiday, too, there was no great compulsion for me to dredge the recesses of my mind.

"In the old days, every action was ruled by kapu, the sacred laws. The kapu laws were all embracing: you could not get close to a chief, touch his possessions, or even let your shadow fall on his palace grounds. There were kapu rules for everyday activities, too. Women couldn't eat certain foods that were reserved for offerings to the gods; they couldn't prepare meals for men or even eat with them. And to promote life, kapu laws strictly controlled the seasons for fishing, for taking animals, and for gathering timber. The laws were to protect the community from the wrath of the gods, who were many, and easily offended …"

As were all the world's gods, I thought irreverently.

"Whatever the kapu law that was broken – however small the act itself – the penalty was the same. Death. By breaking the law, the kapu breaker was calling upon the community the wrath of the gods: tidal waves, lava flows, famines, earthquakes. So it was every man's duty to kill the offender, before the gods became angry. He might be your best friend, but you had to put the community before your friendship. And so, the offender had to literally run for his life, with the whole community chasing after him, with only one thought in mind: to kill him …

But – and this is what's important – he had somewhere to run to. He ran, swam, climbed, to this place, to the Pu'uhonua, the place of refuge. There were many such places in the islands, in the old days. If he came here, if he got here before his pursuers, he was safe. Here, the rule of the kahuna pule, the priest, was supreme. No one, not even the supreme chief could enter the Pu'uhonua. And the priest alone could intercede with the gods, and perform a ceremony of absolution. The kapu breaker was then granted a new life and walked out a new man, washed clean of all his sins …"

Something – a memory? - tugged at my consciousness. Was it a parallel with the Roman Catholic ritual of penance and absolution? No; too far off the mark. It had been something much more personal, something I had experienced, that had shocked me. What was it?

"… In time of war, when the object was to exterminate every man, woman and child on the enemy side, the Pu'uhonua was there to serve every one who could not fight and save themselves. Non-combatants, and even defeated warriors, could seek sanctuary here …"

Key words – 'non-combatants', 'defeated warriors' – shocked open the lock-gates of memory. Suddenly I knew the face of the devil riding my back. Caught up by a flood of memory, I was swept away from the Pu'uhonua O Honaunau to another, unlikely Pu'uhonua – to one man's place of refuge in my own country, far away.

* * * * *

I first met Wimal when we were both seven or eight years old. He and his brother were holidaying with their uncle, whom my siblings and I, too, called 'Uncle' though we were not related. Wimal and I played together for a day or two, and then the two boys went back home. I remembered him as someone whom I knew existed, but had no part in my life. Not for fifty years or so, at the end of which we were suddenly, forcibly, thrown together to act out the last scenes of his life.

During those fifty years, I led what must have been a very ordinary existence. I grew up, went from school to University, worked at many jobs, married, had children, and lost my father and mother, all in due time. Nothing dramatic. What happened to him was very different. He was still a child when both his parents had died, suddenly, catastrophically. The orphaned brothers were brought up by their extended family and shuttled from one household to another amidst much bickering. No one accepted responsibility for them, they never belonged wholly to anyone, there was 'no still point in their turning world'. All this affected Wimal, de-stabilized him. A good student at school, he had been accepted for Medical school when, suddenly, it all seemed to become too much for him. He had reached the point when the road diverged in the wood: – and he chose 'the one less travelled '. Wimal left the country for England and – then what? He passed out of the niche he had long occupied on the periphery of my consciousness, into a total limbo.

Years later, I heard that he had come back. Not the same man who had gone away, but a person no longer in control of himself, schizophrenic, depressed, withdrawn. His relatives had brought him – I don't know how – back to his village and to his family, such as it was. And so, fifty years later, I glimpsed him for the second time. Once again we were visiting our Uncle – at his farm, up in the hills. Wimal was there: his fits of depression and violence had become too much for the family in the village, and Uncle had brought him here, to the farm. We only had glimpses of him on that occasion: he kept away from company, and we respected his wish for privacy. After decades, a chance encounter during childhood was too tenuous a link to presume intimacy.

However, even the peace of Uncle's farm brought Wimal no peace, and he was soon back in the village. Again, not for long: his violent spells were becoming increasingly frequent. His relations could not manage him, and the older relations once again called on Uncle to do something.

Uncle, however, was ageing. He sensed that he could not carry the sole responsibility for Wimal for long, and took his problem to the courts. It was decided that Wimal should be warded in

a hospital for the mentally ill, with his uncle as legal guardian and trustee of his estate. Once again, Wimal passed out of our world and into another.

One day, Uncle came to me with a large bundle of papers and asked my help to sort them out. His intuition told him they were important but they were incomprehensible to him. I was, then, a stockbroker, and I saw that they were letters – many of them still unopened, and in their envelopes – from reputed companies and a Bank in England. They had all to be painstakingly checked. After much poring over and sorting, a coherent picture began to emerge. So, also, did some understanding of Wimal's life in England – what he had been doing, how he had lived, worked, and tried to provide for his own future. Holding a modest civil service job, he had started buying blue-chip shares – buying only, not speculating – and investing in Trusts. He had a current account in a respectable Bank. These were all signs of a rational individual who had been systematically planning for a time when his savings would be his refuge.

Then suddenly, something had snapped: once again, the path he had chosen had gone full circle and brought him back to the beginning. Falling ill, he had had to be brought home, leaving behind him all he had achieved. The letters that kept following him he had left unopened, until they were bundled together by somebody else.

It was this bundle that Uncle handed to me. The letters were many years old, their envelopes dusty and stained, and mute evidence of their long neglect in some old box. The letters inside, however, were startling. Did Wimal really possess so much wealth? Together, Uncle and I wrote to the various companies and Trusts, and the replies started trickling in. The Bankers confirmed that Wimal's account was current and that, over the years, his holdings had grown. He was, we learned, a wealthy man by the standards of our country, and yet he was living out the remainder of his life in the confines of an asylum.

I did not realize, then, that I had taken on much more than an exercise, more than a challenge to my professional ability, and more than a favour for Uncle. I realized it only when the work was over, when I had come to know Wimal as I had never known him before: as a man who had been trying hard to exorcise his demons.

A deep sadness welled up in me, but I was not to know I had reached a turning-point in a road. Like Wimal.

Uncle began planning for Wimal's future, trying to complete the work his nephew had abandoned. He wanted to liquidate his nephew's assets and set up a Trust on his behalf. First, however, he had to be officially recognized as Wimal's guardian by the London Court of Protection. The solicitor representing him seemed to be taking too long. I tracked down the offending lawyer while I was on a visit to England, fired him and retained another who, very competently and with little fuss, completed the matter. But, even before Uncle had learned that the Court had accepted his application, matters took an urgent, dramatic turn. He was diagnosed with intestinal cancer. Though his condition near terminal he had only opted for surgery to live long enough to set up the Trust. It was no answer. Dying, with his task still undone, he asked me to take over from him as guardian of his nephew.

The wheel had come full circle – childhood playmate-for-a-day, disturbed adult, a man re-discovered through bankers, brokers, lawyers; and, now, my ward. And so, duly installed as trustee and legal guardian, I had to go before the London Court to set in progress the liquidation of the estate. Finally, the shares and trust units were sold and the proceeds invested in Treasury Bills.

The work was complete. What Wimal and Uncle, each in his own way, had tried to do, had been done.

3. CROSS ON MY SHOULDER

The Trust was only a little part of the legacy I had inherited, however unwillingly. The larger part was the trauma of being guardian to a man. I had accepted trustee-ship of more than just an estate: I now had a Ward, a Man to look after. I did not relish it, but I had to meet him, introduce myself, get to know him as a man. I decided to, first, meet his Psychiatrist and ask her about his condition.

"Physically," she said," he is fit but, you know don't you, that he is schizophrenic?"

"Yes", I said, "but I have only a vague idea about schizophrenia. What does it really mean?"

She explained it in layman's terms, and added, ".....but there is no need to go into all it can mean. He is now under medication and is not violent. He is allowed to walk around the hospital grounds

and is in a ward with about eight others. He seems content and even happy in hospital. Do you know what made him that way?"

"No, but...." and I told all that I knew of him and how I came to be his guardian. She was full of sympathy for my Ward. And, for me.

"Go and see him. Perhaps you will understand what happened……" As I rose to go, she continued,"…..You know, you have taken on a lifetime's work. People like him, living in a world without responsibility and stress, tend to live very long - maybe longer than you. Keep in touch with me."

I did as she told me to. He was in a ward, which was like a large-ish house, but laid out like a hospital ward. I had asked at the hospital office about him and they knew him very well.

"He walks about every day and is a great talker: A bit boastful too! Says he was in Medical School and could have been a doctor here, not a patient." They were shocked when I told them this was true.

As I entered the ward, a cheerful, doddering patient made a beeline for me. Could this be he? I shrank. Oh, god, please, no!

"Aaah uncle, you have come! Come, come, will you. Here, you all, see will you, my uncle has come to see me! So how? What did you bring?"

A hospital attendant appeared and rescued me. "Don't worry, sir, he's okay. No one visits them and so they get excited". I told him my mission and he took me to my Ward.

"Here's someone to see you" he said, and left. I was on my own.

He was different from what I had, unconsciously, expected. Seated on his bed, quietly, doing nothing. I had to introduce myself. Well-spoken, but in monosyllables, he said he knew me as his guardian. There was no reaction when I mentioned our long-ago meeting. Dark. A beard of sorts. Looking down at the floor, volunteering nothing.

Making conversation was hard, not only because of him but because of me, too. I did not know what to say, was all knotted up inside. It was a diffident nervousness, though, and not a fear-related one. I sensed that here was, really, a man in control of himself. I tried several ways of starting a conversation.

"They tell me it's O.K. for me to take you out. You can come with me for a week-end. Will you?"

We were seated side-by-side on his bed. He turned his head away from me and I heard a long, modulated humming noise going on for a long time and realized, with a shock, that it was he who was making it: his jaws were moving inside his closed mouth. I couldn't understand what was happening - not then. Just when I thought he had forgotten me, had shut himself off, he turned round and said, clearly, articulately,

"No, I'm happy here".

I tried another tack. How were they treating him? Was he getting his food? Was his laundry being done? All his answers were positive. He had no complaints. What does he do to occupy himself?

"I walk around the gardens."

Each time, before he replied me, he turned away and started the humming. Realization dawned: the man was communing with himself, talking, consulting the other man in him. Here was no "madman", but an intelligent one with his wits about him but who had, deliberately, pushed his intellect into a closet and locked the door. He alone went there and communed with himself, when he wanted to. For the rest of the world, he played the Fool. Sure, now, of his intelligence and understanding, I tried to tell him about his investments in England and what was being done about them. He was not interested and did not respond.

But, if he was intelligent, surely there must be some intellectual exercise he needed? I played my last trump:

"Do you like to read? I can bring you some books "

Again he turned away and communed with himself. This time he did not take so long.

"Yes, I like to read."

Breakthrough! I thought.

"What kind of thing would you like? Novels, travel, something serious? Tell me."

He took his time. It was a long time. Finally, he spoke,

"Anything. It doesn't matter".

It was as if a door had been closed. It was, clearly, time for me to go.

"I'm going now, but I'll come again. We'll go out for the day and I promise to bring you back, here, in the evening. O.K.?"

He consulted himself again and delivered his longest speech.

"No. It is good here. I am happy here. I don't want to go out. Here, I am safe."

Black depression clutched me. Not mere depression, but weariness with this whole empty world. Here was a man, intelligent, moral, who had consciously, by an act of absolute will, decided that enough was enough. Decided, deliberately, to stop the world and get off. The hospital to him was no prison.

It was a place of refuge.

4. **"Vultures!..... *VULTURES!!.....*"**

But Wimal lost even that refuge. The building he had been housed in was to be renovated and he was re-located in a common ward. Lacking even the privacy he sought, he caught an infection and, quite contrary to the Psychiatrist's expectations, died.

But my duty had not ended. It had all happened when I was out of the country. The Sanatorium had sent me a telegram, asking me to identify the body and take it over. My wife, who opened it, had never seen Wimal; nor could she do anything, as she had no standing in law. Somehow, she had tracked down some of Wimal's relations who identified him took over the funeral arrangements. I was told all this only on my return.

I was angry with myself. Perhaps irrationally, I felt I had betrayed a trust. Unwillingly had I shouldered the cross, but I was not ready for it to be snatched away before I was willing to lay it down. Perhaps I could have done something if I had been in the country? Questions rose tumbling into my mind. I kept trying to piece together the last scene. The missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle was Wimal's only sibling, his brother Sunil. Sunil, whom Uncle had written out of the equation *(Why?);* who had never tried to meet me *(Why?)*, and been content to live out a life of mediocrity away from the disturbing presence of his brother. But, since it was the family that had arranged the funeral he must, surely, have come?

"Did Sunil come?" No, he had not but, unexpectedly, his wife's sister had. He had not talked about the death to anyone in the family, I thought. So Sunil had deliberately given the funeral a miss! Wimal dead was better than Wimal alive. Sunil would now inherit Wimal's share of the family lands: Wimal's only legacy he was aware of. I had to make certain that he did not know of his other legacy. My anger at myself I now turned against him – how *dare* he reject his brother, even in death?

Let him wait, let him wait. I was still Wimal's guardian. *(Was "Sher Perera" driving me from the grave?)*

It was imperative that I wind up his affairs now, present a statement of accounts, hand-over the monies to Courts, and ask to be released from my task. His Treasury Bonds had, first, to be liquidated and brought back home. Time was running out, as I was due to take up a job abroad but, on the other hand, it would be easier to attend to all that from there. The income tax laws here did not permit me to receive a considerable sum from abroad, unless I had earned it. I took up my job, opened a Bank account there, and sent the Death Certificate and other documents to my Solicitor in England authorizing him to present the matter before Court. As before, he was prompt. The Courts

decreed that the Bonds be sold and the proceeds sent to me, as beneficiary. Wimal's assets, (much greater than mine), were now mine, legally, and were credited to my Bank Account. I could bring it back home as part of my earnings, and transfer it to his Savings Account. These moves had to be kept secret: particularly from Sunil.

Back home, again, Wimal's money was duly transferred to his Savings Account. A statement of accounts drawn up and I needed a lawyer to wind up affairs. I went back to the one who had moved Court to appoint me guardian and trustee. A courtly, elderly man, experienced in this line of work and very, very, correct, he had been Uncle's lawyer. I had met him from time to time when Wimal had been alive, and now I brought him up to date. He fetched his own file and read both through, absorbing past fact and present realities. He took his time. Finally, leaning back in his chair, taking off his glasses, he asked me:

"So you want me to inform Court that your Ward is dead, and that you want to be released from your trusteeship?"

"Yes".

"But the Court will see, from the Death Certificate that he died some time ago. What can we say?"

"The truth. What else? I could not make up the Statement of Accounts till the London Courts had authorized the sale of assets and the transfer of monies to me. And I was not even in the country then. All Court and Solicitor's letters are here."

"So you have drawn up the accounts? Yes? Let me see them."

Putting on his glasses, he went over my statement with great concentration. One again, he leant back, took off his glasses, and looked past me, to some point over my shoulder, with a faraway look in his eyes, and in silence.

"This is a considerable sum, you know. Hardly anyone gives money like this to Court. Court does not audit your accounts. You can even say that all the money was spent, and Court would accept that. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"Yes, I know. But this is all Wimal's money. I want no part of it. The Court gave the little money in his Savings Account to me and asked me to look after him and render an accounting. Now he is gone, and I must give his savings back to Court."

"Not so fast, not so fast! Let me ask you…….you got all this money from England after he died. So who paid his bills and looked after his expenses while he was alive?"

"Well…….I suppose I did".

"But you have not reimbursed yourself for all that in your accounts. And another thing: Court expects you to cost your services, too, and include that in the statement."

"I… didn't know those things. What I have done is to make an Income and Expenditure account like I am used to."

"Well, go home, and do this again, and account for everything, not only his moneys in England and the hospital costs. We'll meet again…mmm…Tuesday, alright by you?"

So I went back, made up a more realistic statement, leaving out only one single item, and took it to him, on Tuesday.

"It's OK now" he said, glancing over it. "I'll attend to it tomorrow."

"But I've left a space unfilled." I said, "For your fees."

He smiled at me. "When you have lived as long as I have, you learn a lot along the way. I understood you when we spoke the other day. No, there will be no fee due to me."

"But……"

"No buts. Just humour an old man, will you?"

