COMMENTS on Untouchable Woman's Odyssey

An extraordinary first novel by an accomplished poet, Untouchable Woman's Odyssey offers a deeply insightful narrative of postcolonial Sri Lanka. Beneath the placid surface lies a tale of the challenges of modernity, the deep divisions of class and caste, and the traces of the past in shaping the present. With remarkable skill, the author moves back and forth in time, linking the present to the past, demonstrating the multiple ways in which Buddhism has shaped the contours of Sri Lankan culture. An inclusive text in the best sense of the term, the novel draws together multiple traditions to explore the pathos, paradoxes and richness of modern Sri Lanka. Suwanda Sugunasiri’s Untouchable Woman’s Odyssey is a major contribution to both Canadian and Sri Lankan literature.

- Prof. Chelva Kanaganayakam
  Professor of English, Univ. of Toronto, Canada

"... a brilliant evocation of the ancient, mythic and religious past of a country in South Asia... The story comes alive within a wholly convincing fictional landscape that serves as the stage for a witty and informative dramatization of the country's modern, post-colonial struggle for freedom and independence."

- Prof Birbalsingh, Professor Emeritus of English, York University, Toronto, Canada

- “Untouchable woman's odyssey! Pulsating vibrantly underneath...”.

- “Tangamma is the heroine, the true woman of Asia with a practical mind, adaptable to any situation, to face any hardship, deprivation and also with the strength and the willpower. ...”

- “...incredibly cinematic, camera panning from one image to another, then zooming in..”

- “A beautifully written love story, the two protagonists, female and male, come from different ethnic / caste backgrounds. They both undergo transformation in relation to each other, their voices "flowing over one another like water...”"

"... deft execution of conflict, intensifying action, crisis and climax..."
LITERARY WORKS of the author IN ENGLISH

Poetry
Waves of Cuba, 2110, Nalanda Publishing Canada.

Critical Studies
Step Down Shakespeare, the Stone Angel is Here, 2011, Colombo, Sri Lanka: Godage.

Editor
Sri Lankan Literature (Sinhala, Tamil, English) (with Prof. A V Suraweera), special issue of Toronto South Asian Review, 1984.

COMMENTS ON the author’s POETRY

“What is exciting about the collection ... is the imagination that transforms (the poet’s) varied interests into moments of revelation that in turn lead to holistic vision.... What permeates the entire book is a distinctly Buddhist sensibility.. the humor and the gentle irony ... are distinguished aspects of his poetry.”

Prof. Chelva Kanaganayakam
Univ. of Toronto, Canada, Toronto South Asian Review

“... The dominant themes of Suigunasiri’s verse: a strong political commitment alongside detached, pietic Buddhism. ... There is much less of diasporic in his verse and much more of a straight out pleading for common sense and non-violence.”

Prof. Vijay Mishra
Murdoch University, Australia, Canadian Literature
UNTUCHABLE
WOMAN’S ODYSSEY

A Novel

Suwanda Sugunasiri
This is a work of fiction, with some historical characters and events as background. Just as the languages De-Leonese and De-Andhrese are, there is much else that is fictitious.
PREFACE

In the making for 10 years, it is with a sense of contented humility that I present my first novel as my 75th year gift to the world.

Several people have helped me along, one of the first being Steven Heighton, Writer-in-Residence at the University of Toronto, with his critical comments on sections of an earlier draft. I am grateful to Kelly Watt and Alana Wilcox for taking the time to go through the novel, and offering their critical comments. It is to Johnny Ossorio I offer my thanks for transforming my concepts into an attractive Book Cover.

Swarna has gone through many a draft of this novel. Without her patience, and the constant encouragement, my work will not have seen the light of day. So my bow to her.

Without the technical help of Anura Bellana, my novel may not have reached the Kindle audience. So I thank him for placing it in your hands. I also want to thank Amazon’s Kindle Team for its facilitation.

May you enjoy reading this Untouchable Woman’s Odyssey as much as I have writing it.

May you be well!

Suwanda Sugunasiri

August 2011
Toronto, Canada
Dedication:

To the oppressed women of the world;

&

To my Parents,

Missinona Warnakulasuriya
(mother)

and

Kaloguru S H Sauris Silva

for whom social upliftment was a way of life.
Bio of Author

Suwanda H J Sugunasiri

Featured at the Harbourfront Reading Series, Suwanda Sugunasiri is a poet with three collections - The Faces of Galle Face Green (1995), Celestial Conversations (2007) and Obama-Ji (2009). The Waves of Cuba is a free-standing publication, excerpted from the third collection.

The pioneering columnist on Multiculturalism at the Toronto Star, introducing multiculturalism to Canadians as it was taking its first halting steps, and a Book Reviewer, he was appointed by Order-in-Council to the Ontario Advisory Council on Multiculturalism and Citizenship. Later writing a column on Buddhism as well, he has been featured on CBC, CTV, TVO, Vision TV, CTS, OMNI TV, CFRB, BBC (London), Radio Blue Danube (Denmark) and Ceylon Broadcasting Corporation (Sri Lanka), among others. He was a columnist in Sri Lanka, under the pseudonym, Madhupa. He has been a popular speaker on the Multiculturalism and Interfaith Relations Circuit in Canada, in academic as well as non-academic settings – churches, synagogues, community meetings, etc.

Sugunasiri is the pioneering researcher on the Literature of the Canadians of South Asian Origins (for the Secretary of State). The Whistling Thorn: South Asian Canadian Fiction (Mosaic), one of the earliest anthologies of which he is Editor, features renowned authors such as Neil Bissoondath, Cyril Dabydeen, Rohinton Mistry and M G Vassanji, among others. He is also co-editor (with A V Suraweera) of a special issue of the Toronto South Asian Review, on Sri Lankan Literature, bringing together for the first time writers in all three languages – Sinhala, Tamil and English.

His critical studies on literature has appeared in Canadian Literature, World Literature Written in English and Canadian Ethnic Studies. He has also translated Bertrand Russell into Sinhala.

A Sinhala popular play in Sri Lanka by Dayananda Gunawardhana, Nari Baena, directed by him in Toronto, was selected as one of the 10 best multicultural plays in Ontario. He has acted in plays and danced in ballets, and performed at the Harbourfront.

Labelled ‘Renaissance Man’, Prof. Sugunasiri, a US Fulbright Scholar, has done studies in National Development (PhD), Bud-
dhism (MA), Moral Philosophy (MA) - all from University of Toronto, Linguistics (MA, University of Pennsylvania, USA) and Oriental Languages (BA, University of London). He has taught in diverse areas such as Buddhism, Education, Linguistics, Multiculturalism, Psychology and Sociology at University of Toronto (Trinity College, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education), Vidyodaya University in Sri Lanka and Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies (Toronto, Canada). Most recently, he gave four guest seminars on Buddhism at the University of Havana, Cuba.

Featured in Canadian Who’s Who, and on June Callwood’s National Treasures on Vision TV, and honoured by the Sri Lankan community with a Life-Time Award, he has been most recently featured in Wild Geese: Buddhism in Canada (McGill-Queen’s University Press), profiling his work in the field of Canadian Buddhism over the last three decades. He is Founder of the Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies, and Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies (Canada), and is published in, among others, Philosophy East and West.

A Member of the Canada Day Committee, Sugunasiri has also written an alternative preamble to the Canadian Constitution that seeks to include both believers in God and those who don’t - atheists, secularists and Buddhists. His Toronto Star piece, “Who, then, is a Canadian? has entered several anthologies, including one on ‘precise writing in the essay’.

With two publications of short fiction in Sinhala, a selected one or two translated into English and Bengali, Untouchable Woman’s Odyssey is his first novel.

Now retired, he lives with his wife Swarna in Toronto.
Few are they among humans,
they who reach the shore beyond.
But these other folk, the many,
they only run along the [hither] bank.

- Dhammapada, 85
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Untouchable
Woman's Odyssey

A Novel

Never never appeased is hatred by hatred. By non-hatred alone overcome it is. This is the eternal Dhamma!
- Dhammapada, 5
INTROLUDE

Even as on a heap of rubbish
thrown on the road,
a lotus flower may grow and bloom,
pure perfume giving a joy ever so broad…

- Dhammapada, 58
As Milton lay in bed, Tangamma tiptoed her way towards the bedroom, tray in hand. Parting the door drape, she peeked into the room. “Vanakkam, good morning,” said Milton, using the little De-Andhrese he had picked up. She smiled, and walked into the room, in her new sari, a gift from Milton.

Keeping the tray on the chest of drawers, she picked up a cup of tea on a saucer and walked towards the bed as he sat up. Giving him a peck on his cheek, she handed over the tea to him. Taking the other cup and saucer, she sat beside him on the bed, not too close but with face tilted towards his.

Tea over, she left the room, taking the tray with the cups and saucers as he lay back on the bed. She soon returned, and sat beside him, now a bit closer. He enjoyed the moment as he kept gazing at her. Now what was she up to, he wondered. She smiled, and then, getting up, walked to the other side of the bed. She picked up a roll of white cloth carefully placed at the edge, and placed it on the tray. Coming around, she knelt before him, and handed the tray.

As Milton looked at her with a questioning face, she started unfolding the roll. It was red in places. A frown came upon him. “Night,” she said.

He looked puzzled. She gazed back at him, smiling.

“Dooty…. Amma say… dooty,” she paused. “Sac-rud dooty… Pattini.” She reminisced on how, hearing her own voice in her sleep the night before, she opened her eyes to a moon peeking through the window in its fullness…. She now watched herself kneeing her way …. The night was silent, and now Milton’s breathing was closer to hers. Beginning to breathe in and out in tandem with Milton’s…, she was now getting into a slow rhythm…. 
Milton soon figured out what she was trying to say. It was her sacred duty to Goddess Pattini to show the despoiled sheet to your husband. He was familiar with the custom among the De-Leonese, but was surprised it was the custom among her people, too. He wanted no proof, nor cared to know if she was a virgin.

“You and your .... goddess,” he blurted out, pushing the cloth off the tray.

Then he broke out in laughter as she joined in. It was a ringing laughter. Then, getting out of bed, and leading her by hand, he tore the cloth into pieces. Going into the kitchen, he threw it into the ember still alive within the perimeter of the three stones, piece by piece. An understanding smoke arose, as the cloth caught fire. She leaned against him as she watched the fire. Then Milton heard her say something he understood as ‘sacred fire’.

Then, suddenly, taking a few steps back, she walked towards Milton in a slow step as he continued to watch the fire. As she came closer, Milton began to hear a sob. As she reached him, the sob turned to a loud cry as she fell prostrate at his feet and brought her hands together as she would do at the home altar in the Rented Grove. Cry returning to sob now, she raised her hands as she raised her body and lowered it – three times. And then touching his feet, she took her hands to her forehead as she had seen through the gate people do at the Kovil when greeting a Swami. As a surprised Milton looked on, she now took his feet in both her hands and kissed them. Milton figured out what she was trying to say through her sobs. It was her way of thanking him, for, as she was to explain later, liberating her from the miserable status she had been condemned to be born into. Now she would never ever have to face the humiliation of untouchability, or the long hours of loneliness and anguish that she had come to experience since leaving home. But suddenly she said, “eyes” and touched his chin. He opened his eyes to her, as she went on nodding as if to say, “I know that I know those eyes.... From some-
Wrinkles of a question mark appeared on her forehead. “But where?” Unknown to her, he looked at her eyes as she looked into his. “But where?” he asked himself, “Where had he seen those eyes.” As if in a silent communication, they both smiled as they embraced each other.............

Bang. Bang. Bang. Startled by a loud noise, they looked at each other. The pounding again. As Tangamma returned to the room, Milton walked to the door. “We’re looking for someone,” said a police officer, in heavy boots, khaki shorts and a matching buttoned up tunic. He was tapping his left palm with his baton in his right. “We’re looking for … Tangamma… Is she here?”

“Tangamma?”
“Yes… is she here?”
“Anything’s the matter?”
“Is she here?” Milton noted an impatience in the cop’s gruffy voice. Not sure what to say, he started to say something.
“I’m only carrying out orders, Sir, we have a complaint against her.”
“A complaint?”
Tangamma’s heart started beating faster.
“She’s wanted for stealing.”
“Stealing?”
“Yes, stealing… jewelry.”
“Stealing jewelry?”
“Yes. We have a complaint from one Mrs. JeyaweeraSinhama…”
“Mrs. JeyaweeraSinham?” repeated a surprised Milton as Tangamma listened to the conversation from the room, heart pounding.
Seeing a sense of familiarity with the name on his face, the cop asked, “Do you know her?”
“But why do you think Tangamma is here.”
“They suggested we try here.”
Inviting the policeman to a seat in the living room, Milton returned to the room. In a few minutes, Tangamma came out. “Why don’t you go,” Milton told the cop. “I’ll bring her to the station.” The cop looked up at him, and then at her, as she immediately looked down.
“You’re sure.”
“I’m Mr. Abhiman…. former Editor of the Daily Misnews…”
“My goodness, Sir… You’re Mr. Abhiman? Why didn’t you say so…?”
Milton grinned. “We just got married.”
“Got married?” The cop gave Tangamma a look over… a look of disdain. She ran inside, sobbing. Coming closer to Milton, and lowering his voice, the cop said, “I suppose you know that she’s …” He paused, and then, looking down, added, “she’s an un…..”
Milton smiled. “But I don’t understand…,” he said.
“There must be a terrible mistake….”
“Well, we have a complaint…… So it must be true…..”
“Alright,” said Milton. “Why don’t you go to the station… I’ll bring her there.”
“You know which one, right?”
“Little De-Andhrese Town.”
“Right.”

**Introlude! Hm!! Never heard of it… Poetic license?**

*Continuing to sip his morning tea in his hotel room by the ocean, Swadesh thumbed through, once again, the ‘bundle*
of papers’ his friend had given him the evening before. Intrigued by the eye-catching chapter heading, he was happy that he had immediately set about reading it, leaving the beginning for later.

But now he began to reminisce how the manuscript had ended up in his hands.
STORY PRESENT I

The wise, learned, principled and firm –
a moon in the stellar path.
Build camaraderie with them pretty firm.

- Dhammapada, 208
“I’ve lost interest in living.”

“Milton!” repeated Dasa, raising his eyebrows, as he tilted his head with a gentle smile. “Oh,” he said after a pause, “so you must be the friend from Canada.”

When Swadesh set off from his tourist city pad on the luscious island, the sun was already out. Walking along the pebbled lane on to the tarred public road, he came to a row consisting of mostly one-story buildings. The vegetable stands, tea kiosks and a metal works outfit were springing into life. A dog ran out on to the road and the road was getting to feel the heat of the sun. Crows were hopping around for vegetable pickings and morsels of food near the kiosks, hoping for an early catch. He looked at them with fascination. Taking short flights from one stand to the next, flapping their wings, they seemed to care little for him as he passed by in his short sleeve shirt and white pants. Kicking his slippered foot in their direction, he enjoyed drawing a caw out of them. He moved away just in time to avoid a white dropping as he went past a taembili vendor who offered a King coconut for ten rupees. The robust fruits sitting on the store front, crowding each other out in a bunch, brought memories of years gone by. He visualized himself at the beach, and a vendor approaching him. Next he was watching the man shearing off the top of the fruit with a sharp blade. Now the man was holding the taembili golden-hued young coconut in both his hands and taking the last sip of the tasty water. He was almost tempted to taste one now, but he had just had his breakfast. Egg hoppers and coconut sambol made of scraped coconut mixed in chili, onions and dried Maldivian fish.