The Courts accepted my statement and the Savings Book and released me of my trustee-ship. I held on to the many files on the matter. I knew that, one day or another, the Vultures would come.

It took them about six months. It was late one evening; dark enough to have the lights on, when there was knocking on the door. I opened it and a woman, wailing and crying her heart out stumbled in, followed by a shame-faced Sunil. When the wailing had subsided into sobs, then to sniffles and finally stopped altogether, the story spilled out:

"Oh! poor, poor Wimal. We didn't know anything, all these days, only yesterday".

It was Sunil's wife who spoke, not Sunil, and I knew that she had choreographed the farce. I was in no forgiving mood.

"But your sister was at the funeral. Don't tell me she didn't tell you?"

The only answers were rambling accounts of the difficulties they were facing, how far away from Colombo they worked, how he was unfairly treated in his workplace (this, from Sunil), how they did not move closely with his family.

"But, Sunil, you knew your Uncle is dead, you knew Wimal was in hospital. Why didn't you go to see him, even once?"

"I could not come, but I heard of him from some people. I knew you had been made his guardian and that he was in good hands"

"Then you should have at least written to me, asking about Wimal, even if you could not come. How could you have cut him off so completely?"

His wife took over with her litany of woes, sparing him the need to answer. It was getting late and the million-dollar question had not been asked: I had given no opening. Finally, the question was forced out of Sunil.

"Are you still the guardian? Can you tell Courts that I am next-of-kin and can attend to anything left? He had a Savings Account and some Fixed Deposits, I know"

"Oh no, Sunil, I am not his guardian – I can't be. He is no longer living, you know. I asked Courts to relieve me and handed over his savings and deposits. They are all in Courts now and……"

"You must have told Courts about me?" he interrupted, anxiously.

"No. I did not name you next-of-kin. I didn't know where you were. I had no address for you: I didn't know even whether you were alive – I have not heard of you for at least fifteen years, and you had not even visited your brother or uncle. So I said to Court that I was not aware of any next of kin."

He understood me then.

"Can I re-open the case? Where are the files?"

"I don't know. A lawyer dealt with all that. And maybe he has them. I don't have anything. It was a task I undertook at your uncle's deathbed. There have been two deaths and I was glad to be rid of the task before there was a third death – mine."

The hint was taken, but they couldn't leave without asking: "If you find something, you'll tell us, won't you?"

I needed a stiff drink, that night, to wash away my anger, the lies uttered, the charades enacted, and the memory of the vulture picking at the offal.

A month later, the scavenger returned. Sunil, only, this time – his wife's part as hired mourner was over and done with. I stuck to my story of having no documents, no dealings with Court. We talked of other things: he about his work as a teacher whose exceptional qualities were unrecognized and I about the dead Uncle. I offered to put him in touch with the lawyer, but he showed no great interest. Something told me that he had done his homework, was playing with me and that I would see him again.

See him I did, not much later. Again, the talk was general, but he let slip that he had spoken to some workers in the Court Registrar's Office who had told him that the case could be re-opened if only I would write to Courts saying Sunil was the next-of-kin. But that was impossible, I told him, because that would contradict my statement to Court and, besides, I did not even remember the number of the case. He had sniffed blood and the trail had led him to the Registrar's Office. A bribe had, obviously been demanded – this visit was to check whether he could get it done without paying it. The price must have been steep! He would be back.

And he was. This time, armed with the case number. I was not yet willing to give him anything. But I was being worn down by his persistence, and my anger, too, was waning. Why was I flagellating myself? After all, the money was his, in law. Why should I worry about it? Hadn't I punished him enough? The time had come, I recognized, for me to lay down the cross. I told him that I would get in touch with the lawyer, myself, and see what could be done. He departed, satisfied, promising to come on the day I stipulated.

Telephoning the lawyer in advance, I took all the files and had a conference with him. He was much frailer than when I had met him last. I told him the whole story, asked him to file a motion if Sunil wanted him to and charge him for all the work he had done so far. But he should maintain that all the files had been with him and, in any case, I didn't want them back.

Sunil arrived on time. My message was simple: I gave him the lawyer's address and said that he could re-open the case, if Sunil would meet him and establish his kinship with Wimal. And that, as far as I was concerned, was that.

But Sunil would telephone me, sometimes complaining that the lawyer was slow, and that Court was slow, too. And then – like in an Agatha Christie story – the third death occurred – not mine, but the lawyer's. I genuinely grieved for him and my advice to Wimal – over the phone – was to go to his junior.

*****

About a year later, while walking somewhere, I met Sunil. We stopped and chatted awhile. He had changed lawyers, he said, though it had taken time and cost him quite a bit. But, in the end, the Courts had awarded him the money. He said all this without gloating: there even seemed to be a hint of sadness.

And, within me, I felt emptiness. And shame.

THE SUBURBS OF THE MIND

Looking back at his University days across a comfortable distance in time and space, he would only see those images that memory had chosen to retain and embellish. Bright, familiar, and reassuring they were, and he found in them the comfort of the bed-time stories of childhood. Like the dog, going round and round his place of rest before curling up, with a sigh, to sleep. But that understanding came later. Afterwards. Many years after the curtain had come down on the last scene, when he had tried to probe, excise the residuary hurt. By then, he was sure of nothing: certainly not of memory. So at the end, this is how Gamini came to re-see it.

* * *

The University was the nursery of his late adolescence. Fresh out of school, he was exploring the horizons of a freedom beyond the family. Relishing the company of peers, the exposure to radical new thinking; trying to argue and defend, deep into the night, the rightness of one's own prejudices; debating emerging political problems; yet indulging in rambunctious schoolboy escapades. And, providing a subtle counterpoint to this wild, exultant peal of the jazz trumpet was the more serious life in the lecture halls, the tutorial classes and the libraries.

The University, too, was passing through a rite of passage of its own, pulling up roots and moving into the Promised Land. The new, "purpose-built" site was picture-postcard beautiful, with imposing buildings on different levels of the rolling hillocks bordering the river, winding roads and

secluded parks. A newness, and a delicious nip in the crisp, resinous-tangy air, which Gamini drank in deeply following, with relish, the cool shock of it passing through the warmth of the spaces inside him. The residential Halls were not yet fully furnished and the grounds yet in the landscapers' hands; so making the rooms habitable, blazing new footpaths through the yet unturfed hillsides, testing out newly-acquired rain-coats, laughing with loud in joy in the heavy rain, brought him new sensations; brought out the schoolboy barely under the skin of the undergraduate. The place was full of "possibilities" and Gamini saw himself as one of a band of pioneers in a promised land.

All this, part of the palimpsest that was to be his later, unconsciously edited, memories.

* * *

Making new friends among girls was not easy for Gamini. A few he knew already, though not really well. Many he wanted to get to know but a shell of deep shyness and a fear of rejection inhibited him. Fond of fun and at ease with all once he got to know them, yet quiet and introverted by himself, he was at his most relaxed and gregarious when he was one of a crowd, not obliged to take the initiative. Still only discovering himself, the fear of rebuff stalked each botched conversational gambit, haunting him. He was attracted to many girls, but found it difficult to start a casual conversation. And so, it happened that Rosemary spoke to him before he could steel himself to speak to her, however much he had wanted to. They were taking the same courses and once they started talking to each other, they often swam into each other's ken.

* * *

He did, eventually, make friends with other girls but Rosemary remained the one he felt happiest with. With others, he still tended to move with the herd, as it were, to shy away from close person-to-person contact and from serious discussion. With Rosemary - more outgoing and self-possessed - Gamini felt very different. Her closest friends were not always with her, did not share the courses she and Gamini took, and they often met up with each other going to and from lectures: sometimes they were even in the same small tutorial groups and would walk back together.

They were, then, simply two persons, equal and unhampered by invisible barriers or absent friends.

They would talk of things that interested them, on which they disagreed and which were – surprisingly – many. Of other people. About themselves, critically and mock-seriously trying to gauge each other. She, thought Gamini, was in search of a something. He did not know what; never thought she could be on her own voyage of self-discovery. Gamini liked the way she wore her hair short and natural, her wide-set grey eyes, the *gamine* in her and what he thought was an unwillingness to bow down to the commonplace. With his in-built inhibitions, his moods swung between the serious and the frivolous. Rosemary sensed the seriousness behind the mood-swings and tried to bring him down to earth, to make him look himself in the face, to ask him what made him like that.

They never did any other things together. They would just walk and talk along the way from the Halls to classes, mildly amusing their friends. They, themselves, just liked each other, enjoyed being together.

In the fragility of his innocence, Gamini was vulnerable. He was obsessed with the nature of his feelings towards her. Insecurity made him anchor himself to her existence for support, made him increasingly dependent on this relationship to sustain; to provide him with a focal point in life.

"Am I in love with her?" he constantly asked himself. In bouts of loneliness and introspection he believed he was. But, when the sun was shining and he was pleased with himself for some reason, when "God was in heaven and all was right with the world" - then, he was not certain. These swings were common but, underneath, he knew his feelings for her were out of the ordinary. She was necessary for him. Her very presence, even merely seeing her, became a friable thing of value, to be nurtured. Something he could not do without. Still, a fear of rejection often made him gauche in her presence.

Seeing her walking ahead of him with a friend, he slows down and falls back for fear that he might appear presuming a non-existent intimacy, of risking losing her friendship. Seeing him, sensing his hesitation, Rosemary looks back and stops, to let him catch up with her. So, quite unknown to Gamini, in the relationship she is not only equal partner but completely in control.

Soon, Gamini needs to see her every day. If they have not walked together for classes, he watches for her coming, waiting for her to search him out in the back rows from among his friends and to exchange a look that – he thinks – means: "Yes, I've come. I'm here." Completely transparent, his obsession is apparent to his friends but, in spite of their jokes Gamini tries to, has to, balance his need for her existence against his fear of rejection.

The tension is obvious to Rosemary, who tries to make him relax, be himself. Getting him to talk, posing probing questions. Talking him to accompanying her somewhere, she asks:

"Today you are so natural with me. Sometimes you look at me as if you don't know me. You seem another person, then. Why?" He has no reply. Cannot articulate: "I thought you did not want me to speak to you - you were with your friends - they might have laughed. I am afraid of that, of losing you." Believing that if he speaks of his feelings for her, that would surely be the end: he is so sure she would reject him. And so he continues balancing, balancing; treading softly, softly.

But adolescence, and undergraduate days are fleeting and must end. The last few months loomed and, to Gamini, so did the question: the relationship he had nourished, which had sustained him for three years - what of it now? After the Finals would come the Dispersal: dispersal of all the "pioneers" of the Promised Land, and a new life for each one of them. With Time's winged chariot hurrying near, he has to make a move, to end the eternal balancing act between hope and despair, to learn to take a fall. Now, convinced that he is in love, he wills in himself a readiness to face the *denouement*, to stake his all on one throw. To make his pitch, to hear the answer he has put off hearing these long years, and to find a way to handle it. For the end of the unbroken succession of tomorrows is near.

And so he choreographs what, he believes, is to be the last Act of all.

* * *

Almost at the end of the last term, he asked her out - to a film - and she said, simply, yes. It was the first time he had asked her out. Such an invitation after all the years would have forewarned her. He, in his intensity, did not consider this. In the dark he reached for her hand. She let it lie in his, made no big scene. Leaning towards him she whispered:

" Gamini, why are you doing this?"

" I'm not flirting with you, Rosie. I love you."

The carefully prepared words. Love recognizes no clichés.

She smiled slightly but shook her head gently, letting him hold her hand longer, making the rejection as gentle as possible. As always, in control. Walking back, for the first time between them, talking becomes difficult, awkward and stilted. He tries to find out "Why?" but surely, there could be no words to answer this? There are only desultory, meaningless words to be batted to and fro to cover the last few yards of their former relationship. And so, at the turn-off to her Hall, they say their last "good nights".

In the days following he found it difficult to act naturally with her and it fell to her, again, to urge him to a semblance of normalcy. As with the first words, hers were to be the last.

The examinations came soon after and, after that, the Dispersal. The Promised Land passed on to the next generation.

* * *

Back with their families, and Gamini with a job away from the city, separate lives commenced. There was no longer the daily eye-contact, nothing they shared and the drifting apart widened. For a while they wrote short notes and, occasionally, when he was in the city, he dropped in to see her. They went their separate ways since whatever there had been had gone out of their friendship. Some time later, she married and, not long after, left the country to settle in England.

* * *

Gamini, too, married. Married life was good for him. For the first time, he experienced the reality of a personal happiness. Something that just doesn't happen but has to be worked for. Work, too, made him different. He found he could both follow and lead and found take "the path less traveled by"; to work with hands and mind, to savor different options available - to dive, to fly, to carve, to draw, to write. A different Gamini emerged.

And then, in his mid-forties, he retired early and entered mercantile service The early years of this, too, he enjoyed, as creative planning and achievement was possible. Later its seamier side became too much for him, and the suppressed idealist in him competed with the need for security. The inevitable tensions followed, made him unhappy, unhealthy and, finally, sustained by a concerned family, he opted out in his mid-fifties. Taking on less well-paying work, he sought a therapy in study, researching an area that had fascinated him for long: nervously at first but with

growing confidence. It was then that Fortune smiled on him. His new interest gave him the chance of an extended stay in England doing just the sort of thing he had long wanted to, researching for himself, not answerable to anybody, just for his own sheer pleasure.

England's fascination for Gamini was a 'generation thing'. His own had had a colonial background and, both reading and study made England fascinating yet familiar. To see England for the first time, even at this age and alone was, to him, a chance not to be missed. He had many contemporaries, family and friends there, many from University days and so invitations to spend time with them were many. Lalani, one of those he had kept in contact over the years, was really happy he was coming: he was to stay with her, she wrote him. "It will be wonderful to meet again. You will see so many of our old friends.... Rosemary lives just round the corner from here, you know, and we meet every day.....". "Trust you to remember", Gamini smiled to himself. But the thought of meeting Rosie was something he had not bargained for, was something that had not been on his agenda. The years between had changed them both, he knew, and gradually, he began to look forward to a very pleasant meeting.

* * *

"There is no new land, my friend, no
New sea; for the city will follow you,
In the same streets you'll wander endlessly.
The same mental suburbs slip from youth to age,
In the same house go white at last".
(Cavafy)

* * *

England, in a coldish summer, was all that Gamini knew and hoped it would be. Scenes made familiar over the years, unexpected kinds of people, tiny flower-filled gardens assiduously tended, the pre-occupied crowds filing out of the trains and musicians playing in the underground. The mixture of peoples along the roads; a single Poppy flowering in a crack in a pavement; a "Brummy" accent forcing him to ask for directions in writing; flowering plants hanging from lamp posts; stone steps worn down by countless generations; the functional beauty of thatched cottages, and narrow lanes winding between hedgerows in rural Devon. All these he relished.

Many-faceted London enthralled him. After one look at the Palace, though, he kept away from the tourist areas. He walked about, map in hand, seeking out Roman wells, picnicking with other nameless persons by London Wall, discovering fascinating little churchyard fairs in Piccadilly, venturing into dank tunnels under the Thames, with no one but himself and the echoes of a troglodyte violinist ricocheting off the walls, following him. He became a happy nobody, coming out of himself in a so-familiar, strange and foreign land. It was as when he had first entered the Promised Land, and he seemed waiting for some spontaneous excitement, some experience, just around the corner.

* * *

It was to be a long week-end with Lalani. She met him warmly at her door. Typically Sri Lankan, she wanted to feed him first. They sat across the table and talked. The doorbell rang and she rose to answer it. Gamini heard voices, and Lalani saying, "Come on in - see who's here". He half-rose from the table; and the air was, suddenly, full of Rosemary and thyme. Their joy at seeing each other was instant. Near, but yet far, their arms opened wide and (it seemed to Gamini) a spark arced across Time and Space between them; the clouds parted, the sun shone and there was a rainbow in the sky. What did he see? Not her graying hair, nor the lines creasing her face, not the thinness under the English clothes. He only saw the same face he would look around for every morning, the wide, wide smile, and the eyes that crossed the classroom to meet his, the welcome in them. Did she, also, only see wavy black hair (not balding, gray), the thin, serious boy with his long, loping, lonely walk, and not the seemingly self-assured man, thickening round the waist? The joy of meeting was electric, shared. They talked as if they had picked up a conversation that had been interrupted a few moments ago. The old relationship - before the break - was, suddenly, there.

Dinner at Rosemary's, the next day, was different, though. He met her husband, children and grandchildren. It was a garrulous night with everyone talking, eating, drinking, and Rosie busy being the hostess. But Rosie, the Rosie of yesterday was not there. There was just an old friend entertaining him in a foreign land, at ease only when talking about children and grandchildren, or when Lalani joined them.

Lalani had to return early and he was to follow later. And when it was time for him to go Rosie, to his surprise, would not let him go back alone, saying, no, not so late at night, not in an unfamiliar neighbourhood. Her son and she would see him home.

And the Rosie who walked out of the house with him was, again, the Rosie of yesterday; and so, yet once more, they walked back together, just two persons, equal and unhampered by invisible barriers and absent friends.

The short walk back they did slowly, stretching it out as long as possible. He was to go back the next morning and so, outside Lalani's house they hugged each other good-bye for the first, and last time; Gamini recognizing, at last, from the warmth and sincerity that, to her, too, the past had had a charm.

* * *

Gamini carried the disturbing reverberations of that encounter back home. Again, as before, he tried to keep alive their re-discovered appreciation of each other. Playing it with as light a touch as possible, he wrote her a short letter, with the photographs taken there, meant for the whole family. At some point, addressing her directly, he said:

"And Rosie, you must surely be wondering what I felt when I saw you, unexpectedly, thirty years after? I saw no change in you: you were the same Rosie I had known long ago. Yes, we have all changed, become older, but is that what matters? To me, you have not and I relished meeting you - it was the highlight of my English summer. Can I say it with Burns, as I remember him saying somewhere? Something like -

'John Anderson, my jo, John, when we were first acquaint,
Your locks were like the raven, your bonnie brow was brent
But (something, something, something), your locks are like the snow,
But blessings on your frosty prow, John Anderson, my jo.'

Do keep in touch. I'll write again."

He was afraid of her reply, but awaited it impatiently. At last it came:

" Your letter was long awaited and most welcome! Yes, I do deserve the ego deflating reference to the 'frosty prow' – if only you had chosen something along the lines of 'No Second Troy' you would have made my day! Still, there it is. Now you have got over the nasty shock of Time's cruelty it will not disturb you when we next meet.

"I do want to see you again. Whether Fortune would make this possible, I do not know."

Gamini read, and re-read it, and read into it all manner of things. Had he been insensitive with the reference to a "frosty prow"? He had not meant to be! Yeat's poem: it had not impressed him in the long-ago years, but did it mean something else to her? How would it have made her day? Was there a hint of a wish that past should have ended differently? He so wanted to lay the ghost of the rejection - the "No" he had expected but which had, still, hurt: to be able to believe, now, that his feelings for her had, even ever so faintly, been echoed.

* * *

Gamini is confused, is swinging between fantasy and reality. In a strangely unrealistic mindset, in a sort of out-of-body experience, he tries to come to terms with a dilemma. He regresses to an old undergraduate habit and tries to analyze the poem, the letter, to see where the truth lies. The poem he finds easier:

"Written by Yeats of Maud Gonne" he scribbles*, "the left-leaning intellectual woman whom he loved but who did not reciprocate, (friends, though?). So he suffers, says to himself, soliloquizes, rationalizes his rejection by her (nacre round an irritant, building a pearl?), absolves her from blame for filling his days with misery, attributes her a nobility of mind that cannot be peaceful, being restless; attributes her a beauty reflecting the beauty of her mind; a mind he places on a pedestal for its loftiness, in solitude for having no peers, steadfast, unbending integrity. So far above him that the suffering caused him is natural, inevitable....she being so - he says in her defence, rationalizing her rejection - that she could not do other than reject him, to follow her destiny....to burn a second Troy. But what is he trying to say? What does the poem mean, really?...He gives the impression that this is a poem of praise. It is. But he is really trying to comfort himself, to come to terms with his rejection, by placing her so far above himself as to be supra-human, and so trying to keep his self-respect intact.*

"So why should something, on the lines of this poem, have made her day?"

He pauses; the going is now becoming difficult.

"She is speaking of the poem from what she remembers of it, not after reading it. (Presumption only?) Perhaps some lasting impression? If so, what? And in this context what is the relevance to our meeting? Parallels?.....

"The parallels, then. I loved her, respected her mind and honesty. We remained close friends. Only. At the end, she said 'No'. The relationship dwindled with post-graduation dispersal. She married and, much later, so did I. We lost

touch and with her going to England we were lost to each other, for good, I thought. I did not dream of meeting her again and in my waking life she played no part. In hers? I suppose the same. Then suddenly, unexpectedly, we met. The first encounter was just gladness, gladness. I ached to reach out to her but long separation, a lack of any former physical intimacy, would not allow it. Later encounters at her home - more domestic, guarded. Only upon parting did we embrace. I realized then that there was something we wanted from, could give each other. Sadly, we could not talk alone, articulate, lay a ghost, craft a new relationship...."

Pause again. The exercise is still barren. It yields no answers. He soldiers on.

"So, is the parallel unreciprocated love and non-fulfillment of her chosen destiny - in life? I don't know. What would this poem - had I quoted it to her - have meant to her? All I can see is that she is glad I am not put off by the 'frosty prow', that the hurt of the rejection has quite worn off (the grit had turned to pearl?), that the fondness I had for her has not become just sterile friendship (athough it doth suffer a sea-change). But she also anxiously waited for a letter from me, emphatically wants to meet again but she knows that only Fortune (capital F) could make it happen. So...."

Pause. Once again, Gamini is face-to-face with the overwhelming question.

"...she does not see (as I think I do) Yeat's less-admirable motives. All she wants is reassurance of my feelings towards her."

Once again he writes to her, still in the grip of his unreal mood, still with the answer he has introspectively sought unclear. But this time he has lost his lightness of touch, is moving dangerously near the bone. Once again, he stakes his all on one throw. Only, this time, he is not in balance, the probe not steady in his hand, unprepared for the unexpected.

* * *

There was no reply. Only, at Christmas, a card from her husband. And then, silence.

.

RAVEN

Soon it would be time to go. Not just yet, though. The bags are packed, weighed, labeled: all that's done. Almost all the expected last-minute callers have been and gone. Almost, but not all: one, whom I am expecting, has just phoned to say he's on his way.

Coming into the house he casually hands me a slip of paper. "That's his number. Ring him when you get there, and take it from there". Nothing more specific, and the rest of the evening carries on in the usual way with conversation and shared jokes, memories, work. Only as he stands up to go do I take him aside and say, "Do you know more? Who is he? What does he know? What am I to say to him - what must I *not* say…..?"

It was more than a month ago that I had told Nihal, my friend, that I would soon be going to Hawaii for a conference. Hawaii was not a destination familiar to either of us and he was happy for me. I was, too, although the cost was a bit daunting. I would not get a chance to go there again and the work promised to be (as it later proved) of much importance. So I told myself: "Go on - be a devil!" and dug into my reserves.

A week or so later, relaxing over a drink, Nihal came back to the matter.

"When you are over there, there is something you can do for me – for us, I mean….. I am not quite sure of details – I've got to get them together – I'll tell you more about it…"

As the plan folded out over time, it began to look somewhat bizarre and unreal, something out of the normal run of things we did together. We had both been in the Navy and now that we were out of it we – and many others like us – were feeling rather helpless and left out in the fight against the terrorism that was behind the ongoing civil conflict. Our friends who had remained behind had either died or become quite different people. Violence had replaced the tranquility that had marked our days in service. The sheer butchery being inflicted upon the people in the border villages and the indiscriminate suicide-bombing of after-hours office workers in Colombo made our blood boil. But the casual violence through which our sometime colleagues sought to even things out with "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" brought us only revulsion – to us, who had tried to push the Geneva Convention down their throats some twenty years ago. Now, out of the Navy but with a certain ability to mobilize opinion and raise funds, we were anxious to do something that

would end the terror, fast and effectively. Our naval friends had not much confidence in – what they felt – were our quixotic schemes: we were venturing beyond our depth and no encouragement could be given. Maybe they felt that we were no longer within the "system" and were but well-intentioned, bumbling amateurs? Certainly, at the Wardroom bar, the smiles were cynical:

"Look, you chaps are out of it now. Leave these things to us. Things have changed since your day. You know, with all your knowledge, you still don't know enough. The best thing you could do is to find us money to do the little extra that's necessary. There are many poor villagers out there without sufficient food, clothing, housing, medicines. Then there are the hundreds in refugee camps. Government cannot find all the funds. Do something for them – we will help – but leave the fighting to us."

We were tired of this condescension. We were doing enough of that sort of thing already, but the terror was not decreasing. What was needed was a swift, decisive operation, surgical in its execution.

"To hell with them" we thought, "Swollen heads. Too big for their boots, the bloody fools. Yesterday's little men blundering along and too uppity to listen to what others have to say."

So, we formed our own think-tank, talking over the problems and worries with others really close to and who thought like us, seeking out solutions we could execute ourselves. It was all very hush-hush. We did not even divulge our friends' names to each other. Not all of our friends were common friends, and we moved in several intersecting social circles. I cannot, now, be sure where the idea originated, or even whether it sprang up spontaneously in several forums. I think it reached Nihal before it reached me.

Simply put, it was that the source of the terror was one man. If he was eliminated, the terror would, eventually, die. The serpent had only one head: cut it off, and the body will die. But how was this to be done? Obviously, we reasoned, it was not likely to be done by the regular forces. We had, then, to call on irregulars. Who? None was available in the country. Someone from out of the country, then? Yes, there were plenty of guns for hire out there, waiting to be fingered and contacted. And how much would this cost? *Mucho* dollars. But *that* was our trump card, the card that the government forces didn't hold. We had enough backers who would put up the money. All we needed to do now was to find the executioner, discuss modalities with him and agree on the price and the details of payment.

And Nihal now tells me they have found the man.

What he, himself, knows is just the bare bones. Someone has found the man, and he has his telephone number in Hawaii. No name, no address. I am to introduce myself as the representative of the man who had contacted him about an assignment in Sri Lanka. He knows what is expected of him, but he has wanted to talk over the details of the assignment, problems to be expected, the terrain, the political situation, the logistical support he requires, confirmation on payment and other business-like details. This is to be a commercial contract and my role is to see the man, assess his ability to deliver, find out his requirements and decide whether this option is a viable one. I am then to report on him to the principals back in Colombo. All quite up my street. The price has been quoted: half to be paid up-front and half upon delivery.

And so I depart for Hawaii, for an assignment with an assassin.

***

My first visit to the U.S. All the very American things one has been led to expect are there, but set in balmy climes. Laid back, helpful people. Streets shaded by flowering trees. I arrive a day early, having forgotten all about the International Date Line when I made arrangements to stay with friends. The house is closed: a metallic voice on the speaker informs me that there's nobody in and invites me to leave a message. A helpful neighbour, working on his car, helps me get a cab and points me in the direction of a nearby hotel. Leaving a message on my friends' machine, I am tired enough to fall into bed fully clothed and to pass out, dreamlessly. The ringing phone wakes me – my friends, alarmed and apologetic, as if the error was theirs, not mine. Eventually all is sorted out, and I move in with them the next day.

A day or so is taken up with us taking stock of each other. We've known *of* each other but not actually met – she, a Sri Lankan and he a Dutchman. We soon find we are all happy with each other and that we have much in common. I like what I see of Honolulu out of the balcony: the clear skies, the craggy range of wooded hills fringing the northern edge of the island, keeping out the trade winds. What rain comes over it is hardly anything, and I watch its misty veils lazily floating towards the beaches till they eventually dissipate and disappear. The beaches are rain-free throughout the year, I am told.

I am to leave for the Big Island for my conference the next day and haven't yet made my call. I have to treat it as casually as I can, the whole thing being so hush-hush. The conversation cannot take place over the phone and I can only set up a meeting for a date on my return. So the slip of paper is consulted and the number rung. A woman's voice (young?) answers but her accent

baffles me. I am forced to call on my friend for help. (*First breach of confidentiality!*) I ask him to say I have arrived as an emissary and would it be possible to meet? It turns out that the man is not in, but that he would be asked to call back. My friend gives his name and telephone number (*another breach!*) and we sit down to wait. No call comes in the whole of the day but my friend's curiosity has been roused. I come in for some intelligent cross-examination by my friend though his wife bluntly tells him that I am, obviously, not willing to talk about it. My story of a questionable offer of commercial goods does not sound too convincing, even to me. It begins to look as if my career as a "cloak and dagger" agent is off to a sticky start. The questioning is not prolonged, however, and the next day I take off island-hopping in a tiny aircraft, with the return call not yet received.

After a satisfying and fruitful week of discussions I head back for a few days in Honolulu before I return. My friend meets me, and he has news. The call has come, and it is evident that some conversation has taken place: but I've got no choice but to stick to my story.

So I ring the man back and I am relieved that he speaks more clearly than his girlfriend. Yes, he knows what I've come about, but he does not know me. We have to meet to talk. No, it cannot be today because of something that's come up, something unexpected, something he will tell me about. So it will have to be tomorrow. All that's okay by me.

"Where do I meet you?"

My friend suggests his place but no, that would not do. It has to be someplace anonymous, someplace outside anyone's territory.

"Do you know where Safeways is?" he asks.

"Not yet, but I can find it."

"OK. Meet at the car-park there. You speak to me".

"What do I call you?"

"Call me Raven. Everybody does".

"How will I know you?"

"You'll know me when you see me. In any case, if you are there, I'll find you. Tomorrow, then, at six o' clock". *Click*.

More talking with my friends now. No point beating about the bush, because, obviously, something extraordinary is going to happen. I am relieved that not much more cross-examination takes place. They will take me to Safeways, there's no question of my going alone. I do my own planning and husband and wife have a quiet talk together.

Tomorrow evening arrives. We drive in the lambent dusk to the supermarket and find a parking spot overlooking the major road, the market and entrances behind us. We hang around the car awhile, watching the pedestrians, cars, bikes moving along the road, trying to spot this man who it would not be possible to miss. My eyes follow an archetypal biker on a shiny Harley Davidson, bandana round his head, dressed head-to-toe in black leather. Marlon Brando and "The Wild Ones", I recall nostalgically. He crosses our vision again, and then we hear the thrum of his bike behind us. "I thought he must be the one" whispers my friend and adds, "We'll be inside but I'll be watching you." They don't go away, though, but wait to meet him. Raven.

Raven wheels his bike alongside our car and dismounts. Tall. Taller than me; maybe six feet. His leather gear is shiny and black, with some little silver accessories. A man conscious of his image and living up to it. The get-up, rather than the man, emanates a vague menace. Irreverently I remember the jet-black ravens in the Tower, in London, so different from the sleek crows back home. This Raven, though, is sleek.

He walks up and we greet each other. There is no need for introductions: we knew him when we saw him and he, us. Talking to all of us he explains what held him up yesterday. One of his biker friends had had an accident and was now dead. The death has affected him enormously. Talking about it to him, using the *clichés* common to all middle-class family bereavements seems so incongruous, given the circumstances that have brought us together. He is at some pains to explain his feelings to us. Bikers, he says, are not the stuff to frighten children with. They stick together because they like each other and the same things. Hanging out together. The feel for the open road. The sense of community and family. The community is the thing and the leader is king. Their king is now dead – long live the community. The members of the community are gathering together now, to support each other, to seek to renew their ties. Today's had been such a gathering. A coming together of kindred souls to mourn the loss of one and to ensure their future together as a group. The group has its own view of itself, a kind of old religion. All this he says as explanation, with an understated sadness. It is so incongruous.

The social preliminaries over, my friends move indoors. Raven sits side-saddle on his bike and I remain standing. To skip from the solemnity of the wake to the matter we have met to discuss is awkward. I compromise, skirting the core. Tell me about yourself, I say, though not in so many

words, because I don't know you nor do any of the parties in the matter know each other. So let us know something about yourself – after all, you are the key – and let us then get on to the matter at hand. What do you know about the matter? Do you think you can do it? How are you fitted for it? Once the first words are spoken, the others come more easily though not with the smoothness and fluidity born of certainty and confidence.

He, too, needs to move round the core. Quietly, tentatively he begins to speak.

His background and training has been as a member of the U.S.Marine Corps. He has had the full combat training and is fully weapons proficient. He's seen some action, too, but he does not specify. (Mentally I note that it is little more than a year after "Desert Storm".) He knows what is expected of him and a small group under him. He's done some research into the situation in Sri Lanka, after he had first been contacted. It's not that he doesn't know what it entails. But……

He pauses. One of his many pauses. He seems to be searching for the words he wants.