As he continued towards the bus stop, he caught himself casting glances at the people who were now beginning to stir up the street dust. It had been a while since he saw so many brown faces, men and women in wrap-around sarong and red-da. Now his ears got a blast of music from a store that dis-
played a near-life size Elvis Presley, alongside a local group, one of them sporting a black cross against a squeaky white shirt. Gypsies, it read underneath. It was a baila tune, adding a *joie de vivre* to the morning. “Oh yes, that inheritance from the Portuguese,” Swadesh said to himself. He immediately recognized the words of the old popular tune.

_Eat, drink and be merry,_  
_Death tomorrow may hurry._  
_But, sweet, today, won’t it be,_  
_if jolly we ... can ... beeeeee!_

A giant newspaper headline of another terrorist attack stared in his face from a rack, but the man at the back continued humming along, snapping his fingers. He continued as if to blow the headline out of his mind. “Eat, drink and merry be”, he said to himself as a smile appeared on his lips. The resilience of a people ... the People of the Lion, De-Leonese, in the midst of all this mayhem of twenty five years – youth rebellions, soldier killings, house burnings, terrorism, terrorism again, pawning off harbours to non-nationals, he thought to himself as he hurried towards the bus.

Caught in the traffic gridlock, it was about an hour later that Swadesh got off the bus. He was surprised to see how pregnant the sky had become with dark clouds. He could feel the enveloping humidity as he prepared to get a soaking, watching the clouds making chess moves.

The expectation of meeting his old friend, Milton, however, lifted his spirits. Hitting a tarred wide road, he knew from the familiar sights of a long time memory, he was now in the neighbourhood of Cinammon Gardens. Walking along Pederson Road, he went past some two-storey and three-storey houses, most of them cozying behind shoulder-high brick parapet walls. A heavy gate opened, and a Benz found its way on to the road. The pas-
senger, in tie and coat, at the back was reading a newspaper as the driver sped past Swadesh.

Turning to a lane, Swadesh read the name on the street sign. Pederson Lane. Taking a piece of paper from the breast pocket of his shirt, he matched the number in it and stopped at a gate. The name on the gate-post? Milinda... Hm.. Was he at the right place? He paced towards the next gate, but came back. Taking a peek at the number again, he opened the gate carefully. It squeaked as if in pain, or was it seeking some kind of attention? As he walked in, he found his eyes looking along a patch of manyokka trees, waist high, all along the side parapet wall alongside the house. To the front of the house were some batala yam plants. A tree heavy with guavas rose above them at the back. A pebbly driveway led him to an open portico with some flowering arbour climbing against a trellis.

Seeing no one at the open door, he stepped on to the open verandah as he looked through the iron grills of the window. He could see no one inside either. Just then a man, in sarong and shirt, came towards him. Tilting his head down slightly, Swadesh greeted him with a "Hello." The man stood there with a blank face. "Is Milton in?" asked Swadesh. An enquiring look took over the man's face. "Milton?"

After a pause, Swadesh was relieved when a change of face brought out a smile. "Oh, Sir, you must be the friend from Canada." Swadesh smiled, as he figured out that this must be the one who answered the phone when he had called from Mt. Lihiniya Hotel. The man disappeared into a room to the right. "Podi Mahatteya, your friend from Canada is here", Swadesh heard him say, faintly.

As he waited, he noted some batiks, face masks, and some tourist literature sitting on a shelf. His mind ran back to the hotel where he had spent the first couple of nights. It was now Mt. Lihiniya, what he had known as Mt. Lavinia. At the entrance, it even had the figure of the sea-bird that
flew past welcoming every tourist to the seashore of the island. “Following a fad? Is he touristizing, too?” That’s what he had come to call the islanders’ penchant, as he had been told, to sell everything. Ebony and shells, masks and batiks, fronts and backs, trading HIV positives for of-the-skin negatives. Everything he had seen during the few days since his arrival confirmed what he had heard - that the whole country was a tourist playground. An anger swelled up in him as he remembered how, before he had left for overseas, way back when, it was his own friend, the Minister of Tourism, who had begun to trade the country off for the tourist dollar.

Returning, the man signaled Swadesh through the front door. He watched him go in the direction of a room with a full length door curtain. The scene on it attracted his attention. A raft was being carried down a stream fed by several rivulets. A lioness was feeding her young one, a cobra coiled up as if to pounce. As the man held the drape in his loose fist, Swadesh went past the door. Looking back, he saw the curtain-drape seal the entrance.

Swadesh studied, like a life sculptor taking stock of her objet d’art, the outlines of a diminutive figure against the window’s dim light, sitting on the sagging centre of a low bed. Was this indeed the friend he had come to see? His knees were higher than the bed. The beard was new, but looked as scarce as his graying hair, parted on the left. As he stood in front of the bed, a faint smile appeared. He walked closer, extending his right hand. “After all these years,” he said, as an arm, more like a stick, took it in his and let go.

“Take a seat,” he said, pointing to a blackened rattan chair in front of him.

“You’ve changed your name,” Swadesh said, as he lowered himself, taking his light attaché case from under his arm and leaning it against the chair on the floor.

“You noticed”, he said, voice barely audible.

“Yes, on the gate. Milinda, isn’t it.”
“Yes”, he said, eye-ball ing Swadesh. His face brightened up momentarily as if expecting his friend to say something. But Swadesh found him suddenly lost in thought. Leaving him to his private world, Swadesh turned his eyes to the sagging middle. There was no mattress. A mat woven of wide straw leaves opened up over what he thought was a string bed. At one end of the bed, a rectangular wood frame made of two-by-fours and bare in the middle stood vertical about a foot above the bed frame. Swadesh broke the silence.

“Well…..”

“Oh, sorry…. I was just thinking …my new name…. It’s been a while since I even thought about it.”

“I like your name”, said Swadesh looking into his eyes. “Reminds me of King Milinda.”

“Thanks for the Coronation,” he said, fixing his eyes on the cement floor.

“Suits you well… Remember, he ended up reaching spiritual heights in conversation with Venerable Nagasena…But, of course, you’ve always looked spiritual to me.”

Swadesh sat listening to his silence. Then Milinda got up and, addling to the door, said in De-Leonese, “Could we have something to drink?” Turning to him, he asked, “Do you remember Dasa?”

No, he didn’t remember, but that was all right. “That’s him… He’s been my confidante all these many years…. As a matter of fact he’s looked after me since I was a little boy.” Dasa stood grinning.

As he returned to the bed, Swadesh watched his feet shuffling from under his sack sarong. He kept watching the movement, as if to say, “There’s something odd here.” But he couldn’t figure out what it was.

Returning to the bed, he said, “So what brings you here after …. What’s it…?”

“Twenty five years,” Swadesh said with a mischievous laugh.
“Twenty five”, he repeated.

“Well …,” Swadesh paused. Milinda looked on. “For some research… I’ve started working on a novel.”

“That’s the only reason you came back?” shot back Milinda with raised eyebrows, as life found its way back into his pale face for a moment, as if a face-painter suddenly added some detail into an otherwise expressionless face. Swadesh thought he also read behind the words, “Betrayed”, “Traitor.” Fidgeting in his chair, Swadesh felt he could do nothing more than just grin. He felt like a monkey caught in an unsuspecting trap. But he was relieved to see that Milinda’s eyes had returned to their familiar territory of the bare cement floor as he twiddled his toes.

Breaking the silence, “I never want to leave this country”, said Milinda, continuing to gaze at his toes as if drawing some wisdom from them. “I want no other place on earth to have my bones buried.”

Suddenly Swadesh’s eyes fell on his friend’s protruding legs, hidden as they were in his sarong. His bare feet rested on the floor. Images of his friend now came rushing to him. Always spick and span in his white pants and short sleeved shirt, he could even hear the tick tock of his black shoes. Swadesh now looked at his own pants and shirt. He closed his eyes for a moment. Something bothered him. Then, he quietly removed the Birkenstocks on his feet and pushed them under the chair he was sitting on.

Weighted under, he sprung himself out of the chair and absentmindedly walked towards a bookshelf behind him that faced the bed. “So what’re you reading these days?” asked Swadesh, squatting on his toes as he lazily thumbed through the shelves.

Milinda reached out to the pillow. It was flat. His hands began to work in the space between the pillow and the mat. When he pulled his hand back, he held a bundle of paper with his small fingers. He stretched his hands towards Swadesh as he placed it on his hands and lay down
in the bed. Taking it in his hand, Swadesh sat on the floor cross-legged beside him.

“A novel!” Widening his eyes and tilting his head, he felt like a researcher who had hit upon an unknown treasure.

“I would like to hear what you have to say…..” Did he hear him right, Swadesh wondered.

“This is my response to all the mindlessness… of the past few years.” He lowered himself into the bed and returned to his conversation with the floor as Swadesh listened to the loud silence enveloping them.

“What happened in seventy one was child’s play,” Milinda said barely audibly.

“Really…?”

Swadesh fell into a silence as his mind went back to a time when, returning from his first overseas visit, he walked through the holding rooms reading the graffiti written by some of the 60,000 National Liberation Front rebels – many of them undergraduates of his own University, now incarcerated for their role.

“Well, they nearly toppled the government.”

“Again?” Swadesh said, coming out of his thoughts.

“You didn’t know?” he cast a piercing glance at Swadesh.

Swadesh could only turn his face left to right to left, with lips pursed. He thought he sensed a deep disappointment in his friend, that living overseas, he didn’t have a clue as to what had gone on. “It’s the country of your birth, you old fool,” he thought he could hear him say inwardly.

As if unable to bear the weight of his disappointment, Swadesh moved his head away. He began to flutter his eyelids, as a crack began to appear on the wall.

Minutes passed. The silence smothered him....

“Have you written any of it?” Milinda suddenly asked.

“What?”

“Your novel!”
“Oh…! Well, sort of …..Just a first draft.”
“What’s it about?”
“It’s really mostly biographical…”
“Can I read it?”
Swadesh looked at him as if in disbelief. Part of the reason he had wanted to see Milinda was to get feedback on a novel he had been working on. Now the maestro himself was asking for it!
“You know, even though we worked closely on that Project for over two years, I really didn’t get to know anything about you. It struck me that you were … sort of different from others of your age … So I should be delighted to get at least a second-hand glimpse of you.”
Swadesh raised an imaginary glass in his right hand. Saying, “I’d love to hear what you have to say”, he picked up his briefcase from the floor and pulled out a binder.
“Well, here it is…,” he said, moving over to Milinda.
He turned over the pages, and asked, “Can you leave it with me?” Swadesh nodded. He was beside himself.
As if Milinda was reading his mind, he raised his head and said, in a barely audible voice, “You know, I’ve never seen you in trousers…”
“Come to think of it, I guess not”, he replied. His mind went back to the time when he had first met Milton. He had taken to wearing the National by then, switching from trousers and shirt. He smiled, and nodded, and continued to nod as if to confirm it to himself. Then the words blurted out. “You know”, Swadesh said, “I’ve been trying to figure out all this half hour what it is that I was trying to figure out about you… now I get it.” He paused. “Y’know, I’ve never seen you in sarong… or barefooted for that matter.”
“Ironies of life, I guess.”
Milinda leaned back resting his palms on the bed strings, and grinned while Swadesh listened to a surge of new blood rushing through his veins on the waves of a
good laugh. “I guess you’re right”, he said moving in his bed, the bed sag adjusting to the change. He fixed his eyes on the floor.

“Come to think of it,” he said, looking from under his eyes, “You’re the one who got me into all this… sarong and all”

“Me?”
“Remember the YMBA?”
“You mean the Association where the Men are neither Young nor Buddhist?”
“Stop being cynical, will you”, he said in a rare moment of lightheartedness. “No, I mean the plays, meetings, seminars…”
“Oh that… Yes… I remember… Why?”
“Remember a seminar on Shakespeare?”
“On Shakespeare? Gosh, no…. Should I remember it?”
“Yes… because that’s where you got me into a sarong.”

Swadesh looked at him with unbelieving eyes, narrowed, and mouth spread into a thin line. Tilting his face down, he rested his chin in a crevice between his index finger and the thumb of his left hand. After a few seconds, he pushed his face up, over Milinda’s head when his eyes landed on a corner of the ceiling. A spider seemed to be struggling to get out of a dangling cobweb.

“You’re teasing me, aren’t you? How do I figure in all this?” protested Swadesh.
“Well,” he said smiling, “Let me try some regression magic on you…..”

“Regression? Is that your latest expertise…?” asked Swadesh, almost taken aback. ‘Of course, nothing should surprise me about him’, he told himself, remembering his versatility – teaching himself Russian, reading the galaxy, Shakespeare….

“No, but… close your eyes.”
Swadesh obeyed without protest.
“Now visualize yourself sitting in the audience at the YMBA…. The hall is packed, and you’re in the front row…”

Swadesh kept his eyes shut but mind open.

“Now you see some people walking on to the stage. The Chair calls the meeting to order… And now he’s introducing the speaker for the day as he looks at a man in white trousers and a white shirt sitting in the last chair to his left …”

He paused.

“Can you see him?… He is small made … and has a face that is … not particularly attractive. He’s looking down, and you see his hair ….. parted on the side.”

Silence.

“Now open your eyes.”

Milinda looked at Swadesh as he opened them.

“Do you see him now?”

“Should I?”

“Yes..”

“Hm… could it be yourself you mean?”

“The very same!”

“Hm…!”

“And you still don’t remember?”

Swadesh moved his head side to side.

“OK… Let me remind you then. I was the speaker, but I couldn’t do it myself.”

“Why not… You were the Shakespearean scholar.”

Minutes passed. “Maybe, but…” He looked down.

“I was to give it in De-Leonese”, he said in a voice less audible than earlier, as if he wanted no one to hear it.

“Oh, I see,” Swadesh said after a moment, watching a ray of light coming through the window.

“Exactly… you translated my speech.”

“I did?” He leaned back against the chair and cupped his hands, the two thumbs touching each other. Next he leaned back and closed his eyes. “Ouw…Yes, I’m
now beginning to remember... Oh yes, yes, I do remember now.”

“Good... and thanks.” Milinda smiled.

“But still I don’t understand how I got you into sarong.”

Casting a glance at the top page of the bundle of papers given to him by Milinda, Swadesh began to send his eyes over the material. “It’s all in there... my life story... Veiled as a novel. Besides, you’ll understand why.”

“Why what?”

“How I got into the sarong and all that.”

Then, after a pause, he added, “I can’t go on with it.” He looked down. Swadesh peeked into his face, as he continued to look down.