But…that's not the problem. I've been thinking this through and I can see problems…No, the problems of the actual operation are not the real ones…

Look, he asks me, is this really the only way out? Not that it can't be done if it is…I am a crack shot, you know, a marksman. See this? He shows a large, shiny bullet hanging from a short silver chain from one of his accessories. That's a Magnum. I can guarantee to drop a man at a thousand yards with that, if the line of sight is clear.

"You'll be in the jungle", I say.

That would not be a problem, normally. We can set an ambush. The problem is……look, one problem is how do I get there? See my colour? I'll be spotted in no time.

"But you won't be going in without camouflaging yourself"

No, no, that's not what I mean. I need to be inducted to within a fairly short distance of the area the man is in. We can't make it across the whole of the country alone.

"No problem there. That'll be part of what we must do. But…yes, it'll not be easy getting him in your sights. He's got his hideouts and doubles, they say."

See? That's the sort of thing I mean. So how do I get close to him? Pulling the trigger and getting away are not the trouble. It's getting there and getting him where we want him to be. Tough, but not impossible, if all goes right.

But……and again he pauses. The pauses are becoming more than just breaks between thoughts. He has another problem, I realize. Maybe he does not really want this job? Conflicting thoughts cross me. If he cries off, then my work will be so much simpler. But it would mean that we go back to the drawing board. I decide to press him.

"But what?"

He's been looking down at his feet, talking to me. Now he looks up, looks me straight in the eyes.

"Look," he tells me, "some things changed after your friend spoke to me. I've changed. I am a different, no, a new man. I've discovered Jesus and he has come into my life. All my past's behind me. Why must brother fight brother? Why can't I abide by His word? I've decided I can. See what happened yesterday? He was such a gentle, good man, and that's why God took him. That's why it means so much to us. He is no more. The man I was is no more. And I can't be the man you want me to be. I can't do it again. I…I… should've told you this before…

"So the answer is No?"

He nods, silently.

There is nothing more to say. We stand beside each other, silent, looking up at the starry skies above us. And then I say =

"That's OK, Raven. I wouldn't push a man against his will. Thank you, though…."

"Sorry, friend."

As if on queue my friends emerge. "Finished? Or …?" No, we assure them. The Harley Davidson roars awake, quietens into a throaty purr. Raven wheels it around, revs her up and, with a wave of a hand the bird has flown.

Well, says my friend as we get in the car, I hope you sorted things out. Yeah, I say, sort of….

THAT FIRST SUNDAY

"Sir….sir…..the Hall is burning!"

Someone burst into the Board Room, shouted it out and rushed away. We were at our monthly Board meeting; I, as Secretary to the Board and Chief Executive Officer. Talk stopped abruptly; elderly Board Members looked at each other, nonplussed. But this was work for me. Leaving them still staring, I was out of the chair and running towards the fire……

(It was a year-and-a-half since I had taken over the country's only International Conference Hall: a National Flagship institution. The reality behind its gleaming façade, I found, was grim. Inefficiency was rife. Losses had mounted over the years. But the overarching problem was a major revolutionary uprising in the country: Security was my first priority. Introducing radical new systems, we became the only public institution in the country that did not close down for a single day. The Head of Government felt it safer than Parliament itself.

The workers, all, were nominees of Board Members, past or present. Because – or in spite? – of this, they were fanatically loyal to the Hall and, when the crunch came, this it was that ultimately saved the day.

And now, the Hall was "burning"!)

……..I found the Hall swarming with workers. Smoke was pouring out of the second floor, from the VIP lounge. The fire-detection systems had sounded and the workers had responded: reeled out the hoses and started to pump water where the thick, black smoke was coming from – a single door. But power had been turned off, to prevent short-circuits and nothing could be seen through the pall of smoke pouring out, permeating every space. Fortunately, no one had been foolhardy to venture inside. Confusion reigned: workers and Policemen were milling around, like ants in a disturbed nest. No one had taken charge. Some were crying, others running around checking various spaces, slipping, falling on the wet, polished floor; *"Aiyo, Sir, api ivarai, indala vedak nae" (we are finished, our lives are gone, what's there to live for?)* cried one, rushing past me. There was nothing I could do to restore order: I could do more by observing. Observation #1 was – there was no fire to be seen, no flames. I went into the main Auditorium, the heart of the Hall, and an alternative route to the VIP area which could have given access to the back of the fire. Fortunately, it had been overlooked by the

emotionally-charged crowd. The Auditorium was dark, veiled in smoke, but – no fire. I walked onto the stage, examined the curtains. Nothing. So the source of the smoke had to be deep down in the basement, I argued. With everyone busy doing his own thing; I decided to do mine too – search out the fire in the Basement.

On cue, the Colombo Fire Brigade came, sirens wailing. The Security Officer met and briefed them. The Fire Officer hurried away to rally his men. Hoses were coupled and water gushed into the VIP area and he cleared the premises of workers, who left unwillingly. Leaving the Security Officer in charge, I continued my descent to the bowels of the basement. Down there, too, there was neither fire nor heavy smoke; only a haze hung, gauzy in the dim Emergency lights. So where was the fire? I borrowed a torch and, with the workers, searched the network of corridors: testing heavy metal doors for excessive heat that could indicate a fire within. Again, nothing. In our last patrol of the outermost perimeter, we spotted what looked like dying embers, on the false ceiling (of perforated hardboard) that concealed the wiring and piping. Still no flames: so we cautiously went right under the 'embers' and, at last, saw the genesis of the 'fire' – an untidy bundle of cotton waste and rubbish which had caught fire, and set off a chain reaction. Above it was a large shaft carrying the central air-conditioning conduits. The shaft was now a chimney, the updraft sucking up the smoke. But – so much smoke from this little bundle of smouldering rags? It had nearly burned itself out and was beginning to burn into the false ceiling – the 'embers' we had seen. Leaving the workers there, I went for the Fire Officer and brought him down. They pulled down the false ceiling, put the smouldering fire out, and brought hoses into play. After thoroughly wetting the shaft they went up it and found the source of the smoke.

Nearly twenty years previously, when the Hall had been constructed, they had used asbestos insulation, sandwiched between the square metal duct and hardboard sheets securely clamped around. The hardboard it was that was now smouldering and, reacting with the asbestos, spewing out clouds of smoke. But hardboard can only burn: not burst into flame. And so we had our smoke - without fire!

Thorough doused, the smoke ceased, and every window was kept open for the noxious smoke to disperse. The Hall lost nothing was to fire – but much to water!

The drama was over. And now, a political farce took centre stage. We had made Headlines: an international Conference of States was to be hosted in four months' time and whispers of 'sabotage' went from mouth to mouth. Politicians swung into action, followed by sycophantic

hangers-on. A powerful Minister, exuding an aura of Power visited the site with a tame 'Examiner' trotting at his heels, who rummaged through the rubble and *'voila!'*, in just a few moments, declared that the fire was an act of sabotage. I laughed in his face; and asked him to show where the fire had been. He could not, of course. But whispers were not silenced, and there was talk of a Commission of Inquiry, pending which the Hall was out of bounds to all of us! A Police Investigation also began and I was asked who I suspected. I tossed them a few names, knowing they would find nothing in them: my confidence in the staff's love of the Hall was high.

I then told the Board that I could not ready the Hall for the Conference unless I was given access to the Hall. The 'stay' order was withdrawn.

Now began the real work. I shut myself in my office and tried to put my thoughts together. With a suspicion of sabotage lingering in many minds – mine included – I took stock. I needed an 'action plan'. The workers would do all they could, I knew. I listed out my priorities: cleaning the mess (*no problem*: the maintenance and housekeeping staffs would do that); structural repairs and colour-washing (*a real problem* this, with the Maintenance Manager, now arthritic and in constant pain, able only play a supporting role); re-wiring and restoring power safely (*problem*: my indispensable Electric Engineer, old, knowledgeable and reliable, was in hospital with terminal cancer, where his staff would visit his bedside daily and discuss problems). I had few options. Who was there to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with me, whom could rely on? My best bet was no staff member, but our highly-qualified and respected Architect-Engineer who acted as Consultant. It was to him I turned now. Happily he was here that day and came as soon as I asked him. Knowing the magnitude of our task, he had already done his homework; and made no bones about how much work had to be done and how little time there was. But, he said, there is a way. Let's work on this together, you and I, he said. I agreed. He promised a work-plan by the next day, but I had to ask the Board to let us ignore "tender board procedure" and hand-pick contractors. I (thankfully) guessed wrong: the Board readily granted my request and gave us all support. We chose our Contractor: he sat with the Consultant and me working out details. Overnight, he diverted all his resources from his other sites. Work began.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I turned to the next problem: the electrical system. I talked with the Electrical staff. The whole of the Hall had been thoroughly soaked by the fire fighters, and water had infiltrated every electrical fitting and conduit, from the humble wall switches to the majestic chandeliers, which had to be lowered from the high ceiling. The Supervisor told me that his staff and he could do everything; that they could take apart, dry and refit them; and that no outside contractor was needed. With his most trusted lieutenants, the Consultant and I visited the ailing

Electrical Engineer in hospital to talk things over. Terminally ill he was, but he still smiled benignly at us and spoke with confidence and authority. Leave it to the Supervisor and his team, he said, because they know the set-up so well. I will be guiding them, he added. But you will give them everything they ask for won't you? Please? I promised.

The next priority was the damaged carpets, soaked furniture, and tattered drapes. The Executive Housekeeper and her staff had done a through investigation. The floor-to-ceiling drapes would have to be replaced, but the sodden carpeting and the furniture could be saved only if quick action was taken. Leave it to me, she said, I will find the best and fastest for the job. We will dry the carpets, clean and dye them and have all the furniture polished and upholstered. If necessary, we could draw on the extra carpet stocks the Chinese builders had thoughtfully left behind. I discovered, to my delight, that reserve stocks of the original paneling and fittings also existed and so we could make the Hall no different from what it had been before the fire.

Of course there were other things to do: I can't remember everything. I do remember the VIP lift, the sound system, telephone system and the Air Conditioning ducts that had caused all the problems. Somehow, everything was sorted out. It took about two months, but the damaged area looked exactly like what it had before. As a test I invited the Chinese Embassy officials over and asked them to say where the fire had been. They could not; and could not hold back their praise for Sri Lankan workmanship. Diplomatically, I did not say what had caused the fire!

The Contractor did exactly as he promised, and took his men and equipment away. The lift was repaired by the Agents and was functioning. The carpets had come back, and new drapes were hung. The Hall was no longer an eyesore to the public. Only one thing was lacking: Lights.

It was then that the Electrical Supervisor came to me. His "guru", the Electrical Engineer had passed away: the saintly old man's gain, our loss. Although everything was ready, said the Supervisor, without an Engineer he did not have the authority to restore power: I have no formal training, no power to give orders, so how can I do that? he asked me. The ball was back in my court. This was no time for indecision. I spent a long time talking to him, understanding the neural system that kept the Hall functioning. Power from the national grid reached us from a sub-station manned by the Electricity Board. From there, it was routed to the main distribution control post, from where the supply to different areas was controlled. Power was on line, now, up to this point, but had not been restored to the Hall. We have done all that had to be done, said the Supervisor but, sir, I am not an Engineer and I can't take the responsibility. He had a valid point. OK, I said, check everything all over again, and I will tell you what we are going to do tomorrow.

Came the morrow and with it, the realization that the responsibility was mine. With a confidence born of the many problems I had recently faced, I walked across to the Control room. I was met by the Supervisor and his staff, and faced a bewildering array of dials, panels, cabinets, switches of all sizes and other things I knew nothing about. "What does this do?" I asked of the item nearest me. I was told. And so we progressed down the line, until I had a general idea of the steps to be taken to restore power to the Hall.

"Okay," I told the staff, "Now, I am taking charge here. You will do what I say. If anything goes wrong, I will face the music, alone. None of you will be responsible. Thank you for what you have done. Stand by". I had by now learnt to hide behind a patina of calmness. My fears, my doubts, my ignorance, the risks I was taking – without authority – were carefully concealed.

My plan was to restore power to one section at a time. As I restored power to one sector, the designated 'runners' would go in there and visually check it. The dials would indicate a fault, I knew, but as a non-technical person I preferred to fall back on human confirmation. With thudding heart, I gave the first order, the Supervisor carried it out, his eyes on the many dials, and the 'runners' sped away. To my relief, there was no problem: the boys had done their work well. So, section by section, power was restored, till the Hall blazed with light. Then, only, did I "relinquish command" and leave the Supervisor in charge. I went back shaking, heart thumping, to pull myself together in the solitude of my office.

(Years later, an ex-Navy Electrical Engineer, held his head in his hands. "Good God, Somasiri!" he said, "You did everything wrong, - *everything*. Why on earth did you do this in this 'gung-ho' way? *Why?"* I replied: "Because – if I had waited to do it the correct way I would have run out of time. There was a job that had to be done, and the men had run the extra mile. I had to do the same. Even at the cost of my life, this was the one thing I could have done. Remember the Navy and 'the loneliness of Command?' Well, I understood it that day.")

We kept the lights burning that day and night, not only to test the system but also to show the passers-by that Life had returned to the Hall, which had been a 'black hole' in the nightscape of Colombo for months. I had only one system to test now, though it had been put right – the sound system. With maximum lights on in the Auditorium, and elsewhere, I walked up the stairs to the Balcony, stopped just above the central aisle, and gave the sign to start. Starting slowly, and gradually gathering in volume, it reached maximum with the big drums booming in and the brasses blaring. Appropriately, the choice of the sound technicians was classical orchestral music: when it reached its crescendo, I found myself gripping the rail, white-knuckled, and face wet with unbidden tears. The dark days were, at last, behind us. That which was dead, we had brought back to life. Groping for a

seat, I sat down, letting the softer strains of the strings soothe me, stilling my turbulent emotions, before I could walk down to the Sound staff to say, 'Well done!'.

The long winter was over, and Life began again. But my stay at the Hall was, also, coming to an end. A job abroad beckoned. The much-touted international conference had been put back by several months, and it took place after I had gone.

A few days later, just before I left the country, I was driving past the Hall at dusk, just as a major function had ended. I stopped the car across the road and, with my wife, watched the scene before us. The Hall was still ablaze with lights, strains of music wafted towards us, unbroken streams of cars were entering and exiting along the twin approach roads, headlights on, lit from above by the lamps lining the roads. It was Light that worked the magic. "This is what this Hall was meant to be," I told my wife, "Let there be Light"! It moved me deeply, this commonplace scene, made uncommon only by my experience.

Whatever happened in the years to come I would know that, once, we had held a charred shell in our hands and breathed it into life.

For a fleeting moment, I knew what God had felt, that First Sunday.

HOME

"Home is where, when you go there, they have to take you in.

- Robert Frost

The woman was camped by the side of the road, with her dog on a string, under a spreading tree, doing whatever she was doing. I was walking to work, as usual, from Thummulla junction to the Centre for the Study of Human Rights. As usual, too, I passed her by – seeing, but not really seeing her.

That particular day I was thinking how to make an effective presentation about marginalized persons. I wanted to use real life recordings. I had already interviewed a blind University Professor who had jolted me by saying that he was fortunate, indeed lucky, to have been born blind.

"Because", he said "I did not lose something I had once had."

Born blind, never having seen sunlight or starlight, he could yet feel sorry for those who had become blind. To lose was worse than never to have had. Life was like that.

That story, I thought, was a good beginning, but a next step eluded me. When I saw the woman, that day, his philosophy opened my eyes. I realized that I was seeing something, someone I had never, really seen before. Of what good are eyes that do not see? She may have been young, may have been pretty at some time. I had seen her sharing a meal with a beggar in a wheel chair. I had thought: what a perfect picture of domestic life this would make – man and wife, eating together in companionship, with the pet dog at their feet and their house in the background. But their home was the roadside. Their house was a plastic sheet spread on the grass. A scrap of a John de Silva song came to mind:

On this green grass-carpet, I sleep at night.

I have a rock to sit on,

I have roots for food.

In the forest I live.

Like another tree.

They had seemed content.

Impulsively, I stopped and started talking to her. I asked her about her dog. I had stumbled on the correct opening gambit. He was the object of her affections. *("Mata inney meyaa vitharai"* –" I have only him") She was very willing to talk but, she said, few people would talk to her. She was only too happy to tell me her life story. I asked her whether I could photograph her. Was she thrilled! Next day I came with my camera and recorder but she wanted me to take photographs of

the dog, first – "He is a very good dog, yes, very good". So I photographed them and taped the story of her life: slides and recording that made a deep impression at the presentation.

But it did not end there, and I continued to talk to her from time to time.

She came from a good family, she told me. They had a house and property and money. To a certain kind, or at a certain age, of parent a daughter is a burden, to be shed. So a marriage was arranged for her. But, she said, the man had married her only for her money and property and he already had a woman somewhere else. Soon, he began ill-treating her, beating her, and complaining to her parents that she was mad. The parents believed him, not her: they weren't willing to pick up the burden they had shed. She felt trapped; she had no one, and nowhere to go. She had nothing left to lose. One day, she bundled up some few things and – *"Ithing mang paarata baessa*" –"So I stepped out on to the road".

I think she became, in effect, an *anagaarika,* a "homeless one". It is not usual to call a "street person" *anagaarika.* We reserve this word for pious persons, who give up lay life, a sort of halfway-house between the lay and monastic lives. Was she, too, not one who, by choice, gave up a householder's life? Had she not shed life's unnecessary baggage and thus become, a "homeless one" by choice? But – did she really not have a home?

Here, on the Road, she found a community of people who were like her. They became her loose-knit surrogate family. The Road is "home". She does not "live" in one place, she told me, but she goes from one pitch to another, as the spirit wills. That is why she is not under this tree regularly.

"Is the man in the wheel-chair your husband?"

"No…but…..we are all together…. Life on the road is good. There are trees for shelter. And I can sleep on the grass".

"What do you do when it rains?"

"There are places to go to. The Police give me a place to sleep. Yes, they are very good people, they even give me food. This dog is my pet. He is a VERY good dog. A foreign lady gave it injections".

"Have you not thought of working somewhere?"

"Once, they took me to a *'Madama'* (a Home for the homeless). I got to eat well there, but they made me work very hard. And people there were always fighting, fighting. *Ithing mang paarata baessa".*

She came to think of me as a friend, after I gave her the photographs. She used to stop me to talk because, I think, she thought of me as a neighbour passing her gate from where she watched the world going about its business. This could sometimes be a nuisance - to anyone's neighbour! Often, with a guilty pang, I would avoid her; cross the road pretending not to see her. One day, though, she was waiting for me with another woman and - both grinning broadly - they walked up to me to show me something. This other woman had also been photographed! The professional photographer had had a soldier's uniform – a studio prop – and had dressed her up in it for the photograph! She was very proud of it, posing like a soldier, cap and all. So now, they hinted, there was a mini community of two women who had been photographed!

She disappeared from her place, again, for many months. And then she was back at her usual pitch.

"Where were you?"

"I was given a job in tea plantation, up in the hills."

"What was your work?"

"I was plucking tea. But the work was too hard. I had to climb hills – would you believe it! EVERY day! *"Ithing - mang paarata bessa"*

I think of Robert Frost.

HARE KRISHNA.

A god and I

Smug self-satisfaction and niggling doubt: feelings mixed in me on the Bombay flight. Here I was, in late middle age and recently cleared after a suspected heart-attack, on my way to my first international conference. During the enforced rest I had picked up the thread of an idea that had intrigued me from schooldays: the place of seafaring in our history. Venturing – with trepidation – to a multi-day national conference where a few papers on this subject had been read, and being immoderately pleased at holding my own, I had come away accepted as someone who knew something. I couldn't help smiling at memory. I found myself speaking at other conferences, gaining in confidence.

At one, I was told that India was holding its first international conference on maritime archaeology soon, and given an address. India? That was not far away: let's give it a try! So I sent in an application and an abstract and awaited a reply. The response was better than I had hoped: if I could buy my ticket to Jamnagar, the National Institute of Oceanography would love to have me and look after all other expenses. An Institute in Colombo funded my travel.

That was how I happened to be on this flight, and journey – my personal Odyssey. The flight from Colombo was an international one, and it appeared I would have to change planes, and airports, at Bombay. Where on earth was Jamnagar? I had searched the atlas and found it far up, at the northwestern corner of the "V" shaped part of the peninsular that India was to me. I would have to leave Bombay International Airport, spend a night somewhere and join the connecting flight from the Santa Cruz domestic airport. This had posed a problem. I needed a room near Santa Cruz, and a means of getting to it early morning. "No problem", said a friend, "My friend Mr. Matthew lives close by, at Kala Nagar. He'll be happy to pick you up, put you up and take you to the airport. Don't worry – he and I are old friends. Consider it done".

Matthew and his son-in-law met me. They were delightful people: Matthew, older than I and a born "guru". We went to Kala Nagar, which was a community of four-storied residential apartments, with a difference. Built by the State, these apartments were exclusively for artists, musicians, architects, dancers: a wonderful concept for a community wedded to the arts. Matthew's daughter was an artist (as he, himself was and his wife had been) and his son-in-law was an architect, who had designed the interior of the house. I had a warm welcome from their wives and kids, and a

long evening's conversation with Matthew: naturally, on matters touching on the arts. He no longer painted, he said, but showed me some of his earlier works. We got talking on one: an illustration from a story in the "*Mahabharata*". Almost totally uneducated (then) on Hindu mythology, all was new and fascinating. I knew something about the other Indian epic, the "*Ramayana*", but only insofar as it had to do with Sri Lanka. Now, I was being introduced to this one and, as it turned out, to someone.

The picture we were looking at is of a king, presumably, riding to war in his chariot. Besides him is another heroic figure, who has turned towards the king, and is talking to him. They seem to be traveling a forested road. In the distance, two armies are locked in battle. But the focus is on the duo in front. "What I have painted" says Matthew, "is a scene from the great war that was fought between the Kurus and the Pandavas. This is Arjuna and beside him is Krishna Vasudeva. See? Arjuna is going into battle and god Krishna is advising him on the way he should fight. This advice is the essence of Hindu culture and philosophy. In fact, it is what we now call the '*Baghavat-Gita'*."

A coin dropped; just a little one. Of course I knew of the god Krishna. We had shrines to him in our Buddhist temples. The Krishna that we knew in our Buddhist context was as a 'bit part player', and I never worshipped at those shrines. But, as Matthew tried to fill in the story – which I never could follow – I realized that to him Krishna was not only god but also a man. He was *real.* He was someone who had lived and died as a man among men and, the other gods had caused the sea to rise and reclaim his city and his mortal remains. His city is now under the sea. "But he still lives, you know, as a god". *(Hey, here's something for maritime archaeology!* I rejoiced. *Now, I have something to talk about in Jamnagar.*) But even a potted version of the epic was more than he could manage, and more than what I could take in. And so we drifted on to talk of other things – of the work he had done in Sri Lanka, with my friend.

Next morning I was taken to the airport where we said our good byes. I boarded the small plane to my next stop. Jamnagar was, pretty obviously, not a busy airport. As we were making our approach to the runway, I could see a car coming along the road, trailing a plume of dust behind. After we landed I realized that it was the airport manager coming to service the flight! He had all of two flights to service everyday. So, in between flights he went home.

The Conference was to start the next day, and I had time to get a feel of the place. I was taken to a city hotel meant for the handful of foreign participants. The Indian scholars were housed in a magnificent old Palace, now a hotel. I drooled at the fantastic architecture and asked whether I

could be relocated, only to be told that it lacked the "mod. cons." for invitees from abroad! I was, also, told that Jamnagar – the home of Mahatma Gandhi – was a "dry" state, and that alcohol could not be served. But, ever resourceful, the conference staff had found out that "foreign devils" could be issued permits to keep, and consume, liquor in the privacy of our rooms. (What an embarrassment this turned out to be! In the course of an early Conference session, a Policeman accompanied by a staff member crept up to me and made me sign an application form, all very hush-hush: and later, I was surreptitiously handed over a bottle of whisky wrapped up in newspaper!)

The next day the Conference began with pomp and ceremony. About half a dozen VIPs made introductory talks, some in English, some not. Most of the speakers and Indian scholars, were deeply learned in Indian mythology and history (the dividing line was very fine) and this first venture into maritime archaeology was swamped by a surfeit of legend. The only maritime archaeologist was the organizer, a retired Archaeologist who had sold his dream to the Institute of Oceanography. In speech after speech, the theme was Krishna (*so much for my trump card!)*, who had lived among men but whose body had been reclaimed for the gods by the sea which had invaded the land. India's first underwater site – which we were to see – was the remains of his city walls under the sea: proof, if anyone asked, that the legend was true. This was India: Science, Mythology and Maritime Archaeology, hand in hand! "Curious" I mused.

After two days of presentations by scholars of many disciplines and more about Krishna, it was time to visit the site. I had made friends with quite a few, now, particularly with a geologist who had worked on the first moon rocks and gradually drifted to maritime archaeology. One evening, he and I went for a walkabout around the town, mingling with the other pedestrians, munching gram. There was so much new to me, in this town on the edge of the Rajasthan desert. Rubber-tyred carts drawn by haughty camels that looked down on us. Food-collecting centres for cows sent in to the city to escape the bitter drought in the desert. Clay pots as tall as a man, to store water in. Water on tap (in the city) for only two hours a day. Strange looking bullock carts, carrying what looked like large, wide-mouthed clay pots wrapped in layers of cloth and tied down, with their mouths angling backwards.

"What are they?" I asked.

"I don't know. Let's ask" he said.

So we hailed the carter and my friend burst out laughing.

"Ice Cream! Shall we try?".

"Let's look inside first" I said, imagining my wife's horror when I related the story.

Good humouredly they opened the covered mouth of the pot – it really was a clay pot swaddled in cloth – and it was packed full of chopped ice within the drifts of which were buried stainless steel ice cream cups - complete with snap-on lids. The vender offered us a variety of flavours but when I asked for chocolate he said

"Sorry, not here, but don't go, don't go! I get it for you" and sped away, running back with the chocolate flavour.

"How did you get it?"

"The owner's shop is just there" he pointed.

The ice cream was not bad at all!

The next day we set off on safari across the desert. I had no idea how far we were going. The Rajasthan desert was not at all like a desert should be. Large stretches of desert, and suddenly, a little grove or a single gnarled tree amidst the sand dunes. Here, there would be a little village, with houses facing the road, their umbilical cord to Mother India. Every house had it clay jar of water and a "charpoy" where the man of the house rested or slept. The people were herders who raised goats, dressed in colourfully embroidered (but *very* dirty) clothes from out of a distant past. This was the India of the Mahatma, the sands that had felt the impress of the Buddha's feet. Humility rose in me: our own vaunted 2500 years of history now seemed but a film of dust motes on a deep jar of water.

After about an hour, the fascination wore off and, with the monotony of the landscape, heads began nodding. A little after mid-day, we arrived at an oasis – a city built by Tata Chemicals which was extracting chemicals and fresh water from the sea. It seemed a mirage, this metropolis in the sea of sand. We were their guests for lunch, and a sumptuous array of Indian food and drink was laid out on two tennis courts draped over with multi-coloured cloths, like a tent. It reminded me of a Delhi Durbar of colonial times. The contrast was just too much.

Back in the buses, we went to Dwarka, Krishna's city. We started from the Sun Temple overlooking the sea, where the story of Krishna was re-told to us: there seemed to be no end to this multi-faceted epic. I had expected to snorkel here and asked for the equipment, but there was none and no plan for us to wet even our feet: India (and Krishna?) was not yielding any secrets to outsiders. We had to make do with photographs, glossy Reports, slides and videos shown to us.

"What really happened here?"

"Well, see, god Krishna was sent here as a man to carry out a task. He managed to complete the task. But even he did not know that he had to die as a man for it to ultimately succeed. And so he died and completed the task. The gods did not want his remains to be with men and the sea rose, flowed into this city and took away all mortal traces of Krishna. The Temple of the Sun is the place where the sea stopped."

We went from temple to temple, each more elaborate or full of historical legend than the other. I was in a stone-collecting mode, then, and was seduced by every man with his sheet of trinkets and stones of all colours. Among the ones I chose was an egg-shaped one of flawed quartz, about which no one could tell me anything. A few of us gradually fell behind the rest and were asked to hurry up, but one of our number led us another way to another temple. Among its wonders were a collection of honeycombed stones with a kind of insect inside. Offerings were made to the insects: sweet-scented sandalwood paste daubed over the stones brought the insects out to feed on it.

"Why are these stones here?"

"Because they are rare, and must be important to god".

"From where do they come?"

"No one knows. Those who find them anywhere bring them to this Temple"

All were temples were dedicated to Krishna. Krishna as a child, a replica of his cradle, Krishna gamboling with the *gopis* with his flute at his lips, and many, many more. Overwhelming.

Further in, we were taken to a *Sivalingam* with a difference. In the centre was a large, egg-shaped and flawless crystal. Around it was a ring of smaller crystals, equally flawless and all of equal size and shape. And they were like in shape to the stone I had picked up!

But we were summoned to join the main group to see the central shrine: a tall, intricately carved Temple under restoration. Built of much weathered stone, each block was being replaced by a identical block made by modern craftsmen using the old techniques. The older blocks were stowed away reverently. It was truly awe inspiring.

Round the Temple was the bazaar, selling Krishna-related things. Clay cigar-like cylinders intrigued me: "This is made of clay from the place where Krishna would bathe with the *gopis*". And people bought them. There were similar mementos connected with the every story of Krishna's life as a man. Paintings and prints of the scene I had seen in Matthew's house abounded: it was evidently a favourite theme. But I settled for an unsophisticated print of Krishna sporting with the *gopis*.

By the time I had absorbed more than I thought possible, it was beginning to grow dark and our return trip began. It became quite dark quite soon, and all that we could see was the stars burning bright over desert skies and the headlights boring through an endless darkness.

Much later than expected, we were back again in the blaze of light that was Tata Chemicals. Here, a tired, dedicated group of staff officers had assembled to make a formal presentation of their work to us. We were shepherded from one chart to another or a diagram. We were too tired to give full attention but we had to be polite to our hosts, and make admiring noises. Finally, it was time for dinner, even more lavish than the lunch.

After this most appreciated pit-stop, it was time to go and fall asleep on the buses.

The last day was up to us. A young naval cadet had cottoned on to me because I was a naval officer, and we had become friends. He had wanted to show me his city and had persuaded his grandfather to lend him his brand new Maruti car and driver. He took me out that day and gave me a most commendable tour, which he had planned with naval precision. By this time I had remembered that, in colonial times, this was the Princely State from which had sprung the legendary cricketer Duleepsinghji, "The Prince of a little State but the King of a Great Game", and I asked to see the Palace of the "Jam Sahib of Nawanagar". He took me there all right: but the gates were locked – the Palace, it seemed, had been taken over by the State for non-payment of taxes!

And all this while, an unopened bottle of "Johnny Walker Red Label" was languishing in my room: I had no intention of taking it home. I decided to do something about it.

"I know you are a Hindu, but…does your father take a dink?" I asked the young cadet.

"Oh no, sir! We are strict Hindus"

I explained my problem with the bottle, and said that I would leave it behind in the hotel room.

"Doesn't your grandfather like to drink a little, once in a way?"

"Yes, sir, but very occasionally only."

"Do you think he would be insulted if I were to give him this as a gift, for lending you his car and driver to take me round?"

"No, sir, he would not be insulted"

And so, with our good-byes, the bottle (well wrapped) exchanged hands. I returned home with a different view of and a deep respect for India. My former flippancy had evaporated.

Back home, I kept wondering how Krishna picked me up at Kala Nagar and took me to his drowned city of Dwarka. It was – I don't know why – a strangely unsettling experience and I would try to puzzle it out from time to time. One day, driving along, I crossed the car of a friend and suddenly, a coin dropped: a large coin this time. I stood on my brakes, signaling him to stop, and he did. Some years previously, he had told me that every man, when he is born, is placed under the wing of a god (he was a great devotee of all the gods) and that I was under the wing of Vishnu.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing. I just wanted to ask you something as soon as I remembered it. Do you remember what you told me about Vishnu?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"Then tell me – is Vishnu called by another name – like Krishna?"

"Yes, of course. Didn't you know? Want to talk about it?"

"Not now. It's just that I didn't know that, and that's what I wanted to know"

But that was not the end of the story. A few years later, we had our own, lavish international Conference with a session on maritime archaeology. The friends I had made in Jamnagar were invitees. After the sessions were over, we went in groups to various places in the country and I was on the trip to Devundara, the southernmost place in the country. I sat beside the elderly father of maritime archaeology in India and had many, many things to ask him. I noticed that he was besotted (*"I had always wanted to visit Lanka, but never thought I would get a chance*") but, sometimes, abstracted. I asked him whether there was something bothering him.