Another long silence. Swadesh ran his eyes along the bare walls of the room again. A light wire hung from the ceiling and a light bulb rounded up its end. Just below it was the bed, right smack in the middle of the room. A small stool was beside the bed, and on it were his reading glasses, a note pad and a pencil.

“I’ve lost interest in living.”

Startled, and head turned back, Swadesh stared at Milinda, who was looking away from him. ...lost... interest... in... living? Did I hear him right? Hm.. Lost... interest... in... living, he repeated to himself, pursing his lips. Hmm... A gecko darting down the wall went tch tch as it nearly crash-landed on the floor.

“What did you say? ....” he said, leaning forward. “...Lost interest in living?” he repeated the words as he moved closer. He couldn’t believe his ears. Or eyes. This literary icon, the great critic that artists revere, not wanting to live! He looked at Milinda again. He was looking up. As if wanting to disappear through the gabled roof... forever, he thought to himself. Swadesh looked at his face. With eye sockets sunken, the bony cheeks appeared with sharp ridges. He noticed how the narrowness of the nose rendered the face narrow, too. With little hair on his head, the fore-
head looked unusually wide. He was reminded of the face of a frozen body he had seen at the museum, standing with his hands crossed against the chest, and with mouth open to a side, as if to say, “I’m still talking. Are you listening?” Buried under the earth for centuries, a soldier nevertheless.

He felt his heart thump. As if recovering from a heavy body blow, he stood up and walked to the window. The rain was coming down in a torrential downpour. Caught in the strong wind, the treetops were twisting and turning as if frantically trying to keep from being decapitated. Swadesh looked back at Milinda who was now in a crouched position. Walking towards the bed, he squatted on the floor by Milinda’s head.

Silence took its seat for many minutes. “I feel I’m like a raft … carried downriver by angry currents.” Hearing the soft voice, Swadesh looked at him. Silence….. Not knowing what else to do, he began to thumb through the pages….

Looking at his watch, Swadesh stood up, stifling a sigh. “I’d like to take leave of you now… if you don’t mind.”

“Do what you want with the manuscript.”

“Oh, I’ll read it very carefully all right.”

Swadesh stood up, and walked over to the bed. He was about to extend his hand, but then suddenly, he clasped his palms together and bent a little forward. As he would do in front of an elder. As he walked out, a fear gripped him. Will I see him again?

Walking to the door, Swadesh moved the curtain-drape that had sealed them off from the rest of the world and went past it. Seeing Dasa who had announced him to Milinda, he accosted him. “Can you do me a favour?”

As Dasa entered the room with camera in hand, Swadesh walked towards the bed, saying, “Can I have a picture taken with you?” He helped Milinda sit up, holding him firmly around the shoulders. The flash brightened the room for a split-second.
As Swadesh turned on to Havelock Road on foot, he found it difficult to breathe. Air-locks? He felt as if all his arteries were crisscrossed and pressing against each other. A van weaved out of the line of vehicles in front of it and pegged itself between a car doing the same manoeuvre and a bus heading its way. The road, with unmarked lanes, appeared to allow two rows of traffic each way with the centre an open sesame. A horn tooted, and the bus screeched as the blaring horn from the van drilled a shrill through his veins. A motor cyclist with a woman passenger at the back swerved off the road on to the sidewalk, nearly running into him trying to avoid a pothole. All this is too much to bear, he said to himself, as he put his palm over his chest. He decided to seek comfort in what some people called a Threesome-Refuge — a wriggle-in-and-out, three-wheel speed monster.

But he had to cross the street first. He walked to the edge of the pebbled sidewalk and waited for what appeared to be hours, looking for an opening. He watched with fascination how the median accommodated vehicles going one way one minute and in the opposite direction the next. Fascination turned to frustration, he decided not to let the traffic hold him hostage. Even as he saw yet another van zooming towards him on the curb lane, he moved one foot forward, but swiftly took it back as the vehicle whizzed past him, shooting up a storm of dust. He jumped back, but capturing a traffic breather, stepped right back onto the road. He had barely inched forward when the front wheel of a Threesome-Refuge appeared right in front of him. He stared at the man behind the handle for nearly crashing into him. Flashing a smile, the man in sarong throttled the vehicle forward, one of the two rear wheels brushing on his trousers. Signaling to the next on-coming vehicle in the next lane by raising his hand, he took a few more steps
across, and before the traffic in the opposite direction reached him, dashed across to the other side, nearly crashing into a tree. Holding on to it, he put his left hand on his chest as if to stop its frantic pumping up and down. The clouds were still threatening as he finally hailed a Threesome-Refuge.

As he rode, he began to recall how he had come into contact with Milton. A mutual friend had introduced him. It was the telescope sitting in the dining room that first caught his attention as Swadesh stepped into the house. Standing eye-level near the back porch that led to a small garden, and about 4 or 5 feet in length he figured, it tilted upward. But his eyes were brought back abruptly by someone standing in front of him in white trousers and shirt, hair parted on the side. Invited to sit down, he found himself facing a pair of intensive eyes with thin eyelashes above bony cheeks, and lips thinner than his own.

When he was asked to come to Milton’s house, Tilan had talked about an idea that he and Milton had been toying with – to publish a Children’s Encyclopedia.

“An Encyclopedia? Just for children? … Surely there must be one published somewhere in the world!” Swadesh had said.

“I’m sure……”

“So why another?”

It was in answer to this question that Tilan had invited him to meet Milton. “So I understand you want to publish a Children’s Encyclopedia”, said Swadesh looking at Milton, as he knew Milinda then. “Yes”, he said in a low voice, and a pencil-line smile. Swadesh thought his voice matched his diminutive appearance to a tee. “I heard you’ve written some articles for children in the De-Leonese newspaper.”

“Auw....Just a couple.. One on Edison’s light bulb and another on Tsiolkovsky’s pioneering work on space travel.”
Swadesh watched as a smile came over Milton. “That’s exactly the kind of thing we have in mind. It’s an Encyclopedia of Science.”

“Oh, I see.”

Now he reached out to the teepee sitting in the centre surrounded by three chairs, and picked up a stack of papers, and gave it to Swadesh. It was held together with a thread that went through three holes on the margin, placed not too far apart. Thumbing through the pages, Swadesh soon realized it was on the Galaxy. He felt like a kid who had just received his first toy. He had never even thought of looking up at the sky on a dark night, never mind any other night for that matter. And Swadesh felt a fan whirling inside his brain as he browsed through the material. It was greatly informative, and written in refreshingly plain English. “This is wonderful”, he said splashing a wide grin. “I could never have guessed a Shakespearean scholar had such a vast knowledge of the sciences.”

“Daughter”, Milton called out, and a girl of about ten, with hair braided into two plaits, came out of the room. She wore a floral design skirt with a matching top. “Show this uncle your telescope.” This is fascinating, Swadesh remembered saying to himself. Walking over, the girl pointed the lens at the sky. The evening star trek had begun its daily show, it seemed, and the girl asked Swadesh to look for the brightest light. Stepping right up, Swadesh kept his eye at the lens, but could see nothing. With a few instructions from the youngster standing beside him, Swadesh now saw more than a few bright lights. Taking his eyes away after a few seconds, he beamed a smile at the girl. As he thrust his eyes on the aperture again, his eyes turned into a satellite disc. “Oh, I see something very bright”, he said, a smile crowning his lips. “It’s the Southern Star, Aurora Australis” the youngster said, and continued to give a little lesson on the constellation, explaining it in minute detail. “Boy, how much you know about stars!”
Swadesh stroked the girl’s hair. “Impressive!” The girl ran out to the backyard.

As Swadesh returned to the chair, he heard the rustling of clothes behind him. Looking askance, he saw someone peek through the door just beside the dining table, parting the floor-length curtain-drape in the middle. As he took his seat, the contours of a face began to appear. It was round, with narrow eyes and small ears, the long hair perhaps making it look even thinner than it actually was. Struck by a sense that her face was darker than his own, he caught himself glancing at Milton. “My wife”, Milton introduced the figure emerging through the door, as she walked towards them slowly, as if restrained by her sari. Looks graceful, he thought, holding the tray with her nimble fingers. Yes, she was indeed darker, he affirmed to himself, darker than Milton was. As she placed the tray on the teepoy, Swadesh stood up as if to greet her, as Tilan, looking up from his seat, smiled at her. She smiled back, looking in the direction of Swadesh. “Tangamma,” Milton added. Swadesh gave a nod, returning the smile. Vanakkam, he thought she said. Good morning!

Taking a saucer off the tray, she placed a cup on it with barely a sound, even as ceramic touched ceramic. Offering to Swadesh first, she filled it with steaming hot tea from a pot she steadied with one hand on the handle and the other supporting it at the base. After filling the other two cups, she kept the teapot in the tray, and came around with the sugar bowl. “Two please,” Swadesh said. As she bent, Swadesh watched her thick long hair roll over a shoulder. As she moved to Tilan and Milton with the sugar, Swadesh dipped the teaspoon that was on his saucer and turned it around. Returning it to the saucer, he began sipping, smiling at u. Her fingers absently rubbed her chest, as she turned around.

Tilan’s voice brought him back away from a train of thought seeking a track. He began to speak about the project they had in mind. Eliya was to be published in install-
ments, to no particular schedule – “whenever it’s ready”, Tilan explained. “Eliya,” Swadesh echoed, pursing his lips, and falling into a thought with raised eyebrows.

“Symbolic name all right… Light. Reminds me of the Buddha’s words at Enlightenment. A Light was born!”

“Yes… symbolizes knowledge all right…Buddhist or other”, added Milton.

“Great idea, but I don’t see how I can be of help… My knowledge of science can be packed into a pinhead”, Swadesh said, trying to hide his feeling of insecurity.

“There’s nothing to worry about on that score,” Tilan jumped in. “You see, he would be writing the articles,” he said looking at Milton who appeared pensive, and un-smiling. He was digging at the base of his slipper with his toe. “But he can use some help.”

Milton suddenly stood up and went towards the backdoor. Pulling the chair close, Tilan shared a secret…

“He can’t read or write in De-Leonese!”

“What?” whispered Swadesh, looking at Tilan, taken aback, as if he couldn’t believe his ears. He turned his face away as if to pay undivided attention to something else struggling to be born in his mind. He took a last sip, making sure that a sip or two remained in the cup.

A jam-packed van whisked by past the Threesome-Refuge he was traveling in along Havelock Road. We have locks all right, the words displayed themselves in his mind. A roadside radio was blasting out a song. He recognized the voice. Yes… it was the silver tongue of the silver screen alright before the days of TV. Rukmani Devi. But did she actually have all those lines, as he had heard, all those scintillating lines, enticing her millions of fans, written in Roman script though sung in De-Leonese, as he had been made to understand? Ah, but were not many an other freedom-fighter politician, De-Leonese or De-Andhrese, illiterate in their mother tongue as well? Sign of the times, I suppose, he said to himself. This was the first time Swadesh had actually come face to face with one who was
illiterate in his own mother tongue. Swadesh found his thoughts interrupted by Tilan. “So that’s where you come in.”

“Oh, I understand… So I’ll be the translator… right?”

Tilan nodded. “Oh, I’d love to do that…. best way to learn,” he said grinning broadly, as Tilan went on nodding.

Swadesh looked in Milton’s direction. He was still facing the backyard. “I saw your review the other day,” he said.

“Your mean of the experimental play? Oh, you saw it,” Milton said.

“You called it a half-boiled egg,” Swadesh said with a smile. “I met the director the other day…. He wasn’t amused.”

“Well, I write not to amuse” adding “… or to abuse”, said Milton in his soft voice as he turned around. “I write as I see it…. remember. I’m a critic…. not a politician.”

Swadesh felt himself leaning to one side, as another van full of passengers swerved to the edge of the road to overtake the Threesome-Refuge. As he continued, he recollected how Milton had become the leading Critic, his words the yardstick by which any work of art had come to be measured. Theatre. Literature. Art. Music.

Now the scene at the YMBA that Milton had brought back to him through his so-called regression appeared on the stage of his memory. He was in the audience Mr. Chairman was explaining how the organizing committee had decided on the topic.

“Shakespeare?” a committee member had asked in disbelief. “We’re the Young Men’s Buddhist Association… not the literary association. What has Shakespeare got to do with Buddhism?” he had asked. “Nothing”, the proposer had responded. “Well, isn’t our goal to bring knowledge to our members? And isn’t knowledge the basis for Nirvana?”
“Knowledge of Shakespeare the basis for Nirvana?”
Laughter breaking in all around, the proposer had joined in the fun.

“Well, our Professors seem to think so…,” joined another. “That’s why they seem to surround themselves with English, Russian, American and any other –ish or –an literatures, all western.”

“You mean, anything except the local,” added yet another.

“You got that right all right.”

“Isn’t that precisely why we would want to introduce Shakespeare to our non-English speaking scholars. So they could do some comparative studies – say, between Shakespeare and Kalidasa.”

“Isn’t that the Bharatan playwright?” someone volunteered.

“At least some of us know him.”

“Ha ha ha.”

“Yeah… That will be a contribution to our literature and culture.” That had clinched the argument.

Getting off at the Borella Junction, Swadesh placed some bills on the three-wheel operator’s outstretched palm. “No Sir,” he said. “Not for this far.” Thrusting another note on to his palm, Swadesh found himself walking towards the YMBA theatre. Would be wonderful to see it again. That was where, he recalled, he had had his own initiation to the stage.

Arriving at the theatre, he gazed at it for a few moments. Entering, he sat at the front row…. and closed his eyes, as if to bring back the memories. Swadesh watched Milton walk on to the stage from a side entrance. He looked at him from the stage as Swadesh made a tilt of his head in acknowledgement. The Chair introduced the speaker. “Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my great pleasure to introduce Mr. Milton Abhiman, our leading critic. Perhaps I should introduce him just as Milton….” He paused. Looking at the
invited speaker, he continued, “...John Milton, as in Paradise Found!”

Figuring that the joke was lost on the audience, the Chair tried another. But only after giving Milton’s background. “So now, ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce our very own Mr. Shakesperera, to speak on Shakespeare -- about his very own accomplishments... in another time, another land, some four centuries ago, before being reborn, as I am sure you’ll all agree, in this blessed island of ours”!
The audience clapped, as Swadesh noted Milton fidget in his seat, as if in embarrassment at the salutatory words. Eyes meeting down stage, Swadesh gave a thumbs-up. Milton watched Swadesh’s head now as if on a spring.

In the audience, Swadesh listened very carefully to every word Milton read from the pages in his hand – as if to see how well he had captured the nuances and the subtleties of Milton’s original. He was impressed with how well Milton gave life to the words he had painstakingly written.

He now thought of something else Milton had said today - how he had taught himself Russian. It was brilliant, self-teaching a language, but, why not Pali or Sanskrit? Then he laughed at his own foolish thought. After all, Milton was not a Buddhist scholar. He was a literary buff. Learning Russian allowed him to read Chekov and Pushkin and Dostoevsky in the original. Great, counter-argued his alter ego, but he missed out on Kalidasa’s masterpiece play Shakuntala with the memorable female character of the same name and Shudraka’s Mrchhakatika, Toy Cart!