"Not really, but…."

"What is it?" I persisted.

"Well, see, my family is from the North, though I live in Bangalore and work in Goa. I am the eldest son and because we are *Vaishnavites,* there is a *pooja* I have to perform on a particular day of the year. I have done it every year but, because I was greedy for this chance to come to Lanka I can't do it, and I am sad. See, today is the day"

I was saddened, too, but what could I do? We continued till we came to Devundara: chock-a-block with traffic and with a big festival fair in progress. We stopped a while and I wandered round the fair grounds. I asked someone what the festival was. "This is the Devundara *Vishnu Devale* festival, *mahattaya, Danne naedda?" ("Don't you know?").* I ran back to the coach and told the tired old man. Rejuvenated, he made a bee-line to the temple, performed his *pooja*, and came back with a beatific smile on his face.

His thanks were fulsome: "Because of you I got the chance to see Lanka, and because of you I got to fulfill my obligations to my family. How can I ever thank you?

May god Vishnu bless and protect you, always"

THE MANSIONS OF THE SEA

It was 1930, and a large crowd had gathered, reverent and joyful on the beach at Dodanduwa. None knew that they were last witnessing the end of an era.

Only a few miles north of Galle, Dodanduwa was then a modest port of call for ships from the west coast of India and for the Maldivian *buggalows* calling at other such ports strung along the south western coast of the country. Long past, now, are the days when these sailors spoke to the Sinhala people in *Divehi*, a derivative from Sinhala and yet close enough to it to be understood in Ceylon, but there is still a "Customs Road" and the ruins of a 19th century Customs' Post and warehouse. And only the people of Dodanduwa remember her as the last home of the *yathra dhony,* or *maha-oruwa.* These were craft unique to the country, and the last product of the logboat technology of Sri Lanka. Seventy-five to hundred foot freighters, they were rigged with jib, main and mizzen sails, rudder and a sturdy outrigger – their signature feature. By 1930 they were essentially cargo ships though, in the distant past, merchants, mariners and monks had taken passage in them to countries fringing the Indian Ocean, if not farther. They were built entirely of wood, by traditional ship-builders using traditional technology.

The crowd that day in 1930, had gathered to see such a ship being launched. She must have taken time to build and must have been a substantial investment. But two friends – one an entrepreneur and the other a seaman – had joined forces to build and this vessel that, though no one

knew it, was fated to be the last of her breed. Kariyavasam Patuvata Vithanage Don Siyadoris de Silva, land owner, and Punchi Sinno *Marakkalaehe*, mariner, the *Amugoda oruwa,* would do sail fair and do brisk business with south India and the Maldives. Almost everybody in the village had gathered, for these ships were the community's pride and there were the impromptu versifiers composing instant ballads to mark her maiden voyage, to Male. Even after more than seventy-five years, some verses have survived:

Gaman yanna naekatin oruwa baa *geney*
Saman deyiyanta puda panduru baenda *geney*
Viman sagarey kanu mul soya *geney*
Apit yamuwa haema deviyanta vaenda *geney*

"Auspiciously have we launched our vessel
And made our offerings to god Saman of Adam's Peak.
Let us now worship all the gods as we go -
In search of the mansions of the sea."

No god, alas! heard their pious prayers.

She must have hoisted sail on her maiden voyage using the favouring winds of the North-East monsoon. Her destination: the southern atolls of the Maldivian chain. Racing, night and day under full-bellied sails before a following wind, she made good time to her first port of call, Male. There she discharged and sold her cargo.

Whatever happened to her thereafter, we can only piece together from scant surviving memory. It is more than likely that she joined the local ships in the busy inter-island trade, using every opportunity to recoup the cost of her construction. To the Maldivians the seas around them are not barriers but highways between islands. But in the south, the sea is not always a lovely tourist paradise. Sometime the sea is always in turmoil. There are channels through which the monsoon driven waves roar through, rearing up and plunging, frighteningly, to seemingly bottomless troughs. It takes seamen born to the sea, sailing seemingly frail craft built for these seas, to navigate them. How did the *yathra,* cope with these waters ? Was it in these waters, or on the reefs of Male that the proud *Amugoda Oruwa* foundered? For that was her ultimate fate, prayers to gods notwithstanding. We don't know when and where she came to grief or what had really happened: all that Dodanduwa knew was that she was gone longer that she should. Each day, the horizon would be scanned for

her, but never was she sighted. Never did she come home again. Over time, news filtered through of her foundering on a reef, with the loss of all her crew. It was a cruel blow. Sad were the dirges sung in Dodanduwa, reliving the euphoria of her launching:

Metaenin oruwa baa laa gati *varaayata*
Diyamba poru sata divve *tharangataya*
Kopamana ruval aedalaa divvat *sondata*
Amugoda oruwa tava naeta aavey *gamata*

"From here was the vessel taken to the port
And many a league did she race along under sail,
But however many sails she hoisted, however fair she has sailed
Amugoda oruwa has not come home again."

Never again did Dodanduwa build a *yathra,* and the Sinhala ship-building technology died with the *Amugoda Oruwa.*. The sea is a cruel mistress.

Ironically, she was not so cruel to the crew. Some, at least, had been rescued, but had not been able to afford a passage home. Seaman all, they had lived and worked in Male for several years, but finally made it home, bringing with them bits and pieces of the last *yathra.*

* * * *

The story now shifts from Dodanduwa of 1930 to me in 1986. I had made it my end-phase-of-life mission to research our lost maritime heritage. I heard of the name and type of a ship called the *Yathra Dhoni*; it could have been from any one of the many people I would talk to, listen and file away bits of information. But anything more substantial was hard to come by. I navigated many a blind alley before I heard of a 100-year old model of one in Kumarakanda Pirivena, Dodanduwa. My informant showed me a blurred photograph which we both agreed was questionable. But after his foray into the temple, the Ven. Dodanduwe Dharmasena, the *Viharadhipathi,* was rumoured to chase away would-be 'researchers'. Knowing how ham-handed my source could be, I was not surprised!

How could I get to see this treasure? For that was what it was to me. As so often in my life, Serendipity now intervened. At a conference at the University of Ruhuna, someone whispered to me that the venerable monk was present, and pointed him out to me. Cautiously, I observed him for a

while: he seemed quite extrovert, not standing on his dignity, so I went up to him, worshipped him and introduced myself.

> "Oh, I know who you are – you are D.T.Devendra's son, aren't you? He was a great man – we can't find people like that now".

The long shadow cast by my father – archaeologist, researcher, Buddhist scholar – was still sheltering me, long after he was no more. The Venerable monk and I discovered that we had been up at the University during the same time, and we became instant friends. I told him that I had heard of the model and asked him:

> "Can I see it sometime?"
>
> "Of course" he said, "*Mahattayata pennanney naettam, katada pennaney?"* (If it is not to you, to whom am I to show it?)

. So an early visit was planned and made, and I saw the beautiful, four foot long model made by his father, enclosed in a large glass box. I tried my luck again – could I photograph it? Again, he was positive. So I made second trip, armed with two cameras, one with color film and the other with monochrome film. It was an overcast day and the light indoors was poor and, anyway the glass was in the way. He was unbelievably generous and agreed to let me take it out of the case and out into the garden, where I got some excellent shots, particularly of structural details.

A friendship forged, long were the talks we had about things historical, things philosophical and things about the *yathra*. The model, he said, had been made in the early 1890s, as a boy, by his father. *Yathras*, then, used to crowd the beach front for their annual refit during the season of unhelpful winds, and the boy would go hopping from ship to ship to see exactly how some feature was made and fitted. He would then scamper home to his model, which was taking shape in the inner courtyard of their house, and add-on his new-found details. The model was therefore accurate and the colonial Governor had awarded a Gold Medal to the boy at a national exhibition. When the monk was ordained, he had brought it along with him to the Temple, along with the pieces of the *Amugoda Oruwa* that the survivors had brought home.

In the Temple there is also a truly wonderful collection of 19th century correspondence with the Kings and *Sangha Nayakas* of Burma and Thailand. There are also letters to and from Olcott, about Buddhism. These were all undergoing conservation by the staff of the National Archives Department. One day, when our talk had turned philosophical, he told me that, however senior a

monk he was, he thought that all the good he had done would not help him in is next stay in *Sansaara*. Because, he said, of his attachment to the valuable old library and other old things he had preserved in the temple, he would return as a possessive spirit to guard over these treasures! It would take many a long voyage through *sansaara saagaraya* (the ocean of existence) to wash away that defilement.

One thing more he did because I urged him to. He lent the model to the National Museum to be exhibited when the UNESCO retraced the "Silk Route of the Sea", calling at Colombo. Years later, when his health was giving up on him, and he was losing confidence in his successors, he gifted the model – and the pieces from the last *yathra* – to the Colombo Museum.

May his voyage through *Sansaara* be shortened by this sacrifice!

* * * * *

Work took me to Galle, again, before that. We had invited maritime archaeologists from the Western Australian Maritime Museum to introduce young University students of Archaeology to maritime archaeology, and to compile a data-base of shipwrecks in Galle Bay. Among the group of experts was Tom Vosmer, a Australian boat ethnographer, with whom I discussed the *Amugoda oruwa* and the model at Kumarakanda Pirivena, Dodanduwa. Tom was enthusiastic, for this was the last of a type of large single outrigger sailing ships which could be traced back many centuries. He spent days examining the model, measuring, photographing and making detailed drawings of structural details. Tom considered that its accuracy, both in scale and detail, made it an ideal candidate for documentation. The drawings and measurements were tested against a computer programme – "MacSurf", designed for Alan Bond's challenge for the "America's Cup" – for acceptability, and they were found to fit in well within the requirements of a vessel of her size. The net result was a complete set of computer generated structural drawings, and an understanding of her sailing characteristics. And so, Man and Machine combined to retrieve from the wastepaper basket of History, the blue-prints to build another *maha oruwa*. When Dodanduwa is ready to build the next *yathra*, the drawings would be there!

Some years after this, the Museum received the venerable monk's gift to the nation. The Director's first impulse was to make a media event of the gift, with Ministers present, and beating of drums, blowing of conches, lighting of ceremonial lamps etc. By this time I had made some progress in my research and knew how important it was to educate people in their maritime heritage. Fortunately, the Director listened to me and we decided on another tack. We would mount an

exhibition round the model of the *yathra,* tracing the birth and growth of watercraft and of ship and boat-building in Sri Lanka from ancient times to the present. The Museum had a collection of models they knew nothing about, and detailed drawings of many craft made by a German enthusiast. I had photographs, charts and diagrams. The Navy and modern shipbuilders would lend us their models. All I had to do was to put all together. We targeted school children, who come on Museum tours regularly. It turned out to be a quite respectable effort, making copy for feature writers: it was even featured in the electronic media of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam – the ultimate accolade!

One day, I was relaxing at home when a couple of young men – one quite young – came looking for me. They knew me only by name. They had been given it by the Museum curator, but they only knew the road I lived in. What impressed me was how they had found my house, which is off the road. They had started at one end of this long, winding road stopping at every Buddhist Temple (Dehiwela is full of them) asking for me. About halfway they got lucky, because it was our Temple, and there their quest ended. They wanted some help and, because of the initiative they had shown, I decided to do my best. The younger one said that he was a final year student at the Faculty of Fine Arts, at Horana, and that he was one of a group. It was a Faculty requirement, he said, that they had to research a subject completely alien to the painting, dancing, music etc. they were studying. His group, boys and girls, had been asked to submit a paper on the boat models at the Museum. The staff there, who had worked with me on the exhibition, had been too diffident to explain things and had referred them to me. But they did not know my address or telephone number! So the youngsters had decided to do field work along the coast, asking the help of fishermen, but had found them not quite helpful. All they had gathered was pieces of a jig-saw puzzle, many of which were missing, and which they could not make much of. In desperation they had decided to find me.

They deserved help. I asked them to come as a group, and they did. I introduced them to the basics of boats and fishing craft – their specific focus – and I could see that they began to make sense of the odd bits of information they had picked up. There problem was language: they could not read even the one little book written on the subject. They needed pictures, photographs, drawings. So we agreed to meet at the Library of the Royal Asiatic Society and had a long session there, digging up the books and images they needed. They were not well off and could not afford to buy prints from the newspaper archives and so I directed them to the National Archives and its microfilm service. They took me by surprise when they went down on their knees to thank me in the way a *guru* was traditionally thanked. I remembered the many English-speaking students from other

faculties, whom I had helped in one way or another, but from whom I had not even heard a "Thank you".

The boys (and a girl) would ring me from time to time, for clarification, and I think they made a good paper. I only asked them to make cyclostyled copies and place them in as many libraries as they could for the use of other students whose only language was Sinhala. They even rang me, one night, to tell me that one of them had met with an accident. It was pleasing that we had forged a personal link and not only an academic one.

My end-phase-of-life mission had borne at least one fruit!

ENCOUNTER ON THE INTERNET

My daughter-in-law hands me an old book, saying "Uncle Somasiri. I think you will find this interesting".

It is an old copy of Platé's "The Hundred Best Views of Ceylon", printed in the years of the First World War. The soft dark green paper cover is a bit tattered, but all the pages intact. Fascinated by the black-and-white photographs, I scan them, looking for pictures of boats, my special interest. Then I look at the cover again, and find a handwritten note in an old fashioned, slanting hand:

"You want to save this book till I come home and I will show you all the places I was at take it over to Selt and show him and let him keep it for something to show Papa"

Intrigued by this very human touch, I flip through the book, looking for more.

"Where did you find this?" I ask.

"Oh, there is this girl who was with me at Uni in Sydney. She picks up anything about Sri Lanka she finds in offbeat places and sends them to me", she says.

I turn the book over, look at the back cover and open it, and there – written from edge to edge on the end paper, in the same large, slanting hand, is a letter from a young boy to his mother.

"March 1st.1917

Colombo

Pte Kaehne AIF 9/50 Infantry number 3424

On active Service.

Dear Mother,

Just a few lines to let you know that I am alright hoping you are the same. We are having a good time I saw what I will never see again was yesterday I and all the rest about six hundred of us went to Kandy that is about 72 miles from Colombo it only cost us two shilling and eight pence there and back my word the best picture in the world. We was about 1689 feet above sea level we went through six tunnels they were all different lengths some about half a mile and all the cocoanut trees and all the trees, all blacks there are only about thirty white people there altogether some of the buildings have been there about two hundred years and there is a lake on the top of the hill. all the 72 miles it was it was all hills about two or three times higer than Mount Remarkable my word some of the places where the train went it ran on the edge, if it ran of it it would go thousands of feet, you wouldn't believe it till you seen it the trains travel quicker than thoughs in Australia there were thirteen carraiges and a brake van. We landed in Colombo one Tuesday and we are leaving on Friday when I come back I will tell all the news about Ceylon. I was only sea sick twice one day. I am alright now good has gold nothing to do and plenty of time to do it in, it will do me, we are all the time on the look out for thoughs tin fish that floats about in the sea, we train to get into our life belts get

to our place in case of a miss hap. I think thats all the news this time more next time we are going to stop three more times on our travels that will be alright.
Close with love from

Norman"

I was hooked. It is a young boy-soldier from an Australian backwoods who has written this exuberant letter, while cheerfully going to a war in which the ANZAC troops had been decimated. But he was going, ready to die. *(Why must it always be the young we sacrifice?)*. He does not seem to know much of the world outside his hometown. This is, perhaps, the first time he is away from home. He tells his mother not to worry about his seasickness and makes joke about "the tin fish that float about in the sea" – making light of the ever-present danger from enemy submarines. He is positively effervescent over his trip to Kandy, his first experience on foreign soil noting, like a schoolboy, the distance in miles, the height above sea-level, the lake up in the mountains – mountains much bigger than "Mount Remarkable", the biggest he has seen – "my word" he exclaims – and he is looking forward to returning home, a be-medalled hero, to impress his stay-at-home friends and family with his tales of foreign lands. Is this his first letter home? Probably: for he has drafted it out in pencil *(chewing the end, scratching his head, careful not to upset the Censor)* from edge to edge of the page. Then he has inked it over, dipping his steel nib in an inkwell, sitting at a table somewhere ashore.

Did he survive the war, or not? I thought there was a chance he did, as the war did not last beyond the next year. If he did, what battles, what horrors, had he faced? And back home, undoubtedly be-medalled, what happened to him?