Getting up, Swadesh left the Hall and walked through the compound. All of a sudden, his mind was on a light flickering in the wind. Like Eliya itself. He remembered how Milton would not keep many an agreed upon deadline, often resulting in Tilan threatening to withdraw funding, but Swadesh pleading with him. Just one more chance. Please. Yes, his own nudging gave Milton a shot of adrenalin, but now he began to wonder. Were these early signs of his loss of interest in life itself?
To his surprise, the image of Tangamma continued to intrigue Swadesh as he lay on his hotel bed. It was not so much her dark face, the long black hair, and the smile as she served the tea. But her fingers at her chest. *Scratch scratch scratch.* Even though he had come to be close to them as he worked on the Encyclopedia project, he had never asked, or wanted to know, anything personal about them, not even how they had met, or come to marry. But now he was overwhelmed by a curiosity. “It’s all in there… My life story,” didn’t he say, handing over the manuscript?

Tired, he decided to start on the novel the next day. But as he was closing the pages, his eyes caught the Contents page. Going through it lazily, he thought he recognized something both familiar and unfamiliar. What an intriguing literary exercise, he thought in the end, in a genre, the novel, that took shape in the west!

Noting the Introlude, Interlude and the Postlude, the Pancatantra, the Bharatan Beast Fable, of story within story, came to his mind. Within this parenthetical structure, he noted a Buddhist Jataka Birth Story, in which the Story Past makes the connection to the Story Present. He remembered how he had come to see how the Story Present constituted the text, while the Story Past the sub-text, neither making sense without the other, but each enriching the other.

He was now curious to see how Milinda, the Shakespearean scholar, would pull off the trick, of a marriage of the East and the West. Looks like he is a specialist on marriage …. of incompatibles, he quipped to himself, a smile coming over his lips. However, the thought of the novelty of the structure occupied his mind long into the night when he finally dozed off.
Even as on a heap of rubbish thrown on the road,
a lotus flower may grow and bloom,
pure perfume giving a joy ever so broad…

- *Dhammapada, 58*
BOOK THE FIRST:

Growing

Ah, so pleasantly we live
without affliction among the afflicted.
Among humans with affliction
do we dwell without affliction.

- Dhammapada, 198
Three

A Bike Ride

“Milton stepped into the house, back from school….

Oh, so this is back to his childhood, Swadesh said to himself….

….Milton stepped into the house, back from school. His blue pants still showed a crease, but the white short-sleeved shirt showed signs of a rough & tumble day at school. He was still wearing the blue and white tie. Taking them off, soon he rushed to the bathroom, washed himself up with the water Dasa had fetched from the well. He got into his home shorts and a shirt with a gold flower design on it.

Sitting at the lunch table beside him, amma, dipping her fingers into the plate, made a round ball of rice. He opened his mouth, as he sat down. He looked at mother’s face as he gulped down the several other rice balls. His favourite. Painting a smile on her face, she looked at him adoringly, and sent her left hand over his head. “How was school, puta?”

“Good.”

“What did you do?”

“Oh, nothing,” he said, opening his mouth for another ball of rice. After a few more mouthfuls, he stood up.

“Can I leave?”

“What’s this rush, puta?” asked mother. “You just got home.” He gave a mischievous smile, and pushed the chair back. “Taatti’s still eating”, reminded mom, as she placed a fingerful of food in her mouth as dad continued eating.

But the hot and humid afternoon was calling. He could think of no better time to go for a spin on his bike. It was not long ago when he started riding a few feet on the
pedal. After tripping a few times, he could now climb on to the seat. Veteran was the only word he could think of himself! Yippee, he imagined himself flying through the air.

As he rode along the road, the light breeze began to caress his thick black hair. Sending his fingers through them as if to open up more space and dig up more wind canals for the wind to zip through, he stepped on the pedals. He let his hands go off the handle as if to show off his manoeuvring skills to himself, as the bike gathered momentum down the slope. But as the dirt road took a bend, he found himself losing control. Putting both hands on the handle, he scrambled to maintain his balance, but what he didn’t see was the sand which had been pushed on to the road by the wind blowing off the pond.

In a split second, he found himself hugging the road, with the weight of the bicycle pressing against him. He could do nothing more than cry, ammay, Oh, mother, as he lay, breathing the dust. Feeling an excruciating pain, he grabbed at his chest, as he clenched his teeth and shut his eyes. Feeling something cold, and pressing hard against it, he moved his fingers around. It was the bicycle handle, he realized. Wiggling the body with great difficulty, like a mouse caught in a trap, he managed to distance the chest from the handle. But now realizing the pain was elsewhere, his hand meandered its way down his body until it ended up at the knee below his short pants when his fingers felt wet and hot.

Pressing his fingers against where he felt the hurt, he closed his eyes for a second, muttering the words ammay ammay to himself, as if to gather strength to push the bike off his body and get up. As he struggled, he hoped somebody would pass by. But soon came the realization that it was siesta time when, like his parents, the village was enjoying the rice-snooze buth maté. Besides, he remembered that the two houses on that stretch were more than a few meters away from the road. As he began to smell a stench, he realized that it came from the public lat-
trine. He felt helpless, as his fingers pressed on to the knee, still experiencing the warm, thick liquid. He shut his eyes, unable to bear the excruciating pain.

He didn’t know how long he had been there, eyes closed, as he felt the presence of someone. Opening his eyes, he saw two bare feet with long, bony toes, shuffling its way towards him. It came from the direction of the latrine. Then, all of a sudden, he felt the big weight off his body. With no weight pinning him down, he rolled over on to his back when he saw the man reaching out to him. He had a puckered face, the cheeks receding into a bowl on either side, and eyes hidden in his eye sockets. Removing his hand from the knee, Milton grabbed the outstretched bony hand and helped himself to his feet as he moaned. Looking down, he saw the blood oozing not only off the knee. He noticed how the gravel on the road had sought entry at several points on both his legs!

He looked at the man for an instant, neither smiling nor unsmiling. He sensed a certain familiarity, but the face with high cheekbones reminded him of no one around in the village. Now he wanted to wrestle the bike off the ground so he could go back home. But the ooìy that fell off his lips stopped him short. The man moved closer and Milton held on to his sweaty bare shoulders. He smelt the stench of the latrine again. Still holding on to the man’s shoulder, he took a second step, noting the bike lying there flat out on its side. As if answering to the invitation to be picked up, he wanted to get to it, but found it impossible to move either of his legs. As he stared at it helplessly, the man reached out and put it on its wheels. Milton grabbed on to it with the other hand.

He now began to walk up the slope, still holding on to the man with one hand and the bike with the other. But why, he wondered, was there glue under his feet? And why did it feel all so tight at the knees? As if reading his mind, the man moved between him and the bike. An air of stench entered his nose again. Pushing it aside, and casting a
glance at him while painting a smile, Milton began to limp his way. The man matched his pace, trudging the bike along with him.

Soon a cart went by and he noted the carter looking more at the man than him. The single bull yoked to the cart nodded its head as if to say ‘uhm’. Now a dog appeared from nowhere, and went around the man, sniffing, and barking. As if answering the call, a couple of other dogs came running towards them. They, too, went around the man, sniffing, as the first one ran away, still barking. Continuing to sniff, the animals kept going around the man, barking and yelping.

The silence of the sleepy afternoon disturbed by the barking, he saw two women coming out of a house, as he came in sight of the thatched houses up the street, a few hundred yards away. They looked towards the two moving bodies on the road. The man walked on, looking straight ahead…. The women rubbed at their nostrils, and one of them, lifting the end of her wrap-around, wiped her nose.

“Oh what happened, Podi Mahatteya?” a woman enquired as they took a few steps towards them.

“Fell off the bike”, he mumbled.

The man walked on.

“Let me take you home”, said one of the women, approaching him, but careful to avoid the man.

“No, it’s all right.”

“No, let me”

“He’s helping me.”

“But, Podi Mahatteya...”

The women returned to the door as he and the man continued their way. A few crows flew by and settled on the rooftops and the trees, as one went by, hurtling a white dropping.

A few houses later, a man coming out of his wattle house, stood in the mud-corridor, and stared at them, rubbing his nostrils. “Oh, Podi Mahatteya, what happened?” he asked, as he shuffled his feet in their direction, Milton said,
“It’s all right... Only a few more feet away.” The man stood back, rubbing his nose again with the back of his hand from time to time, as Milton moved along looking back, helped by the man.

The sun shone brightly. Now it all came to him. He remembered the sight of the green cart sitting beside the latrine, and the stench that had pierced his nostrils on occasion as he went past them. But rarely had he seen the man whose job it was to clear the latrine buckets - three each for men and women - to be dumped somewhere. “Oh, it’s him.” Now he looked at the man with new eyes, trying to imagine how he could be dumping the human waste from the buckets into the green cart without the stench killing him.

Wondering why Milton was late, mom was already at the gate. “Oh, what happened puta?” she asked as she came towards them. The man let go of him, and leaning the bike against the barbed wire fence, briskly turned around and walked away. As Milton entered the yard, he cast a glance at the receding figure, and returned his eyes to where he felt a tug and began to limp his way into the house, now leaning on to mom.

“Were it not for him, I’d be still there in pain”, he offered, as mom began to nurse the wounds, with the water in a basin Dasa had prepared by mixing the hot water from the kettle with the water from the well.

“How lucky he was around.”

“How lucky he was around.”

“Now, wasn’t it?”

“Well, I’ll tell taatta to look after him for looking after you.”

It was with great pain that he bent his knees as mom held his hand, and lowered himself to relieve himself.
Not being able to make the more than one mile to school on foot, Milton stayed home the next day. So he was surprised when mom suggested that they go to the beach.

“But amma, I can’t walk”, he protested.

“I’m going to help you along”, she smiled tipping her head as she stroked his head. “I can also ask Dasa to come along”

“Oh amma, do I have to?”

“Ready, Dasa?”

“Yes, Loku Nona.”

Even though getting to the water was a struggle, Milton enjoyed the breeze blowing from the vast oceanic expanse that lay in front of him. As Dasa unfolded the mat, he hobbled along towards it, and with help from mom, lowered himself and lay flat. He felt comfortable as if the sand under the mat had adjusted itself to the contours of his body. He panned the blue skies and lowered his eyes towards the horizon to gaze at the setting sun still low in the sky. A sea gull dipped into the ocean, making him go “ooiy”, as if sensing the pain of the fish in the gull’s beak. Mom sat beside him as Dasa waded along the beach back and forth, throwing the matti scallops he would find after the water had receded.

After a while, Dasa called out. “Come, Podi Mahatteya… Let’s go to the water.”

“Noooo...”

“I’ll hold you.”

“No!”

“I’ll walk you”, said mom, taking him in an embrace.

“Yes, Podi Mahatteya .”

As Dasa continued his frolicking, Milton sat up on the mat and sent his fingers along the design. Mom moved closer, and touched his other hand. He looked at her, and then at the waves dancing in the ocean, bringing foam to the top and making a design of white and blue. As mom held out her hand, he grabbed on to it and got up. Dasa
came running up the beach, and now with two hands to hold on to, he started shuffling his feet towards the water. Then he stopped, just out of the reach of the water. A gentle remnant of water pushed by a wave moved towards him, kissing his feet. Feeling the wetness under his feet, he briskly moved back.

Then, all of a sudden, a high wave broke very close to them as Dasa cried, “Lift your sari, Loku Nona.” Milton held tight on to Dasa who was looking into his face. Mom was holding her sari in one hand as she held him with the other. Soon, the water dashed against his legs, needling it, and wetting his short pants. Clenching his teeth and squinting his eyes, he gave out a scream loud enough to drown out the sound of the wave just receding back to its womb. “Ooh aai aai aai”, he kept crying, his face in contortion, and began to hobble back to the safety of the sand. He felt a ringing in his ears, and his whole body submerged in a tub of pain. The salt in the water continued its assault on the wounds.

“Let’s go back, Podi Mahatteya. Let’s go sit.”
He stared at Dasa through the tears, as he continued to hobble on his shoulders up the beach. Holding on to both mom and Dasa, he lowered himself and lay on the mat, closing his eyes, and moaning. The fish in the sea gull’s beak swam back into his memory.

“It hurts, I know?” said Dasa on their way back home. Mom joined in. “You want to go riding again fast, don’t you?” Milton looked up. “Salt twice a day, keeps the hurt away,” she said with a smile as she moved her palm along his cheek. “The salt does wonders.”

“But it stings.”
“I’m sorry…But, puta, your bike’s waiting for you.”
“I am not going to that water again.”
“Oh puta,” said mom, putting her arms around him.
“Let’s see.”
It was as amma had said. The next morning, he felt less sore in his legs even though it had not been nursed. He
bent down and looked at the knee. The skin was off on the right one, but it did not look as raw as it was the day before. About the same time as the day before, he limped to the beach, with mom and Dasa at either side. Standing at the edge of the water, he took in the beauty of the vast expanse cascading in front of him. With eyes glued to the farther waters, he moved deeper, holding on tight to the two hands helping him. Closing his eyes, he braved a few more steps, listening to the waves breaking and visualizing the water that he knew was going to reach him any minute now. And, as a wave dumped salt on him, he gave a scream, no less loud than the day before. Squeezing the two hands, he kept his eyes shut, feeling the sand giving way under his feet.

Opening his eyes, he enjoyed looking at his submerged feet under the wet sand.

“It stings, doesn’t it? ” enquired Dasa.

“Soon you’ll be able to go flying again”, said mom.

For the next few days, Milton went to the beach, both morning and afternoon, Dasa always accompanying him. They built sandcastles and sand-caves, watching them washed away by the invading waters. Squeezing the liquid out of a scallop or two left behind by the receding wave they thought was a lot of fun, but they always threw them back to the ocean. “Pauw,” isn’t it, sinful, he would turn to Dasa. Walking along the beach, they polished their toenails by turning them downwards as they walked. They walked and talked, and talked and walked, along the beach further and further away into areas he had never ventured into all these years.

One evening, as they were walking along the beach, Milton suddenly felt an air of eeriness in the air. The billows were rolling angrily, and the wind was howling. And when he noticed that there were no dogs on the beach any more, he suddenly realized they had ventured past the edge of the village. He looked towards the land where the coconut trees were swaying in the wind. A line of pattakka bushes, with their tapering cacti fingers with sharp tips,
confirmed that the road leading from the village was ending.

Then the realization hit him. This was the Baduruppa Rented Grove cemetery! A sweaty fear gripped him. The shrill of goose bumps unnerved him. Sweating all over, he looked over his shoulder. He couldn’t move. He remembered the one or two times he had been to this neck of the wood other than when he came there for his uncle’s burial. On those occasions, there were lots of people, and he had held on to mom’s fingers. Still, he remembered how he always looked over his shoulder, to make sure no ghosts were behind or around him. He had heard how a woman would appear to anyone walking alone around here, in a loose white dress, with hair down, and carrying a baby. She would plead with you to take the baby, and if you did, that was it! You’d immediately drop dead! He listened to the eerie sounds of the breaking ghostly waves. Everything around him was dry, the scarce fauna and flora reminding him that village life ended here.

Another thought occurred to him. Wasn’t it the pat-takka bush that was the warm and cozy home for pythons? He remembered how someone in the neighbourhood had peeked into the bush, and was said to have been attacked, and died of poison.

Dasa thought up a joke to lighten Milton’s fears. “Do you know why this place is called the Baduruppa, the Rented Grove?” Milton looked on. “Because it is rented out by the dead……uh, ..until whenever. “Grove rented by the Dead!” Dasa broke out laughing as a smile came over Milton.

“But the dead are not alive to rent it.”

“All right, all right….the relatives do….So it’s a place where the dead hang out….until they go wherever they go,” continued Dasa.

“But the monk at the temple said that you’re reborn the moment you die.”
“Yes, that’s true….all right, their bones then… The space is rented out for the body…which then turns into bones.”

“Not funny!” Milton protested.
“I’m sorry.. But isn’t that what it is?”
Milton stood as if he had been robbed of all his expressions.
“You want to see some bones?” asked Dasa, with a mischievous smile. “When somebody’s bones end up as dust, then the place is dug out for somebody else.”
“Let’s go home,” Milton said.
Milton was on his way to his new classroom, in the company of Daawith. In short-sleeved shirt and cloth-sack sarong falling all the way to his ankles, the peon looked tall. As Milton looked into his face, he noted bony cheeks and eyes in a well. As he followed the bare feet along the corridor from the Principal’s office, he passed several classrooms full of students.

“From down south?”
Milton returned the smile.

“Touch not an open-eyed cat with a ten-foot pole, hanh, from that neck of the wood?” Daawith chuckled. Milton just looked on, not knowing what to say. “Just teasing,” the peon added, noting the discomfort. As if to console the new boy at Churchill College, he placed a hand on his shoulder. As they went up the cement steps, Daawith looked back as if to make sure everything was all right. Reaching the first floor, they turned left on to the corridor with a half wall to the left. Milton noticed several classrooms to the right. Daawith stopped at the second door, and peeked into the class. The teacher stopped the lesson. “A new student”, he exclaimed as Daawith shuffled his bare feet from under the sarong.

Milton peered through the opening and saw many darting eyes directed at him. The sight of a large number of students sitting in several rows of individual desks numbed his body cold. But Daawith lay his hands on his back and gave a slight push. But Milton found his feet glued to the floor. As the teacher walked towards him, the glue felt stickier. “You can sit beside Albert”, the teacher said, pointing to an empty chair attached to a desk. Albert splashed a smile as Milton lifted one heavy foot after another towards the desk, separated from Albert’s by about a
foot. In his mind, he thanked Albert’s smiling eyes for making his feet become less heavy.

As he reached the desk, he cast a glance at Albert. Then, turning to the front, and clasping his hands together at the chest, he bowed to the teacher. Hearing giggles, he moved his eyeballs to one side, but luckily, he noticed the teacher make a tight pencil line of his lips as he tipped his head in acknowledgement. Placing the exercise book he had in his hand on the desk, he took out a white handkerchief from his pocket, and dusted the chair. Then, laying it on the chair, he sat down, carefully holding the pressed lines of his short pants with the index finger and thumb. He now took a pencil from his pocket, and looked up at the teacher. Dressed in a white coat and a tie, his face looked square. It must be his forehead, with thick eyelashes below the eyes that were wide apart, he thought.

Unlike at Christ Church College, Milton was happy that walls separated his new classroom. It was bright, with the window bringing in lots of sunlight. Here he could hear the teacher, without having to shut out the noise from other classes. Twice as big as the one at Christ Church, the board almost covered the entire west wall. From time to time, as the teacher turned his back to write on the board, Milton looked around with the corner of his eye. Albert winked. He smiled back, as he noted some eyes in his direction.

As the bell rang at the end of the period and the teacher walked out, Milton closed the book and clasping his hands, bowed to it. He soon felt hot all over as students rumbled around him, outlaughing each other. “Did you see that?” one said, “He worshipped the book….”

“Why did you do that?” asked one.

“This is not the temple, you know”, added another, as Milton looked down, controlling his tears. He felt better when the laughter receded and one of them asked, “What’s your name?”

“Milton,” he said in a low voice.

“Milton!”
“Hey, you got a new friend”, another said, looking at Albert.

“Milton”, someone echoed his name. “It’s an English name... But you don’t look white!”

“Leave him alone,” said Albert sternly.

“Hey, we’re going to be late for science class”, someone said as everyone began to scramble towards the door.

Albert stayed behind until everyone had left the room, and putting his hand around Milton’s shoulder, walked out of the classroom, and down the stairs. “They’re a good bunch...... They’ll begin to like you when they know you better.”

Walking past the doorway, turning left, the two friends walked down the steps. Continuing along the corridor towards the Principal’s Office, Albert stopped at the third door. “This is our biology class”, he said, as he walked in. He followed Albert walking between a long high table to the right and a long desk to the left that ended halfway across the table. He looked at the pile of books at one end of the table, and the beakers, test tubes and plants at the other end. As Albert turned left, Milton noticed about eight rows of tables on each side, with an isle that invited the students to their seats.

Sitting together in the front row with his newly found friend, Milton listened excitedly as the teacher began to talk. He started by describing what they were going to be learning today. How to dissect a frog, so students could study its heart and the liver and all the other body parts. Milton looked at Albert with open mouth, as somebody said, “Are we, Sir?” He had never done anything like that at Christ Church.

Halfway through the class, the teacher reached down under the tabletop, and took out a bottle and held it high for the class to see. There was a little frog in it. It was dancing around. “Happy little fellow, huh!” So saying, the teacher turned the bottle to the front so the class could see
“You see, there’re holes in the lid.. for it to breathe.” Keeping it on the table top, he said, “But not for long.... See this?” showing the class another lid with no holes in it. As Milton watched with mouth still open, the teacher held the bottle with his left hand, and removed the lid turning it anti-clockwise. As he was taking the other lid to cover the bottle, the little frog jumped right out of the bottle on to the table, and hopped hopped hopped away and soon disappeared as the class roared in laughter. Everybody ran to the front of the class and began looking for it. They were all looking right around the table, but one or two looked a little further away. “I got it”, said someone as everyone looked towards the corner of the classroom. Holding the little frog’s legs dangling, and pushed his tight lips against his wrinkled nose. “You little rascal”, the teacher said, as he grabbed the leathery thing and shoved it into the bottle. Covering the opening with his left palm, he took the unholey lid in his other hand, and screwed it in tight. The little frog started to scramble around feverishly as everybody watched it in great excitement. Within a matter of minutes, the excitement died down as the class stood around the teacher’s table. With eyes jumping out of his sockets, Milton watched the little frog making its final struggle, its movements slowing down and its body gradually going limp. As the body mass lowered to the bottom, he turned his head to a side abruptly and pressed his palms tight against his eyes as he looked away. As he closed his eyes, he visualized himself at home, in front of the Buddha figure. Another scene appeared on his mind… A mosquito sitting on his hand.... Having watched it suck some blood out of it, he tapped it off. Getting a tug from Albert, he opened his eyes, and returned to the seat.

The bell rang, and Milton was leaving the room, when he felt somebody bumping against him. He held on to it.
the wall to avoid falling. “Sissy”, he heard someone say as he looked to see who it was. A heavyset boy, taller than himself, was sneering at him. “Sissy”, the boy said again, as he started to walk away reminding him of a duck’s waddle. “School bully”, Albert said, taking Milton’s hand, “His dad’s a rich businessman.” The two friends returned to the homeroom, and leaving their books at their desks, ran down the steps.

Several students walking along the corridor stepped on to the quadrangle between the two-story buildings, a hundred or so yards apart. It was now teeming with blue shorts and white shirts, popping up and down.. “Hostel,” Albert said, noting Milton looking in that direction. Teachers and students were walking up the steps.

As he took a glance at the second floor, he saw some students leaning against the half-wall. Two of them began laughing as they looked down and caught a glimpse of Milton trying to keep his shoes on his feet as his heels kept coming off it. He bent down, and tightened one of the shoelaces. “Father bought me two sizes large… He said that I will soon grow into it.” He looked at Albert and added. “We’re not very rich, you know.”

Soon the two friends found themselves walking in the direction of an iron gate that was closed. “We can’t go there during the interval,” explained Albert. As he held on to the rails, Milton found himself giving a wow. “What a big playground! Can we go there after school.” Albert nodded. The only game he played at Christ Church was tennicoit – with his sisters and their friends. He and Dennis, a brother of one of the girls, were the only boys allowed. “It’s not even in the dictionary,” said a boy not allowed in. “Just jealous,” sister said. As he sent his eyes from one end of the playground to the other, he asked, “Where is the tennis court?” He was thinking of Christ Church where the principal, Mr. Samuel, played every afternoon and Milton loved watching him.
The next day after school, he watched students run to the playground past the gate. Leaving his books and shoes with Albert, he dashed across the field until he could run no more. He stopped as his heart pounded. He waved at Albert, and started walking towards him. Just then he noticed some boys gathering a few yards away from him. Reaching Albert, he picked up his shoes and books and walked in the direction of where the boys were. By the time they got there, several students were standing around. The heavyset boy who pushed him yesterday was standing over a shorter boy as the onlookers cheered. Another boy walked towards the bully with fists clenched and arms ready to take him on. The bully pushed him and was about to jump on him as he fell. Just then, Milton rushed to position himself between them, and arching his body so his head would thrust forward, charged into the bully like an angry bull. The bully lost his balance and toppled over like a lump of flesh as everybody cheered and jeered. Scrambling on to his feet, he helped the student on the ground to his feet. Walking up to the bully, still on the ground, he said, “Sorry,” and offered his hand to help him. Whipping Milton’s hand, the bully scrambled back to his feet as a teacher walked toward them. “No, Sir,” several students volunteered, and pointing to Milton, said, “He was only trying to help.”
School year over, Milton could not wait to go home. He wanted to get away from it all. And it was with relish that he joined his parents at the temple…

At breakfast, he couldn’t have enough of the hop-pers mom had made. He liked the crunchy sound of the paper-thin crust as he bit into it. Breaking off a piece of the thick layer of well-cooked crepe in the centre, he dipped it in the spicy hot *sambol* mom had served on to his plate. As always, he thought, the right touch of chili and loads of onion. Smacking his lips, he took a sip of the plain tea. Father had already returned from his morning walk.

Getting up from the breakfast table, Milton said. “I’m going for a walk.”

“For a walk?” asked mother. “This early?”

“Yes,” mom heard his faint voice say as she watched him go past the gate on to the dirt road.

He walked in the direction of the Baduruppa. He made sure he had his bamboo-pistol in hand. He reached out to the first bunch of tiny round nuts along the way, and broke off the twig that held it. He pulled out the bamboo handle with the long narrow wooden ekel sitting snug inside the bamboo barrel, and placed a nut at the mouth of the tunnel. Placing the ekel against the nut, he pushed it about two-thirds of the way. Then he pulled back the handle and, aiming at a nearby bush, gave it one quick jerk. The nut left the barrel making a twit sound. That was enough to pierce the eerie silence. He shut his ears as if not to hear it. Even as the nut bulleted its way out, he looked around, eyeing the scary quiet. No, I’m not scared, he said to himself. Just then, a cold sweat gutted his body. But, as if to test his own mettle, he put another nut, and another and another, and shot at the bushes left and right. No devil, no woman with a child, would come near me, he said to himself. “Not with
you to protect me, right?” he now talked to his pistol. “Wouldn’t you drive the living daylight out of anyone who would dare?” He nodded as if answering his own question.

Going past the few houses, he soon came to the end of the dirt road. His bare feet welcomed the soft sand. Digging his toes deep into it, he did a quick dash. The ocean played peek-a-boo between the scattered bushes.

He now tip-toed to a cactus bush along the way and, heart thumping, peeked into it, making sure his body didn’t touch any part of it. He dreaded a disturbed python darting at him. Raising himself on tiptoes, he moved closer and, with heart still thumping, peeked into the dark labyrinth. Relieved that no pythons had appeared, he continued on his stroll, shooting his way.

Walking further, Milton suddenly saw a man emerge in the distance from almost nowhere. The cold sweat returned, and he put his palm over his heart as if to stop the galloping beat. Soon, he turned, and hurried back towards home, looking back as he took to his heels. Summoning courage, he stopped at the end of the dirt road, and almost unknown to himself, began walking towards the water, turning his head from time to time to see where the man was. Walking closer to the water, he let a wave caress his feet as its peak sought out the flat sand to spread itself out. As the sheet of water rejoined the roaring billows, he stood firm to make sure he would not be pulled in by the receding current. As if to challenge the waves, he walked back and forth knee deep. Then walking out on to the beach, he strolled along the shore, pushing his toes into the sand and dragging them. From time to time, he stopped to look at his toes as they began to get polished.

He now started walking back towards the dirt road, looking around as if to make sure no one was lurking behind him, or no pythons were slithering after him. Just then, something hit him in his foot as his heart began to pound. Looking down, he noticed a stick of bone. Giving it a kick, he continued to walk. Reaching the dirt road, he sauntered
into the bus and filled his pocket with some more round nuts.

Suddenly, he was taken aback by the sound of metal hitting the gravel. Heart thumping, he turned around, a full 360 degrees it must’ve been, he thought. Turning his face towards the road, he saw a moving body. Letting off a sigh of relief, he started walking towards him. The man was looking in his direction. Getting closer, he thought the face looked familiar. The man etched a tender smile on his lips, as Milton returned it. Oh, it’s him... Recognizing the man, he gave a wide grin. Soon, the man reached out to a cart sitting behind a bush. As he dragged the four-wheeler out, the familiar smell entered Milton’s nostrils.

The man began pushing the cart in the direction of the dirt road. He figured that the man was making his round to collect the pooh-buckets from the public washroom. The wheels, in the front and the back, soon began burying themselves in the sand. The man kept pushing the cart as the sand returned to its place after each wheel. Milton walked beside the cart.

Soon they had arrived at the dirt road. Still empty, the bins started rattling inside. Milton got closer to the cart and touched the left handlebar. The man smiled. Milton placed both hands on it. The man continued to smile. However, when Milton tried to reach out to the other handlebar, the man turned his head from side to side. Milton made a face as if to say, *Onh*. The man continued to push as Milton walked alongside. Becoming a little pushier, Milton moved to the middle, and nudging the man out, took hold of the two handlebars. Pushing the cart even as the man held on to one of them, Milton struggled to keep the two-wheeler in balance. Soon, with the cart in good control at Milton’s hands, the man let go of his hand. Milton looked at him with a big grin on his face as if to say, “Thank you.” It was heavy, he thought, but lots of fun!

The passers-by stared: “*Anay* oh Podi Mahatteya, what are you doing?” he heard one say. Another asked,
“Why don’t you let him push the cart?” There were more comments along the way. “Why don’t you go home?” “I’m sure, you’ll get a tongue-lashing from Iskowla Mahatteya.” After all, his father was the School Principal. Which is why the household would get a share of the day’s catch, the fishing net hauled to the shore with participation of the men of the village. “Iskowla Hamine is not going to like it.” He knew they were respectful of his mom Mrs. Principal. “Ayyo, you’ll be smelling all over” … “You’re getting your hands dirty…”

But none offered to push it.