I had to find out. I decided to ask my colleagues on an e-mail maritime history study group I subscribed to, and. I wrote:

To: MARHST-L

From: Somasiri Devendra <devemari@slt.lk>
Subject: A voice from the past

Yesterday I was given two booklets picked up in a flea market somewhere in Australia. One is a collector's piece, a "tourist" picture book of photographs, "The Hundred best views of Ceylon" Apart from the intrinsic value of the pictures, showing how different the country was at the beginning of the century, what is interesting is what has been handwritten on it. On the end paper, a young Australian soldier sailing to take part in WW1 has written a long letter to his mother, to whom he has sent the book. Dated 1st. March, 1917, the writer is Pte N.C.Kaehne, AIF 9/50 Infantry, number 3424. He gives his name as N.(for Norman) C.Kaehne, of 84, Rosetta Street, West Croyden, Adelaide. The voice is that of a young boy, going abroad for the first time, thrilled with the sights he is seeing. I wonder whether he survived the war and what happened to his unit. The tone of schoolboy wonder reaches poignantly across the decades. If it is of interest, I can send the contents of the letter.

The gush of interest this evoked spoke for the universal value this letter had.

"Hi Somasiri

Can you scan the letter on to the net? If at all possible I would like to use it as a text for students studying WW I.
Brad"

"Like very much to see that letter, Somasiri. I can print it out for insertion under the cover of my copy of "Over There With The Australians", by Capt. Hugh Knyvett. (My library is loaded with books full of appropriately related clips and snips -- it's part of my dubious filing system.)

FRANK'

I

"According to the Nominal Roll of the 1st Australian Imperial Force, 3424 Pte Norman Charles Kahne (not Kaehne, although this may be a clerical error) enlisted in the AIF on 17 October 1916. He returned to Australia on 16 June 1919.

The Nominal Roll can be perused on the Australian War Memorial's website at:<www.awm.gov.au>

As for Kahne's unit, he served with the 50th Battalion, 13th Brigade, 4 Australian Infantry Division. In 1917 50 Div fought at Noreuil, Bullecourt, Messines, Zonnebeke and

Passchendaele. In 1918 it countered the great German offensive at Hebuterne and Dernancourt and retook Villers-Bretonneux (the school in the town, bears the sign 'Never forget Australia'). This was followed by Monash's classic set piece battle at Hamel and then the great offensives of the 'Hundred Days' which destroyed the German Army and forced the Armistice.
Ric"

"Probably not a 'clerical error' - just a reflection of the normal suppression of diacritic marks by English-speakers (see also most editions of Lloyd's Register). His name would appear to be of German origin, and he has used the normal German alternative of _ae_ instead of _ä_ (a- umlaut).
David"

"Yes, very likely considering Kahne was in a South Australian unit and that state had (and has) a large German population, many of which were interned in WW I.

There were also two men named Kaehne in the 1st AIF.

Ric"

It was my turn to write again:

Thanks to all who helped me identify the writer of the letter. For the benefit of those who were interested in the contents, I am including it below.

Brad: I will get it scanned and send it to you a little later.

Starts:)

Ends.) (Text omitted here)

I have capitalized and punctuated and spelt as in the original. It has first been written in pencil and then over-written in ink with a steel nib. On the title page he has written his name and address and added in pencil:-

"You want to save this book till I come home and I will show you all the places I was at take it over to Selt and show him and let him keep it for something to show Papa"

Following Ric's directions, I accessed the Australian records and found that the Army (with typically efficiency) had enlisted him as KAHNE, Norman Charles, although he has called himself KAEHNE. But, perhaps, in those days, such trifles did not matter.

I can visualize the young man of 1917 and picture him as of the same type as the many young men I met (as a child) during WW11. So I am glad he went back home safe, though it would appear he had better tales to tell, then, than of a train ride to Kandy.

Somasiri

Then, I hit pay-dirt:

Dear Somasiri

As possibly the only Adelaide rep. of MARHST-L group I was interested to hear of your story a few days ago re- Norman Kaehne and since that time I have been trying to locate relatives of the man concerned. I'm happy to say I now believe I've been successful in this, locating his niece. However, I did not feel it my place to seek further details of the man at this stage.

I did send her all the material that's been on the list, including a copy of the letter he wrote. However, as far as any extra publicity is concerned at the moment, she does not wish to see this matter go any further than between the three of us, and if that's the case then I feel we must respect her wishes. However, I understand she is willing to send you further details, photographs etc. of Norman that the family holds and she is naturally most delighted about what you have found after all these years.

There is of course in all of this, something of an ethical dilemma in what you have found. Of course what you have, they would now regard as a family heirloom and one wonders just how they came to part with it in the first place? They would naturally like to see the book, with its letter, returned to the family, but as I've explained to her, this would be highly unlikely given the fact that the booklet is now of quite some local historical value. She quite understands this. However, if you could see your way to getting a photocopy of (say) the cover and Norman's letter, I'm sure they would be delighted to receive same.

Once I've received your reply to this email, I would be happy to send you further particulars that will enable you to make contact with her directly. By the way Norman has a sister who is 98. I haven't spoken to her, but apparently she still has a great deal to say.

Best wishes

John"

Pay-dirt, it may have been, but there were ethical issues in the dirt! John merited a reply:

Thank you for the trouble you have taken and the sensitivity that you have shown. I would have approached the matter in quite the same way myself.

Yes, the book has a value to me personally and as a piece of 20th.century history, and I would like it to remain here. I will not do anything (publication etc.) as its interest to me is, largely, human. It is the human being whose voice intrigues me, and the fact that he was so chirpy while going on a voyage that might lead him to his death. That is why I am happy that he got back safe. I will get photocopies of the book and send it on to his niece. I suppose Norman died long ago and that this book got into some junk that was given away. Still, I would be happy to let her have the photocopy and, if I ever make it to Adelaide I will try to show it to her. …….the chances are that I will visit Australia again sometime.

I have not copied the letter to Brad for his use of it as teaching material. This would depend on her wishes. Perhaps I could ask Brad to ask her and get approval?

- which brought me more pay-dirt:

Dear Somasiri

I have recently spoken to Norm Kaehne's son, Don, - he's in his early 70s, and he lives in Adelaide. I was supposed to be getting some material from Norm's niece, Barbara Cameron, but haven't chased her down what with Christmas - New Year festivities and trying to orchestrate/get all bits and pieces together for publication of my 1st book dealing with RAN aspects of Japanese air raid on Darwin of 19 Feb. 1942.

I don't think Don will have any objection to your using the material you have re- his father. Bu it would appear the book on Ceylon wasn't the only item that went astray. Don tells me his father came home with thick, newspaper size photographic record of WW1, he recalls it being printed on very glossy paper. He lent it to someone, can't remember who, and it was never returned. I have a friend in UK who is an authority on WW1 and he may be able to help and let me know what this particular publication was.

Don was also contacted some years ago by an Australian historian about his father and he believes some of his father's recollections were used in a book. He said the name of the historian was a Dr Phillips(?), but the name means little to me. Again there's a retired historian who is a WW1 authority in Adelaide, a Prof. Wilson, and he might be able to provide me with a pointer.
Anyway Don Kaehne's address is:……..

- and a final, down-to-earth query:

Somasiri
Did you ever close the loop and send Norm Kaehne's son a copy of the letter he wrote from his troopship on his way to WWI.?

With ANZAC Day upon us fairly soon, I may be seeking an opportunity to discuss some WWI matters on local radio, Kaene being one of them, if permission is forthcoming
Regards

John

The letter, in fact, had now been scanned and it was time to close the loop. I wrote to Norman's son and mailed it along with the scanned image.

"Dear Mr.Kaehne,

As this is the first time I am writing to you, I am being somewhat formal! May I call you Don after this? I had meant to write this letter to you quite some time ago bit it is only now that I can send you the document that I wanted to send you. I am sorry the book is of a queer size and some bits have gone missing in the scanning process, but I have given the text in full below

.

From reading the correspondence that took place last November-December on the Marine History e-mail List, MARHST-L – which I am including here – you will see how many are interested in the saga of your father, which fell like a gift on my lap. How did I get this book? That's a story in itself. My daughter-in-law was awarded a scholarship to a University in Sydney. One of her old Uni. Mates, in Australia, picks up all sorts of things that look Sri Lankan and sends them on to her. And this book was one of them. I am sending you only a copy of what has been handwritten by Norman – the book is of value to me for another reason than this link I have forged with you. It shows a whole lot of pictures of my country 80+ years ago and some of them have to do with a line of research I am following. Do forgive me for keeping it.

I was a schoolboy in Kandy in the middle 1940s. Kandy is the place your Dad took a train ride to. Soon after Darwin was bombed in February 1942, Colombo was also bombed on Easter Sunday, 1942 (today is the 58th.Easter Sunday after that). Kandy became the HQ of SACSEA (Supreme Allied Commander, South East Asia) Lord Mountbatten. Colombo was the western-most point the Japanese reached and that day was called, by Churchill, "The most dangerous moment" of the war. Kandy was soon flooded with young men from all over the world going to or coming from the forward areas. We were great friends with them, and their faces, their ways, their youthfulness, their willingness to horse around with us boys: all came back to me when I read Norman's letter. The story is full of human interest and I would like your permission to write it up as a story – one that will show the human face of e-mail contact. As you can see, I am not the only one interested: one wants to paste it inside his book about the Australians in WW1; another wants to use it as teaching material about WW1 and yet another lists the campaigns his unit fought in. Norman Kaehne has now become a piece of world history and he belongs no longer to your family alone, but the family of Man. So I do hope you will allow me to make this available to other serious persons and for me to make a story out of it. You will see how so many strands bind so many of us together….."

May you be happy, Norm, wherever you are. Maybe our paths will cross again

THE MYTH MAKER

I had never been part of a close-knit community, where everyone knew who's who you were, and where family history and legend merged seamlessly. My own family (and I) had always been part of a floating population in the many places we had lived in. So, when I married a girl born and bred in Galle, I became part of such a community for the first time. The view from Galle was, I learnt, very different from mine: even while speaking of everyday things they used words that were new to me. And the tangled web of relationships that seemed to enmesh them all was bewildering; fascinating and a challenge to unravel. I ruminated on the plum stories till I recognized them for what they were: a testimony to how myth, legend and fact blended to create, and keep alive the traditions of nations. Why not, I asked myself, try to make my own myth? At least, I'll learn something.

One Saturday afternoon in Galle, an eccentric Buddhist priest known, appropriately enough as "*pissu hamuduruwo*", came on his alms-round and, in his kindly, garrulous manner, was gossiping with my soon-to-be mother-in-law. After the ritual blessing of the Dantanarayana family – whose name proclaimed the special service the family had rendered to the Sacred Tooth Relic, for which deed the Triple Gem would bless them unto Eternity – he began to make more prosaic inquiries about each of the children. The good lady pointed to Dayadari (my wife to be), who was standing close by, saying she was soon to be married. Then, of course, he wanted to know to whom and, when the name of 'Devendra' came up, exclaimed that *here* was a fit consort for a Dantanarayana for, was it not Devendra Mulacharya who built the Audience Hall, the Octagon of the Temple of the Tooth and other architectural gems of by-gone days?

Eccentric he may have been, but perhaps it is people like him – and those who wrote the ancient chronicles – who kept alive the legendary history of lands and peoples. His throw-away reference was intriguing and I dug into the family memory-banks for its origins. Then, I tried to flesh out the bare bones with a smattering of learned history, memories of a Kandyan childhood and intimacy with the ruins of older Sinhala kingdoms, enriching the whole with my own fantasies.

In the Kandyan kingdom, our last, the Kings were the custodians of the "*Danta Dhaatuwa*", the Sacred Tooth Relic - believed to be a tooth of the Buddha himself - there had lived a humble artisan by the name of Narayana. The name is South Indian, and so must have been the man.

Though the King was the custodian of the Relic, the Relic was greater than the King. It was his prime duty was to look after it, as his own claim to power flowed from this custodianship. But Kings are but human, and this one (like many another even today) believed he could take liberties with the law, doing as he wished. In time, he began to neglect his duties to the Tooth Relic becoming more engrossed in other, more worldly matters. Finally the day dawned when this neglect crossed the fine line and the Relic decided that the King must learn a lesson.

The next morning, when the monks, drummers, and the rest of the retinue arrived at the *Maha Maluwa* (the inner shrine) for the customary *poojawa* they sensed, uneasily, a strange coldness. Mustiness pervaded the shrine. There was no scent of flowers and incense. The warm glow that enveloped the inner shrine was dulled. Instead, there was this smell of an abandoned house. Something was horribly wrong. Panic-stricken, they sent word to the Chief Monks. They hurried to the scene; striding, almost running, hoisting their robes over their shoulders more securely, fearing some awful Fate had befallen the Relic. With beating hearts and shaking hands, they uncovered the innermost Relic casket and – it was empty! There was no way anyone could have removed it: only the Relic could move itself. There, staring in their faces was the fateful conclusion: the Relic had abandoned the Temple.

It was a National Calamity. Disaster would now follow. Fearfully the monks summoned the King.

The King was horrified. Too late he realized that the Relic was punishing *him*, not the country. He had to locate the Relic if he were to remain king, and beg of it to return to the Temple. In forlorn hope he asked that the four major *Devales* – particularly the *Natha Devale* where Kings were consecrated – be checked for the presence of the Relic. But he only drew a blank, and had to launch a kingdom-wide search. He could only use teams of nobles and generals: he dared not use the traditional *anda-bera-karayas,* as news of the loss would make the people rise against him.

After many, many days of nothing but bad news, some good news at last reached the fever-wracked King. A group of *Veddahs,* trekking through the scrub jungle that covered the ruins of the

ancient capital of Anuradhapura, had seen a strange light in the forest one night. Investigating, they had stumbled upon a majestic tree, a *Vanaspathi* ("Lord of the Forest"), from within the canopy of which the light streamed out. There could be no doubt that the Relic had now been located, in the forests of far-away Anuradhapura. The tree grew amidst the ruins of a roofless building, open to the sky. Stone pillars leaning askew, guard stones and balustrades fallen down, stone steps pushed out of alignment, ant-hills growing by the flower altars, scattered brickbats where a central shrine had been and since been plundered. And trees were everywhere: twisted, tortured, stunted trees; feathery-leaved, thorny *Mimosas;* others with wicked spurs for thorns. Towering above all, was this tall, majestic tree. There could be no doubt: this ruin had been the first *Daladaa Maligaawa* of Anuradhapura, when the King had received the Relic from Price Dantakumara and Princess Hemamali.

Preparations had to be made to persuade the Relic to return to Kandy. There had to be an appropriate ceremonial *poojawa* performed, respectfully inviting it to return its rightful place in the golden casket, borne on a silken cushion by the highest of the high-born and the purest of the pure - and certainly not by the scallywag of a King who had brought this sorry state about. All that had to be done was done, but alas! The Relic was not moved by the entreaties of all the greatest and most venerated in the land. The Diyawadana Nilame, the Saluwadana Nilame, the Mahanayakas of Asgiriya and Malwatte, the Basnayake Nilames of the four Dewales, tried: and failed. Mixed feelings prevailed: joy that the Relic was yet in the kingdom and frustration at failure of the monks and lay guardians to sway the Relic's decision.

One night, in his restless sleep, a god-like presence appeared to the King and instructed him to search out this artisan, Narayana who, alone, would be able to woo the Relic back. Another search now began: this time, for a man called Narayana.

This is the core of the story that fascinated me. The Kandyan kingdom was kept strategically forested, to confuse would-be invaders. Only the terraced paddy fields were free of trees. Villages nested on the slopes of hills. To search for an unimportant man, who could have been in any village, was a daunting task. But, it had to be done; and done it was, and Narayana and his village found. I visualize the scene when the King's party comes to the humble artisan's village. I can see in my mind's eye the lofty canopied trees of the Kandyan countryside, and the taller, lissom areca nut trees lining the narrow, high-terraced paddy fields, hear the tinkling of water falling from terrace to terrace, see the

morning mist yet blurring the tree tops, the rutted cart tracks and the narrow, slippery-stony footpaths climbing the steep hillsides to villages of low-eaved, straw-thatched houses of mud: all these I, too, have known. So I can imagine the consternation, the fear, in the little community when the King's party, with Heralds, drums, horses and palanquins enters the village. Mothers, clutching babies, hurry inside. Elder daughters spirit the younger ones away, out of sight. The village elders gravely gather to receive the visitors. Their mission is explained with due gravity and the Man of the Hour is asked to come. Narayana heeds the summons, rises from his workplace, bewildered, takes his tattered towel off his shoulder and wipes his face, ties it round his waist, and bows low to greet to these lords who have come in search of him. And, to hear why.