By the time he got home, the news had arrived on wings. Mother was at the gate. “What on earth is goin’on here? What will they think?” she asked. “They’ll say that you’re gone nuts after going to the city. Or that we’re getting crazy…. under your spell.”

“But, mom,” he protested. “What about our washerwoman?”

“What about her.”

“Remember how she was treated whenever she came to pick up our laundry or deliver it clean? She was always offered a stool to sit on. Remember what you told me? And I was proud of you. You said, “Well, she may be of the washer-caste, but she surely deserves more than the bare floor to sit on. That they do everyday at home, don’t they? After all, she’s been washing our dirt all these many years, carrying them all the way back and forth.”

“But that’s different. This man doesn’t work for us or come to our house.”

“Then what about dad’s campaign? Didn’t you tell me that thanks to him, men of the drummer-caste could now come to the city with their upper body covered?”

“Let’s go in, puta” said mom as Milton held on to her fingers. “You must be tired.”
Six

Cricket

4 runs away from victory with 5 minutes remaining, and 2 wickets to go, the number two-down batsman, Ossie, is one run short of a century. The fans cannot wait for him to get that additional run so the thunderous applause can begin to ring through the stands at the Oval Cricket ground at Wannathamulla. Facing the bowler, Milton, just coming in to bat, drives the ball to extra-cover where the fielder is in easy reach of the ball. He starts to run, as Ossie yells, “No, no.” But noticing that Milton is halfway down the pitch, Ossie leaves the pitch and begins to hurtle down to the other end of the wicket. The fielder scoops up the ball and zooms it to the wicket keeper, who tips off the bails a split-second before Ossie’s bat touches the crease.

“Howzzat?” howl the fielders, throwing their arms up, as Ossie zips past the wicket and the wicket keeper. Looking askance, he sees the leg umpire raise his right index finger. The fans of the opposing team now go into a wild cheer, a drumbeat roaring through the field. Ossie took one angry look at Milton and walked out of the field. “Gotcha!”, Milton murmured, remembering the final night at the Boossa cadet camp, as the stumped out batsman walked past him towards the pavilion.

As he waited for the next, and last, batsman to walk into the field, Milton could feel the tension that was gripping the pavilion. The silence pierced his heart. He could feel the rush of blood as his heart started pounding. He began sweating. He swept his face with the back of his glove, and watched the last batsman stand at the other wicket as the fielding team moved positions for a new over. He could sense the overpowering confidence in the eyes of the fielders now that the big gun was out, and the last batsman – yes, he was the weakest, Milton said to himself, was in.
The captain had brought on a pace bowler. Milton watched him with anxiety as the two had a word, as the captain buffed the ball on his white flannel pants before passing it along. The bowler took 22 steps, and as he sped towards the wicket, Milton got ready to face him. The ball whizzed towards him like a bullet off his rifle at the cadet camp. His heart pounding, and gritting his teeth, he got a firm hold of the handle, and hit the ball full flat on the bat. As the ball fled past a fielder who nearly nabbed it, the crowd on his side of the pavilion went wild, as the other side fell into a deafening silence. The umpire waved his hand at the scorers as the ball went past the boundary line. Four, the crowd yelled out!

His fellow batsman came running and grabbed Milton in a bear hug, as his teammates poured into the field. As the fielders fell into a funeral march towards the pavilion, there was a scramble for the stumps – souvenirs for a victory gained through the jaws of a loss. Carrying Milton on their shoulders, the players now ran towards the pavilion when the fans got to their feet giving Milton a thundering ovation. Off the shoulders at the end of the field, fans reached out to touch and pat Milton. “Well done, well done.” As he entered the player’s room, he saw Ossie standing at the door, holding on to the wall. Milton grinned at him as Ossie returned a stern look.

That evening, he felt for the first time since leaving home, a strong sense of wanting to kneel at the home altar, offer some flowers to the Buddha as he used to do as a daily practice, and be with himself. He did not feel good at all about himself. Ossie’s dead-beat face kept haunting him. The blaring of the radio at his boarding house, and the chatter in the living room, allowed him no comfort. He tried to say the words of homage as he lay in bed, but soon found himself fast asleep.
Making a habit of taking a morning walk to the cemetery, during the holidays, he was no longer afraid of pythons or goblins. He now wanted to prove to himself that he truly was no longer the village scary-crow *baya gulla* boy, now that he had lived in the city for a few years. One night, dinner over, Milton convinced mom to be allowed to go out by himself. “Well, I suppose…you’re already all of sixteen,” said mom. “Time for a *katayutta* to settle down,” teased sister, herself barely ready for betrothal.

As he walked in the direction of the Baduruppa along the unlit dirt road, he felt he was cutting through blocks of thick black. It was as if all the houses had disappeared into the dark. Only a light or two glowed, like scattered stars on a dark night, the only assurance that there was life around. Weighing every step, he moved his body forward, when the barking of a dog chilled the air, bringing that cold sweat again. Did the dog see the woman in flowing white clothes with baby in hand? Another chill ran down his spine. He closed his eyes and stood still until the dog settled down, and continued as quietly as possible so as not to disturb another dog or a night owl.

Soon he was at the end of the dirt road as he began to hear the billows of the ocean breaking up the silence. He found it soothing. Walking towards the ocean, he thought he suddenly saw a figure emerging out of the water. Taken aback, he started to run towards the road, heart thumping. Stopping for a moment, he looked back. The waves broke into a flat surface. Another figure emerged as the first disappeared in the water. He kept his hand on to his heart to stop the thumping. Was it the woman with the child? As he continued to watch, he noted another body emerge a few feet away. He stared at the figures, watching closely. Eyes glued to the figures, he took slow steps towards the water.
Now it became clear to him that three people were dipping themselves in the water and rising. But who could be taking a night bath, he thought to himself, heart beginning to slow down. Yes…

Now the two figures close to each other were leaving the waves towards the shore. As they got closer to him, he noted that one was short - about what he was when he was ten - six years ago. The other was taller, though not by much. As he came closer to the water, he recognized a woman and a girl, who turned direction, as if to avoid a stranger, and began to take hurried steps… up the beach towards the cemetery. He noted the girl scratching around the chest. He remembered the time when he himself began to have a sensation of wanting to scratch as his knees began to heal, drenched in the ocean’s salty water, day in day out. May be she had hurt herself. With a coconut ekel perhaps? And it was now beginning to heal. That explains it. Dipping in the salty ocean. He almost felt an urge to follow them… but found he somehow could not.

Suddenly he found the other figure not too far from him. It did not take long to recognize the man …. his gait, his lean figure, even in the dark, against the open skies of the ocean. Out of the water, he was picking up a piece of cloth, and drying himself up as he thought he smiled. Then, he started following his wife and daughter walking towards a hut at the other end of the cemetery. Milton followed him, as the man slowed down his pace. Soon, he watched the mother and the daughter go in. The man stopped, and turning around, began walking in the direction of the village, looking back as if to invite Milton to follow him. As they walked, Milton looked the man in the eye. “Mahal?” he used a word he had picked up in school. Daughter? The man smiled.

“Enna per?” What was her name?

The man looked surprised as if asking, howjyu know De-Andhrese? Then he said, “Tangamma…. Shanti.”
The second name he understood. It was his own cousin’s name. Shanti. Peace. “Yeah, a peaceful face alright,” he concluded, although he had hardly seen it in the thick dark. They reached the point where the sand gave way to the pebble. Then, the man turned around, gave Milton a smile, and walked back.
As the class heard the tock tock tock tock, everybody looked in the direction of the door. Impeccably dressed in his white suit and school tie, Mr. Marcus JeyaweeraSinh ham entered the classroom. The class stood up, and remained standing, as he walked towards his table.

The teacher walked up the two steps of the raised platform, and sat in his chair, with the words, “You may sit down.” He was not looking at the class.

Milton remembered when he first saw Mr. JeyaweeraSinh ham. He had walked past him, and Milton looked up as if he was looking up an arecanut tree. Slender, straight and tall. Almost reaching the sky. With hair parted in the middle and combed sideways, his face looked square, but the wide forehead reminded him of Mr. Samuel. Milton wondered if Mr. JeyaweeraSinh ham was also from Bharata, like his old principal. He sure is smart, he thought. Taller than Mr. Samuel, his demeanour did not fail to exude a sense of authority and a presence.

In order to be sure that he would hear teacher’s every word, he sat, as he had done in every class over the last four years, closest to the teacher’s desk. It did not matter to him that 40 other pairs of eyes would be staring at him from the back whenever he stood up to answer a question. He watched in rapt attention as words rolled off the tongue of Mr. JeyaweeraSinh ham — like off a waterfall, he thought — reading the Ancient Mariner or some other work. Milton was thrilled to pieces whenever he was called upon to read or recite a verse, or was called upon to explain the meaning of a line. So what if the cricket-playing dummies at the back seats were talking behind his back! Sure, I play with them, but….in class they’re nothing but dimwits….seat-warmers.
“Page eighty five,” came the voice, as the students opened their books. Mr. JeyaweeraSinhaam opened a page and began to read the words aloud as the class listened. “Breathes there the man with soul so dead…” His voice boomed, as he looked straight into the class as the words flowed. Milton watched in awe at his memory. After introducing the poem, the teacher raised his head, and looked in the direction of Milton. “What did you have in mind when you wrote this poem, Milton?” Nonplussed, he found himself raised as if by a forklift. “Sir, I…I didn’t write it,” he said, hot all over, piercing into the teacher, who was beaming with a smile.

“But your name is Milton, right?”
“Yes, Sir.”
“Here, in this book it says right here that this poem was written by Milton.” Now feeling comfortable that the teacher was only pulling his leg, a smile came upon him as he lowered himself to his chair. “Yes, John Milton.” The teacher joined in as the class broke into laughter. “Oh, sorry, it’s your first name that is Milton, right, not last?” Milton sat silently as he looked down.

“Breathes there the soul so dead,” the teacher began.

Throughout the lesson, Milton had had many a question in his mind. To ask them would be to be disrespectful. School culture was well drilled into him. ‘Speak only when spoken to.’ But soon, Milton found himself called up again. “Soul,” the teacher asked. “What does that mean to you?”

Taken by surprise, Milton looked around as he sprang to his feet. ‘Please help’ was written all over his eyes. Taking a deep breath, he said, “I don’t know, Sir.”

“It’s what God infuses into you when He creates you,” the teacher explained. Milton noted several heads nodding, but that was not what he had learned from his parents or the Haamuduruwo at the temple. But, he kept it to himself. Like several of his peers, he realized that, may be
the teacher was Christian. Like his principal at the old Christ Church. Even though much of what was taught was difficult to grasp, Mr. JeyaweeraSinhham’s smile put the students at ease.

At the next class, Milton found his heart pumped up, as if getting ready for a boxing match. His palms were sweating. Keeping his left hand on his chest as if to stop the galloping beat, he pressed his eyes closed, and boldly sprung his right hand up. He could visualize everybody looking in his direction startled. Opening his eyes, he saw Mr. JeyaweeraSinhham looking at him. He was relieved to hear him say, with a smile, “Yes, Milton… Do you have a poem for us?” Milton shook his head side to side.

“No, Sir,” he said, as he stood up, mouth dry.

“Then what?”

“Sir, about the question you asked yesterday…the soul…. I can answer it now.”

“You can? Good…. Very good…”

“Sir, I know that the soul is said to be created by God… But our Buddha teaches that it is a fiction of the human imagination.”

“What? A fiction?” The class broke into laughter, as the teacher kept a question mark on his face.

“Yes, Sir. That’s what the Haamudurawo at the temple said.”

“Oh, the monk. That’s what he told you?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Seconds of dead silence appeared to be like forever! Luckily, the teacher spoke. “Why don’t we take it up another time?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, on to the next page.”

Milton had come to Churchill College on a scholarship, winning top place in math/science in the entire Southern Province. Yet, it was English that Milton had come to work hardest on. He could never get rid of the videotape that had been playing in his head ever since the incident. In
the very first term, asked by the teacher for the spelling of the word ‘gonorrhea’ that had appeared in a line by D H Lawrence, he stumbled to his feet and half standing said, “I can’t ispell that, Sir.” That did it. There was no end to teasing thereafter.

*No ispell, no iskill,*  
*no place at our Churchill.*

There was something else he could never forget. Returning after the holidays, a student going past the gate had said, “Your ayah is waiting for you at the gate.” Embarrassed hot, he had not been able to summon the courage to say it was his mother. She was dressed in a *redda-haette,* and not a sari.

From then on, he was determined to excel in English to make up for the insults. When Milton got his School Report Card at the end of the first year, he beamed from ear to ear. He knew his tenacious determination had worked. He read the Report Card again and again, stopping each time at the word ‘English’ under the heading ‘Subject’. He had earned top marks not only in science/math but in English, too. In this final year of high school, he was determined to win the Gold Medal for English.
The New Year celebration was special. The lagoon was where Milton wanted to be. The rains had come down early this year, and as if overflowing with joy, it was awash with the gushing torrents from down under the bridge, filling it to the brim, and going in search of the wider ocean. Was he glad he had been able to convince mom to let him go to the Kalapuwa all by himself! Without even Dasa.

Throwing off his short-sleeve shirt and white undershirt on to the hot sand, Milton ran into the water in his sarong. “Careful, Podi Mahatteya,” someone said, “the current is swift.” Looking back at the elderly woman, he dipped in the tropical warm water, closing his eyes, as if to immerse a body gone dry in a city drought. He floated with abandon, but realizing he was getting too close to the ocean, straightened himself and struggled back against the current. Several women, wearing their tanapata, were washing straw mats as others beat their laundry at a nearby rock. As a young lamissi walked over, he found himself following her with the corner of his eyes, but soon taking them away, with a sudden coyness. As he swam away, he savoured the meaning of the word. Lamissi. Breast up. Nice word for one just past puberty. Coming out of the water, he noted some other lamissiyo. They gave an occasional glance at the frolicking ilandaari young men in the water, taking eyes away as soon as one of them would cast his eyes on her.

Coming out of the water, he took the piece of Sunlight soap in his hand. Wetting it, he applied it first on his head, and then on the upper bare body, as his eyes wandered… Lifting his sarong, he took his hand up and down his leg, reaching up to the thigh. Soon, he jumped back into the water, splashing all over a woman beating the clothes
on the rock. “Oh Podi Mahatteya!” she said with a smile, as Milton dipped in and came out.

“Ah nangi, getting the dirt of a whole year out of the way?” cracked a youthful ilandaariya, approaching a lamissi in her breast-high wrap-around. Crossing her hands across her chest, and smiling, “Not as dirty as yours,” she said, giggling away with her friends.

“Want to play water diya-bung?” he asked.