Who was Narayana? What was going on in his mind? How does he react? Can he, does he know how, to do what's expected of him? Or, could he – by divine coincidence – also have had a strange dream? Anyway, he does go (what else can he do?) with the King's party, leaving behind an awed village full of frowns and whisperings, worried faces and fear. But first he has a bath, offers flowers at a shrine, changes into fresh clothes and goes, confused though he may be, to do his duty by his faith and his King.

They reach the tree, rays of golden light emanating from within, a King prematurely aged by worry, and the full panoply of the Court, standing a respectful distance away it. Narayana, undeterred, makes the preparations for the *poojawa*. Seated in *padmasana* (the lotus position), he meditates in silence, cleansing his mind of worldly desires, prepares himself to address the Presence above him. Then, slowly raising his clasped hands over head, he begins to chant: *"Om Namo Narayana….."*

Was it that he recited? How did he know the *mantram*? It was George Keyt, the painter, who gave me the key. We had gone with him to Galle one day exchanging stories along the way, and this was one I told him. The next day, he met my mother-in-law and, on hearing her name, he began to recount, as if new-minted, the story of Narayana and the Tooth Relic, embroidered with all the fine detail of Kandyan peasant life he was so familiar with and the Hindu mythology he was steeped in. Narayana, he said, was a *Vaishnavite*, a devotee of the Hindu god Vishnu and, to him, the Buddha was an *'Avatar'*, or manifestation, of the god Vishnu. The very name (**नारायण**; *nārāyanâ*) is also the Sanskrit name for Brahma, Vishnu, Krishna; and the first *Narayana* was the son of the First Man, *Purusha*. Divinity resides

in Man. Any man, conscious of the Divinity within him, is *Nara-Narayana,* an incarnation of Vishnu, on earth, working for the preservation of Righteousness. And so he began his prayers that day with the ancient chant: *"Om Namo Narayana"*. Fanciful? Perhaps; perhaps not.

But behold! The Relic heeds this humble man's incantations and descends from the tree in a blaze of glory, into the golden casket, on the silken cushion borne on his head by Narayana. And so, it was Narayana – *Nara-Narayana*, working for the preservation of Righteousness – who carries the casket on his head, all the way to Kandy, where he places it in the inner shrine of the Temple of the Tooth. (And the jungle tide of stunted, thorny trees around the first, ruined Temple of the Tooth, far away, crept back to reclaim its lost territory, and there was no tree taller than the rest.)

Narayana must have been well rewarded with lands and costly gifts, but the most enduring reward was the coupling of this name with that of the Relic in a traditional *'pata-baendi-naama'* ceremony, to become the founder of the clan of "Danta Narayana"

And if, by chance, you doubt this story, you must make your pilgrimage to Kandy, to the Temple of the Tooth. There, if the guardian gods smile upon you, you shall see the Relic: exactly where it was placed by Dantanarayana, long, long years ago.

INHUMAN RITES

The phone rings, and I pick it up.

"Commander Devendra, Sir?"

"Yes, it is"

"I'm Commodore Samaratunga, Sir, from Vavuniya. There is a gentleman from the Human Rights Commission with me, who says he knows you and wants me to give you a message. Do you know a Mr. Parameswaram?"

"Yes, Commodore, yes. I think I know what he wants to tell me. Can I speak with him……?

"Yes, of course, Sir"

…and thanks for calling me"

Para comes on line.

"Soma, I don't think you know this, but Bala passed away this morning….."

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So he is dead, then. Bala, Para's brother, my closest friend from Navy days. Now claimed by a creeping cancer in far away Sydney, to where he had emigrated, reluctantly, years ago

There are many ways of coming to terms with new-born grief, none of them easy, none successful – except, perhaps, Time. I grieve for what I have lost. He, who is not here, is beyond sorrow. I, yet wedded to Life, grieve for the loss of some of me. At times like this I tend to turn to words to work out my grief. How many times I had written about my close friends! Once again I turn to words. The need to transform my self-pity into something more is strong. I dig deep into yesterdays to keep alive the dying embers of shared memories that are, now, mine alone.

"The 1960s were the years when we were young, " I write, *" the world was young and we were in the Navy. Just three of us, all of the same vintage of our only University, then. Robert, Bala and I. Robert was the first to go. Now, it is Bala".*

I stop. Other thoughts intrude, take center stage. Memories of why Bala, and so many others, had to leave this country. The loss of innocence.

We all joined the Navy when it was essentially a peaceful force, only called upon to help the Police when more hands were needed. For most of the time our lives were simple and domestic. In 1971, with the first revolutionary uprising, that age ended. We found ourselves being the target. Our reaction was slow, unprofessional, born of anger. The uprising was put down violently, even when some of the revolutionaries had been our own men. A generation of very young, idealistic, misled boys and girls surrendered, were taken prisoner, or killed. Not all of us – I, for one – actually

resorted to violence and cruelty, but not one of us – and that includes me – can be absolved for what we did collectively. We did what we, each one of us, thought it was our duty to do: products of our colonial education.

The next year, I was returning by train from comparatively peaceful Jaffna. Sharing the compartment was a University mate, now a successful lawyer. University life had had more than its share of "Reds" and "Pinks", and we both had indulged in those activities. Naturally we got to talking about the insurrection: we, who had marched in protest against the government and faced – and battled – a baton-wielding Police Force, not twenty years previously. We were indulging in our old undergraduate game of analysis, analysis, trying to turn the grit that was hurting us into pearl. It could go along as a game only so far, no further. Finally, he said:

> "Somasiri, let's face it. If this had happened ten years ago, you and I would have been on the other side of the barricades"

I had no answer.

Neither had the country. For, though the insurgency had been put down, the country had emerged as an unpleasing mutant of its past self.

The next two decades were our worst. An age misbegotten of mistrust and mistake. Feelings had become polarized. Dislike had turned to anger. Anger begat hate, hate begat violence and violence begat war. A group of soldiers ambushed in Jaffna lit the fuse. A backlash of ferocity, never experienced before, erupted all over the country as, perhaps, it was intended to. Overnight, houses and shops of the Tamil persons in the south were torched. Sinhalese were marooned in the north desperate to flee the area. The centuries old Muslim settlements in Mannar, in the east, became victims of ethnic cleansing. Temples, Mosques, Churches and school buildings became refugee camps. Overnight, we were no longer one people. Friendships were broken in the atavistic need to live amongst your own. Ships ferried refugees to and from one part of the country to another.

The night I remember was a peaceful one in our own neighbourhood. I was no longer in the Navy then. The radio carried news of disturbances, but we had lived through sporadic incidents of this kind of thing before and, besides, we could not see or hear anything untoward around us. We dined leisurely, got ready for the work of the morrow, and so, with minds at ease, to bed.

Waking as usual, I drove off for work. Nothing was amiss along the back-roads I used. When I reached Narahenpita junction, I was totally unprepared for the sight of the burnt and vandalized buildings, shattered windows, a pall of smoke, debris on the road. And people, with set faces, going to work, only being asked to move on by the Police. Some, I saw, were worried but others happy at the horror. My first thought was for Bala, who lived down a small lane close by. I went straight there, dread in my heart. The house was closed but two boys peered out, hearing me call, recognizing my voice: Bala's nephews, hiding in fear. What they said added to my worry: Bala had flown abroad a few days ago, was due to arrive back that morning and Pathma, his wife, had already taken a car to the airport to meet him. Neither could be contacted. I appealed to the neighbours to help keep the boys to stay out of sight and outsiders away. I said would be back after looking into the office.

We decided to close office early – a curfew had been declared – and I started back. Tension and terror were rising by the hour. I asked an office driver to come with me, promising him I would get him home. Disturbances there were, though at a lower intensity than the evening and night before. Motorists were being stopped by mobs demanding petrol for arson. The crowds were irrational, fired by anger. Underworld elements were in control, and the Police thin on the ground. My mission, though, was to seek Bala. At the top of his lane, I handed over the wheel to the driver. He was to keep the car on low gear, the near side door open and be ready to take off if I came running back. I walked down the narrow cul de sac, with eyes wide open, fearful of what I might see. The house was closed and locked. Neighbours came out in strength to check me out. They recognized me from the morning and told me the boys had been all taken away in a Navy car. Robert, yet in the Navy, had rescued them.

Relieved, I came back and took over the wheel. As I rounded the next bend there was a crowd. A motorcyclist and his pillion rider were surrounded by a mob, demanding the petrol in his tank. The riders hadn't a chance. Suddenly, my self-control broke, and Anger boiled in me. A lesson from long ago came, unbidden, to mind – "Remember, a car can be a weapon". Revving up the engine, blasting my horn, I charged into the crowd. Cursing, they drew back. I hoped I had given the riders a chance to get away; I don't know whether they did. I couldn't stop to check.

Similar scenes, less dramatic, all the way home. I dropped off the driver and went home, seething with agitation and anger. But, at least, Bala was safe.

We started work the next day. No one who felt safe enough needed to come, but we had to keep the wheels rolling. There was comparative peace and we managed to get through the week till "Black Friday", when Raja, an elderly Tamil in my office, decided to come to pick up his pay. He needn't have, but habit was too strong. A false alarm that Colombo was under attack triggered an exodus. Buses, trains, cars were all packed, and the roads full of people walking home, perhaps ten miles or more away. We closed up shop and sent everyone home. Seeing that all had gone was my responsibility. I took the last four – a girl, my elderly Tamil friend, and two others – in my car to drop them off along the way. Things were very much worse that day. Violence was only too visible. We looked out for columns of rising smoke, judged direction and took other roads. Thankfully, I dropped off the girl, first. Soon after we saw our first torture victim, and a crowd too cowed to intervene. Turn! Change direction! Heading south, kept on getting more and more difficult. Whenever there was a crowd, I turned into a side road before reaching it. Till I came to near the place I had charged into the crowd a mere four days ago. There was a crowd and a traffic build-up, but there was also a road to turn to. But a Policeman waved us through, and I kept going. I could plainly see a gang brutally harassing some person and the crowd was drawn to the sight like a magnet. He was going to die a horrible death and I was too conscious of the waves of fear from my Tamil friend next to me. I cut left and swung sharp right in a U-turn, bump! over the curb and bump! down again, when the crowd realized I had a Tamil in the car. Rocks and steel rods banged the car but I had the advantage of a clear road and pulled away. Stopping someplace quiet I asked my Sinhalese passengers to, please, find their way home as I had to look after our Tamil friend. They agreed, willingly, and got out. I asked Raja what he wanted me to do, now that neither he nor I could run the gauntlet home together. He was traumatized.

"I don't know, I don't know what to do. I can't think" he kept saying.

This was no time for dithering.

"Then," I said, "you will do as I say. You will place your life in my hands"

I had only one ace up my sleeve. I went back to office, in the commercial district, by now an oasis of eerie calm after our recent adventures. I took him inside and told him to stay indoors, and I would see that he would be fed and looked after. He was to telephone no one and we phoned a responsible friend, who would tell his wife that he was safe but would not come home for some days. I had then to go the Chairman's house and tell him the story. He calmed me down and undertook to look after Raja. Much later, I joined a Navy vehicle going south and reached home.

The curfew was extended over the next several days and we were marooned at home. A house of a Tamil friend some yards away was torched, only an hour after I spoke to him and he said he trusted an "early warning system" he had established with the local underworld. Seeing the house on fire, I did not know whether they were trapped inside or not. My children were crying, frightened at what might have happened to their playmates. The Police Station lines were too busy. I tried the Navy. An officer contacted an Army patrol car in the vicinity and it came. We were then getting water ready to fight the fire if it spread to the adjoining house. The young officer and his men went into the still smouldering ruins and reported that there were no human bodies. My friend had escaped, but not the animals he reared. The pigs squealed as they were butchered, and the air was full of chicken feathers. The peacock had managed to fly away, but had come down a little way off and provided a feast to that neighbourhood.

Where had my friend gone? To those who reveled in the slaughter, I was the prime suspect for his miraculous escape. Ominous phone calls began coming: the next house to burn would be ours. We kept as bold and calm a front as possible. It was always possible that the callers were those who enjoyed spreading a little fear around while enjoying their drink and the mayhem. As night fell, leaving the others to sleep, my son and I patrolled the garden armed only with heavy lengths of piping. There were two houses and a car yet burning. The smells were not consoling. Around midnight, we could not keep it up and went to bed. Almost immediately, it seemed, I was woken up. There was a fire just behind our house. Was it meant as a warning for us? Groggy with sleep I went out to see. Another car had been set on fire on the road behind us. The arsonists were yet busy. Patrolling began again. But kindly Fate spared us.

Things began to slow down the next day. But for the Tamils yet trapped in their houses there was little hope. A young couple living in a room near a neighbour, decided to make a break of it. We were fearful for them, but they had made up their minds. Having spread the word among a trusted few, we watched them clamber over the back wall and maintained a "watching brief" till they went out of site. I hope they got away, but we don't know.

In Raja's case, I know. A wealthy client took Raja's family and essentials away from Colombo to his house close to the airport and looked after them for many days: enough for him to get a visa to Canada. He put the family on board, gave him money to set himself up and sent them to a new life. (Several years later, the 'saviour' went to Canada on a visit, and did not forget to tell Raja that he hoped to see him. He had Raja's telephone number and rang him. The call was

evidently expected, for Raja had left a message – Raja did not want to talk to anyone from here – not even him.)

Bala's experience was different. He continued to be in Colombo, working at his job. He was a citizen of this city, not of Jaffna to which he was bound only by family ties. But the stress was too great in the weeks that followed, the call to seek refuge with the family more insistent and so, unable to resist that call, he joined the deck passengers on a ship. What thoughts went through the mind of this former naval officer and lately company Director, as he watched the coast of this country slip past him? I don't think I will ever know. This was his second round of war: he had been born in what had been the Federated Malay States, till the Japanese invasion. His father, working in the Railway Service, disappeared after a bombing raid and was discovered in a hospital months afterwards. With a disability pension, the family had come back to their Jaffna roots, but it took a long while for Bala to adjust. At the University he found it easier to relate to Colombo and the Singhalese south. I remembered my midnight train ride to his home for his father's funeral. My presence was welcomed so genuinely.

I wonder what went on in his mind, he, whose adopted city had no place for him.

There was safety in Jaffna, but that Jaffna was not to his liking. He could not accept the new political philosophy. And it was not safe for him to do so. "You have eaten Singhalese rice, Bala: you are no longer one of us" was a regular refrain, with a hidden menace. This, and his having nothing to do, having to mind his words, his questions, became too much for him and, with the south becoming calmer, he packed up and left Jaffna. "If must die", he told me one day, "let me die among my friends." Once again, he had been rejected, as an outsider.

Colombo brought him the life he had missed in Jaffna. His job was waiting for him. So were his friends and the old garrulous socializing with friends resumed. Many, many Tamils were seeking refuge in other countries and he was urged to go, too. Yet, he had not the heart to cut the ties that bound him to this country, his city. But Injustice – in his adopted city – caught up with him, once again. He was made to feel unwanted in the company he had served so well and he was, quietly and illegally, dropped. With his skills and experience he found others, but he began to realize that the chain of rejections would follow him. I, myself, urged him to go to Australia and, reluctantly, with heavy heart, he went to yet another country to live out the rest of his life.

A man so often rejected, how would it have changed him? He changed, of course, but on his visits here he was his old self. Would not the iron have entered his soul? I wouldn't be surprised if it did: he was, after all, but a frail human. We were the same with each other, though. Would the cancer of hate invade his mind? I don't know.

But the cancer did invade his body, and six months later, I had this call from his brother, ironically through the Navy. Ironically, too I was at a University, teaching Human Rights to Military personnel and raging at the inhuman rite that "ragging" had become in the universities. But Bala, with whom I could have talked all this, had gone away.

Everyone has a time to go and it is not their loss I mourn, but mine. One comes to a point in life when making new friends is not easy. One looks around and sees no one left with whom to spend an evening of exasperating argument or companionable silence. And one never really learns to do without. If one is fortunate though, there will come a time for looking back; to put away contemplating one's own loss; to remember only the good times and laughter.

To accept that all things must end.

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