“I’ll beat you any old time,” she said, as she waded into the water, her friends joining. As the young man jumped in, raising a wave, the girls dipped in as in a synchronic swim. Coming up, the girl said, “Ready?” as she placed the base of her right palm on the surface of the water, and made a quick push, squirting a palmful on to the face of the challenger who was now approaching the girls. He returned the favour with a palmful of his own in her direction. Soon, with splashes going back and forth, back and forth, in rapid succession, the washing of mats and clothes came to a standstill as the women watched the fun and the girls continued jeering, dipping in the water and swimming around.

“You lost,” said a young man standing shoulder-deep, turning to the girl. “No, I didn’t,” she said, as she winked at a friend who sent a palmful of water in the way of the youth. The other girls joined in, raining down a monsoon on the youth who deftly dipped and swam away!

Swimming away and turning around, Milton watched a young woman lift her arm and rub her armpit with a coconut husk wet with soap. Then she loosened her tanapata and reached in with a wet piece of soap in hand, as she watched the fun of the continuing water splashing back and forth.

Back home, the mud floors of the kitchen had been cleansed with cow-dung, and the wattle walls had been refurbished with another layer of mud and sand mixed in water. With the April showers coming down in time, the flowers were blooming. “To celebrate your English honours”,
mom said. The fragrance of the *araliya* and *sooriya* flowers was all over in the air.

It was next morning, at the auspicious wee hour of 4.38 to be exact, when the fires were put out. It would be a few hours before the new fire was to be lit, ushering in the New Year. A whole multi-bunch of bananas hung in clusters along its long stem just outside the kitchen door, bathing in the morning rays, parading the shades of its golden hue. Resisting the temptation to pick one – no no, he’d heard many a time mom say, inauspicious time still, Milton began to help mom get the sweetmeats ready. Dad had already taken his bath at the well in the backyard. So had sister.

As Dasa pulled a bucket of water out of the well, and got ready to pour it over Milton, his eyes fell on the mini-pond around the well, home to a few water-veggies and lilies, and … a family of frogs. A young one was hopping away, from the mother, as if in search of a new freedom. He felt an unease. After all, came the thought, Dasa was not much older than he himself was. So why could he not pull the water himself? Suddenly, he stepped off the ledge. “Let me.”

“Oh Podi Mahatteya.”

“No, really…” Moments passed, the two young lads looking at each other, when finally Dasa handed over the bucket. As he poured the water over his head, and the slush of water drained down, Milton closed his eyes. Enjoy the moment, *ilandaariya*, he said to himself. Then, opening his eyes, he watched the water drain into the mini-pond and finding a niche to continue its flow.

Going into the room he shared with his sister, he got into his New Year clothes. It was a brand new sarong, and a silk shirt. He felt like the *Auwrudu Kumaraya*, the New Year Prince, who would parade down the road to the envious eyes of the *lamissiyo*, one and all, upon the auspicious lighting of the new fires. Making sure sister was not around, he went to the mirror, and taking a comb in his
right hand, parted his hair on the right. Then, he combed the hair carefully, getting a twist at the front. Then he powdered himself in his face. “Here comes the Auwrudu Kumaraya”, sister teased, as he came out. “Ooooh, new hair style, too,” she said, looking at the twist, as he hurried a smile.

His aunt and women from the village, all in their New Year clothes, were seated at the three-foot wide circular rabaana drum, sitting on three legs anchored to each other by a metal frame so they would stay firm as the women pounded on the taut skin. A pot of embers generated heat from underneath to keep the skin taut and well tuned. A woman tapped on to it and said, “Yes, it’s coming along,” as someone stoked the embers to get some more life out of it. Soon everybody was watching the clock on the wall. The women around the rabaana began to clap at each number as Dad started the countdown …. Ten, nine, eight… Milton joined in. seven, six, five, four, three, two, one. Just then, the whole place fired up and went crazy with the sound of firecrackers. Aunt had already begun the drumming, joined in by the women. Galapita galapita galapita galapita began the rhythmic beat. “Oh, I know that,” said Milton, as he wedged himself between aunt and another woman. “Ah, Podi Mahatteya plays well,” said a woman, raising her voice over the music and continuing to play. Now it was a new tune.

Taakka naenday, taakka naenday,
taxakka maamaa koy?
Gahen vaeteelaa,
anda kaedeela,
lunu ata gaalaa,
kullen vahalaa
kussiya mullay doi, dodoi doi,
kussiya mullay doi.
Too complex a rhythm, all Milton could do was to sing to it, trying to render it literally to English, in his mind:

_Taakka auntie, taakka auntie,
where's taakka uncle?
Fallen off the tree,
a thwack at the knee,
now in a poulticed salty ghee,
winnowed in, quite unfree,
asleep in the kitchen nook, a-doi
_Doi dodoi doi, doi dodoi doi!_

It was fun, he thought, his new English skills! Or was it iskills, he said to himself with a chuckle.

Milton could not wait to rush out of the home Shrine Room where they had offered the first meal to the Buddha. The aroma of the _alut auwrudu_ food was inviting from every nook and corner. Soon, everyone was seated around the table, the traditional brass oil lamp standing beside, the wick-flames dancing to the gentle rhythm of the air movement. Reaching out to the oval flat dish, Amma served the first serving of a diamond shaped piece of _kiri-buth_, … oh, its sweet scent mouthwatering, to Taatta, and then to all others. Competing was the caramalized big onion slices, flavoured with chunks of maldive fish, and tamarind paste. The fish curry, spruced up in a red chili sauce, and the _lunumiris_ hot hot chili mix provided the contrast, for the eye, and yes, the tongue! As Milton was about to dig into his rice, mom reminded, “Ball of rice!”

“Ohops,” said Milton, and scooping some rice in his fingers, made it into a ball. “For the less fortunate in the world,” he said in his mind, the way he had heard it said at the table many a time, placing the ball along with those of family others on the saucer, to be eventually offered to the birds hopping along in the yard.

Still slurping as if to ward off the spiciness, he reached out to a banana, peeled it, and took a bite, with
mouth still full of milkrice. He surveyed the sweetmeat dishes, organized in a circle, right in front of him. Amma’s hand all right! He ran his eyes greedily over each of them - aluwa, kokis, mung guli, konda kevum, kaludodol. Then he looked around to see if everybody had finished eating the milkrice.

“We may go for it now,” said amma. He reached out to his favourite kokis, which soon went crunch crunch in his mouth. “Oh, I love these,” he said to himself, helping himself with a mung guli ball. As he bit into its thick layer, he savoured the roasted mixture of ground mung-bean and hakuru, perfumed with nutmeg and cardamoms. Suddenly in his mind, he was sitting on his haunches beside the woman who had come to help make the sweets. He was helping to ground the mung-beans between two heavy flat round stones, held in the middle by a post attached to the lower stone and rising through the hole in the upper. As the woman continued grinding, sweat pouring down her face, he reached out and held on to the handle on the top stone, and turned it round and round as the ground mung fell off the sides on to hand-woven straw mats placed around it. He fondly watched himself sticking his little finger into it, and licking it, as the woman gave a little tap on the hand! He was soon watching the mung ball being dipped in the coconut milk-based batter, and deep-fried, to give it the thick crusty layer he was now eating into. Finishing off the last bite, looking at mom, he next nipped the nipple of a konda kevum oilcake, and tossed it into his mouth, tasting the flavour of treacle and fennel seeds, topping it off with another piece of banana. “Not full yet?” teased sister as he reached out to a piece of kaludodol – marshmallowy black lumps with cadju and treacle. As he began to eat aluva, he noted that taatta was waiting for him to finish so he could leave the table.

Raban playing over, the women were now taking their turn at the food, as an uncle stepped into the house, saying, “Just finished the vataavat at home.” Invited to the
table by mother with the customary full glass of water placed on a saucer, he walked to the dinner table with glass in hand. Then he was served one of every item sitting pretty on the white tablecloth.

At the end of it, he walked over to the living room where the family sat around. Vataavat time. Taking a bill from his pocket, he wrapped it in a betel leaf, and walking towards father, offered it to him. “May the New Year overflow with milk and honey,” he intoned, as father accepted it with both hands, returning a similar gift to him, also wrapped in a betel leaf. The last to receive his betel leaf, Milton opened it immediately. Now he had small change of his own!

“Daughter, you want to take this to Yaso aunty’s house”, mother said, getting a plate full of milkrice, bananas and sweets to the next-door neighbour.

“Can I take it?” volunteered Milton.

“Oh sure, malli”, said sister.

“How lovely to see you again, Podi Mahatteya…. Heard you got a gold medal … for English,” beamed the next-door aunty as she came out of the house. “Not a gold medal… but yes, I did well,” he said, smiling ear to ear as he spotted aunty’s daughter peering, moving the door drape with her dainty fingers. “Next year!” he said, as his eyes went in her direction. Lowering her head, she quickly let go of the drape. “You must’ve gone to the Kalapuwa,” aunty said.

“Yes… Had a lot of fun.” Then turning to leave, he looked back. Perchance she was still there. She smiled as he went for a wide grin.

The day passed with more sharing, and receiving sweetmeats, visitors in and out throughout the day to receive the first rupee notes or the first food at the hands of the Principal or Mrs. Principal. New Year Prince walking past the houses to the clapping of revelers, many young la-missiyo in their new jackets with elbow length sleeves
strolling along the streets, raban music ringing in the air, the occasional firecracker into the night...  
Exhausted, Milton went to sleep.
Milton waited for them in front of their house. As Sarat approached, he got two of the stumps from him, and walked towards the dry dirt patch. He remembered why three or four years ago, they chose this spot. It was perfect - flat, and there was enough room all around for the ball to be hit without fear of breaking a window or losing a ball over a rooftop. Now, after years of running between the batting and the bowling ends just about every Sunday, the grass along the pitch of two yards across had disappeared, and they had a perfect cricket pitch.

Milton pushed a pointed metal stump on the ground at one end of the pitch, and hammered it down with the flat side of the other stump. When the sharp end had gone in all the way to make it sturdy, he straightened it. Sarat was already at the other end of the pitch, 22 long strides away, hammering down the middle stump. Then he put another stump to the left of it, narrow enough to not let the ball through, and Milton, walking over, hammered it in. Then as he pushed the third stump in his hand into the ground to the right of it, Sarat pounded on it with a bat handed to him by his brother. The stumps were now sturdy, and Nimal placed the two wooden bails over the grooves of the flat top of the stumps, keeping the shorter side of the pins of the bails touching each other on the centre stump.

Nimal was now throwing a ball away from the pitch, and running to get it himself, the ball not running far against the grass. Then he bowled it back in the opposite direction, as Upali, now joining, picked it up, and bowled it back to Nimal. “Hello, Upali”, Milton said waving at Sarat’s next-door neighbour. Then taking out a ball from his pocket, he threw it at Sarat who threw it back to Milton.
Nimal, six years younger than Sarat, and the youngest player, always had the first turn at batting. He picked up his smaller bat, and walked to the end of the pitch with the three stumps. Sarat was keeping wickets at the back. Milton took two steps at the other end of the pitch, and tossed the ball up, in readiness to bowl. Playing for the College team like Sarat, he was used to the heavier leather ball, but playing tennis ball cricket all these years on the weekend, he had already made the adjustment.

Milton bowled the first ball, and as Nimal connected, it went to mid-off to his left. As Nimal started running towards the other end of the pitch to score a run, Yalitha, who was just walking into the field, picked up the ball and threw it back to Milton. “Nice throw”, Milton said as he caught the ball. “Nice shirt, too”, he added, looking at the colourful design on his short-sleeved shirt he wore over the blue short pants. “Shows you’re now fully crazy.” Everybody, including Yalitha, laughed, as he continued walking. “Stop right there”, said Milton as he bowled another ball at Nimal.

At the end of six balls, Upali took over. On the sixth ball, Nimal touched the ball with the tip of his bat as it zinged past him to be caught by brother Sarat, waiting close behind the wicket. “Howzzat”, cried Upali. Yalitha raised his right index finger to say he was out. Nimal protested. “Oh, let’s give him another chance…. He just started”, said Milton, taking over the ball from Upali.

Play continued for the next couple of hours as people living in the vicinity went in and out of their houses. An occasional “Well balled”, or “Good run”, cheered the players on. Girls, mostly sisters of the players, watched from behind a window or standing against a pillar, but rarely stepping out or cheering. But a fielder running into a yard adjoining the field to pick up the occasional ball would take a look. The girl would simply walk inside as if she saw nothing.
By noon, everybody had had his turn at batting twice. “I’m sweating”, said Sarat, as he wiped away the sweat off his forehead. “I’m hungry”, said Nimal, picking up a stump. “So am I”, joined in Milton, walking towards Upali and Yalitha standing in the shade. “Y’all live just around here. But I have to walk all the way home.” Suddenly his mind was on lunch. Just thinking of it made him hungrier. He visualized the plateful of rice, the fish curry, the lentils and the green something he always got at the Perera’s where he was boardered. But his thoughts were interrupted as somebody enquired,

“Where’s Malcolm?”

“Yeah, where IS the devil?” Yalitha asked.

“I saw him this morning through my window”, said neighbour Nimal. “He was in a tie.”

“Sunday best,” quipped Upali.

Suddenly turning his head and pointing, said Yalitha, “Oh, that must be him.” Everybody looked in the direction of St Paul’s Church, as everybody recognized the familiar gait, but in long pants today, he looked so different. Behind him, in the far distance nearer the Church, were people bustling around, some walking to or getting into their cars.

One by one, the boys started moving in the direction of the church to meet Malcolm. As the boys worked their way forward, Malcolm kept coming, headed home. He waved at the boys. “Hi”, he yelled across the several hundred yards between them, competing with the blowing wind. The boys waved back as they broke into a stride. Soon they reached Malcolm. “Sorry I couldn’t join you today”, he said.

“Since when are you so damned holy?” quipped Yalitha. “You bugger, you never went to church a day in your life.” That was Upali.

“That’s true”, said Malcolm looking away.

“So why today”, enquired Nimal. “Did God send you a summons to appear?”
Everybody laughed as Milton patted Malcolm on his shoulder.

“Don’t touch his white shirt with your bloody hands. He’ll have to wash it,” joked Sarat.

“Yeah, don’t desecrate my shirt…Oh me…I’m after Novena.”

“After what?”

“Novena… A special service.”

“What kind?” enquired one.

“So what did you do in there? Did you ask God to give you a job or something?”

That was Nimal. Everybody laughed, jabbing or patting each other. Barely passing his Senior School Certificate, everybody knew that when it came to studies, Malcolm was nowhere close to like whacking sixers over the boundary.

“Yes”, said Malcolm, lowering his eyes. Everybody stopped laughing, as if giving him the look of “You can’t be serious.”

“I thought only Yalitha was off his rocker,” quipped Upali, as Yalitha reached out to give him a punch. Upali moved away to avoid him. Yalitha ran after him, and took him in a headlock. Then he let go. The two put arms around their necks, as they returned.

“Seriously”, said Malcolm, as somebody interrupted him. “You’re saying God is going to give you a job?”

“There’s not even a God in the first place.” That was little Nimal again, as everybody but Malcolm went, “Yeah!”

“Yes .. Come to my Temple Sunday School. You can hear for yourself,” said Nimal again.

“You can laugh all you want, but I’m telling you, God is going to give me a job.”

“God is going to give you a job… aah aahhaaa” broke out Yalitha. “Everyone’s a comedian!”

“Seriously…That’s what the Father said”, explained Malcolm. After his sermon from the pulpit, he said, “Any-
one who will write down his wish on a piece of paper and put in that box,” he said, “will be looked after by God.”

“Just like that, huh”, chuckled Upali, as everybody looked at each other, and then Malcolm.

“God works in mysterious ways”, added Malcolm, repeating what he said he heard the Minister say. “I’m so sorry I can’t come to play with you any more. To get God’s favour, I have to go to church every Sunday…. No if’s and but’s” And then he added, “I’m sorry I am going to miss y’all … and cricket.”

“For how long?”

“Until I get a job.”

“When will that be?”

“God only knows!” said Malcolm, now heading home, as he toyed with his tie. Everyone laughed again, at what they thought was Malcolm’s naiveté.

“Oh my Gawd.” Milton was surprised at his own words. He did not realize how what he had been hearing all these years at Churchill College could ever enter his vocabulary. He pursed his lips, as he heard somebody say, “Since when did YOU come to believe in God?” Milton walked away not knowing what to say. Then he added, “You know what,” as everyone began to disperse. “Why don’t we play in the afternoon? That way Malcolm can join us, too.”

“That’s a great idea,” Malcolm said turning back.

“Yeah, can we?”

Yalitha sat on the green as Upali joined him. “Yes, why not”, said Milton as he joined in the two.

“Hey”, yelled Upali as Sarat headed home, carrying the bats with him. “It’s alright with me”, he said, looking back.

“Yeah, why not”, added Yalitha.

“Yeah, let’s”, agreed Upali.

Soon, they were playing in the afternoon. Now there was a newcomer. “Could I join you?” asked a boy of their age walking in their direction. “Sure,” said Milton.
“What’s your name?” someone asked.
“Upul.”
“Hi Upul”, rose the chorus.
A couple of weeks later, Upul heard someone call out his name as he was getting to the field. “Oh, good”, he said, as Upul walked towards him. And taking his hand, he returned towards the pitch with him. “This is my friend Wije”, he said. “We go to the Sunday school together at this Temple here. I asked him to come.”
Later they explained that playing in the afternoon made it possible for them to join in. “One holy thing leads to another”, quipped Malcolm, as he swung the ball at Sarat, glancing at Milton as if to say thank you.

Three months passed, and the boys began to tease Malcolm. “What happened to your God?” asked one. “Is he still going through your application?” asked another.
“No, he’s still trying to be born”, quipped Milton!
“That’s a good one”, joined someone.
“Don’t laugh,” Malcolm said, looking at everybody around. “I had an interview.”
“With God?”
Malcolm smiled.
The following weekend, Malcolm offered to buy everyone ice cream at the end of play. “I got the job”, he said beaming from ear to ear.
“Oh my Gawd! How intriguing”, Milton said to himself. This time he felt more comfortable with the word.
All week, Milton thought about what Malcolm had said. Curious to find out for himself, the next Sunday morn-
ing, he went in the direction of the church, bat in hand. It was close to the noon hour, and throngs of people were walking out of the church gate. A casual glance at the men in tie and coat, and their shoes, reminded him of his spit and polish days as a cadet. Some of the women were in white dresses, wearing head veils, and mesh face cover, while others wore the Sari. However, what surprised him were some women with a red pottu between the eyebrows, he had seen at the Annual Hindu Vel Festival. The golden bangles in their bare arms jingled as the long earrings danced to their tune as the women and the men engaged themselves in pleasant banter and laughter.

Seeing the smart suits worn by them all, Milton was attracted by the idea of going inside the church. It had been a long time since his Christ Church College days when they all had to attend the morning service at the chapel, in tie. However, a tinge of fear, and discomfort, swept through him as he remembered the story of Rosalind and Jayatissa he had read in a novel - how Jayatissa was attracted by the church music and came to be converted. Will that happen to him, too?

As a few young girls, fairer than himself, and in their Sunday best, passed by, a heavy aroma of perfume entered his nostrils. Noting their dresses that fell below the knees, he looked at them with a smile, one after the other, but huh, only to see their eyes avoiding his as they walked away as if sneering at him. Where did this country bumpkin come from, he thought, each of them seem to be saying. Quickly, looking at his own clothes, short pants and open neck short sleeved shirt, he felt himself a misfit. Thinking how dirty his playwear must have looked, he took a firm grip of his bat in hand, and began to walk in the opposite direction along the gravel road leading to Basement Road. Burghers, descendents of the Dutch, he said to himself, as he felt he was back at Churchill the first day. ... The boys mocking him, no ispell, no iskill, no place at our Churchill. He felt a hotness devour him.
BOOK THE SECOND:

*Away from the Rented Grove*

Not by birth is one a *Vasala*.
Not by birth is one a Brahmin.
Action alone makes one a *Vasala*.
Action alone makes one a Brahmin.

- *Vasala Sutta*
Eleven

_A Bus Ride_

Standing behind the banyan tree up the bund of hardened brown soil, Milton could see the lone bus parked under a lamppost. Despite four other lampposts lining this side of the road and four more at the back along the bund, the bus stand was dimly lit. At 3 AM, everywhere else was enveloped in darkness. The valiant streetlights on the other side of the tarred road seemed to be straining to shine through the thickness, as if to keep an eye on the odd movement that would violate the silence of the closed shop doors and windows.

The movement that broke the monotony of the morning pleased Milton. As if alerted by a twinkle of a streetlight, he watched the girl’s father emerging from the shadowy side of the bus, almost out of nowhere. He felt a tingling sensation in his body at the thought that it was going to finally happen. At first, he barely saw the man, his face, and bare body waist up, weaving into with the night. However, the lines on his forehead, the cloth band around his head and the sarong falling just below the knees gave every indication that he was not on any routine job but on a special mission.

Emerging from behind haltingly, he began to shuffle his bare feet, looking around surreptitiously as if to ensure himself of something. He continued towards the front of the bus past two other people having a conversation. He noted askance another man, chewing betel, squirting out a dart of red saliva to the ground. A couple of others were sipping tea in tin cups, and the vendor was pouring a third for a waiting man looking in the direction of the bund that surrounded the lake behind the bus stand. Some of the waiting passengers cast casual glances at the father as he continued past the door towards the engine and stood there panning the street.
Walking briskly back into the darkness behind the bus, the father now emerged again. Just behind him was the mother, with her daughter tugging on to her. Barely four feet tall, she wore her knee-length hair in a plait, tied at the end with a green piece of cloth. Her one-piece dress fell all the way to the ankle, almost sweeping the ground. She followed her parents closely, eyes cast down, as if to avoid catching anybody’s eye but also perhaps to ensure that her bare toes would not rub against the broken-up surface.

Going up to the driver, the man pointed to his wife and daughter behind him. After paying the driver, he now let the daughter get on the bus first as he looked around again. The mother got on board next. Walking past the three or four other passengers already on the bus, the two of them sat on the long bench-seat at the very back.

By now, Milton was already buying his ticket. He could feel the pleasant tropical breeze blowing from the lake over the bund. The tea vendor poured a last cup from his canister. As the driver sipped it, the vendor made his last call. Milton was still looking in the direction of the last seats of the bus when the conductor invited him on board.

Soon the engine came to life, as the driver, well en- sconced in his seat, revved it up, disturbing the peace and quiet, startling the crows, too, perched on the banyan, tamarind, araliya and sooriya trees circling the bus stand and lining the bund. Their excited crowing, added to the noise of the engine, shattered the quiet momentarily. Now the lights came on, flashing a beam on to the wide storefront of the David Store just facing the bus stand as if to say, “Same time tomorrow!”

However, like the several other businesses ending up at the bridge, it stayed undisturbed.

Milton had already walked to the back of the bus himself, and taken his seat in the row just in front of the mother and the daughter, but on the far side from them. As the bus began to roll on to the two-lane road, empty of ve-
A vehicle, man or animal, he looked back, as if to catch a
glimpse of the father.

Allowing the crows to return to their night’s sleep,
the bus now turned right, illuminating the closed storefronts
deep in slumber as it went past a tea kiosk, a grocery store,
a few clothing shops and a hardware store, ending with
what everyone knew as the Batticalo Store, before the road
forked. Owned by an out-of-town entrepreneur from the
eastern town of Batticalo, it was the only other department
store in the town, in addition to David Mudalali’s. The tri-
lingual signs in the two stores, in De-Leonese, De-
Andhrese and English, seemed to be talking to the trilingual
community of the town, keeping both in a thriving busi-
ness.

As the bus chugged past the Batticalo Store, Milton
saw the father at the bus-stand turn his head in the direction
of the Batticalo store, and then at Milton. He nodded back,
understanding him immediately. Like the father, he had
been at the bus stand to catch the 4 o’clock bus yesterday.
Waiting behind the banyan tree, Milton had seen the father
emerge out of the dark, but immediately beating a retreat.
Talking to the driver was the Batticalo Mudalali, impecca-
ably dressed, and regally it appeared to Milton, in a match-
ing buttoned up sherwani coat falling over the swan white
verti wrap-around. The shawl around his neck seems to
highlight the Batticalo Mudalali’s pitch black face. A chain
held by a small golden round pin along the button line held
his trademark gold watch, tucked into the upper pocket. His
wife, in a Kashmir sari and a long sleeved jacket, wore a
red pottu on her forehead. Her several gold necklaces com-
peted for a comfortable resting place on her ample bosom,
as her bangles clanged as they came into contact with each
other as she held the railing to board the bus after her hus-
band. Milton watched the bus heaving under their weight as
they boarded.

As the bus disappeared the day before into the dark
labyrinth that was the road to Matara, Milton had walked
along the bund towards the bridge. He knew that the mother and daughter could not, would not, dare travel in the same bus with the Batticalo merchant couple, without earning their wrath for caste pollution. Besides, the father would have had to explain why the mother and the daughter were on the bus. “If only dad had been there yesterday,” Milton mused, remembering his father’s campaign to banish the less-than-equal treatment of the lower castes among the De-Leonese themselves.

Once on the road, Milton leaned against the wall and turned his face as casually as possible to take a glance at the girl sitting behind at the far corner window seat, under a dim light. Eyes glued down, she clutched on to a small package in her left hand. A parcel of what appeared to be clothes, wrapped in newspaper, showing the year 1946, wedged between daughter and mother. Another sat on the seat to the right of the mother. Now his eyes turned on the mother as she caught a glimpse of them, and immediately looking down.

The few passengers stretched in their seats to doze off for the two hours it would take to reach the destination. But when Milton, like the other passengers, was jolted out of his nap as the bus creaked to a halt on and off to pick up passengers on the way, he saw the mother wide awake, with her daughter’s head on her lap.

Getting off at the Matara bus terminal at the crack of dawn, Milton walked towards a bullock-yoked bakki cart, waiting for a passenger pick-up. The bull moved its head as he patted on its head, and sent his palm along the rail on his side, connected to another by the ambaraawa resting on the bull’s neck. “Train station,” Milton said, as he smiled at the man sitting on the single-seater across with cane in hand. Joining him at the front seat in the open cart to get a front vantage on the road, his legs dangling, he now looked in the direction of the mother and the daughter who had by now gotten off the bus. He sent an inviting smile. The mother looked at the daughter, as she held on to her
hand. As they began walking towards the bakki cart slowly, 
the carter got off, and going to the back, opened a little half 
door above the step. Looking at her daughter still holding 
on to her hand, she moved to the side to allow her to get on. 
Next, the mother got on and sat across from her, the legs of 
mom and daughter well ensconced within the space be-
tween the two seats facing each other. The carter latched 
the door at the back and returned to his seat at the front, and 
pulling the reins, gave a tender tap on the back of the bull 
with his cane.

Soon, the three of them were on the train, bound to 
Colombo. The mother and the daughter sat on one bench, 
and Milton sat on another facing them but at the other end. 
The train sped, past coconut tree after coconut tree after 
coconut tree after coconut tree, as many a beach opened up 
on the way. His mind went back to the beach back home. 
Far away from the pattakka bushes and the goblins, a smile 
came upon him. How silly it was for him to be scared of 
walking alone in that neck of the wood. Other thoughts 
came rapidly at him. Pushing the cart, the chance encoun-
ter, and now….

Before long, Milton watched the mother open the 
package. With the corner of his eyes, he noted that she was 
trying to catch his attention, looking in his direction. He 
now looked at her as she sought to get a smile. Placing her 
hand on one of three packages, she smiled wider at Milton. 
Surprised that the third package may be for him, he smiled 
in return. A few moments passed, Milton not knowing what 
to do. Then, standing up slowly, he moved over to the emp-
ty seat facing them. The mother stretched her hand in his 
direction. Taking the lunch package, Milton began to undo 
the banana leaf wrap carefully as the train sped away. As 
the rice came into view, he opened the package fully, and 
began to finger around. He now dipped his fingers into the 
rice. Oh, del maalu cooked breadfruit … and pol sambol 
shredded coconut mix. With mother’s image in the kitchen 
running towards him, Milton was now imagining the wom-
an seated in front of him mixing the shredded coconut in a coconut shell, adding chili and salt, then squeezing a wedge of lime into it, and finally tasting it, by picking a wee bit between the index finger and the thumb, placing it on the palm, and licking it with her tongue. With the girl looking on, was his added thought. Now his mouth watered. Mixing a little of the thick gravy of the del maaluwa, he made a fistful of rice and placed it in his mouth. Oh, my other favourite, too. So thinking, he bit into the fried fish. Although it was soggy, he liked the taste…. Not as delicious as mom’s food, he thought, but at least at this early hungry hour, much better than what I get at the boarding house!

As he enjoyed the food, glancing at the mother and the passing coconut trees on one side and the open sea on the other, his eyes fell accidentally, sort of, on the girl, sitting close to mom, and continuing to look down. But suddenly, she looked up ….. when their eyes met, for the briefest moment as she looked down again as if in embarrassment. He noticed her hand scratching around her chest. Feeling a tingling sensation, he looked away, as if to hide it from anyone, and listened to the speeding chug chug chug chug chug. I’ll be darned, he said to himself, as he continued to shove mouthfuls of food. Suddenly, however, another thought appeared. I’ll be darned, he said to himself again, if those eyes did not belong to someone… Hm… but, who could it be? He could not get rid of the thought.

And if the coconut trees, fields, ocean, scattered houses and roaming and sleeping cows and bulls, even the open blue sky, all tried to push the thought away as the train sped by, it bounced right back, emerging through the crevices and openings. Those eyes! As if unable to bear some sort of unexplained weight impinging upon him, he moved back to his seat, thanking the mother.

Soon, with head rested on his hand resting against the window ledge, and the wind rushing past his hair, he was fast asleep. He did not know how long he had slept when the train creaked to a stop at a station. Wellawatta,
the sign read. Oh, the *Nambadal* Our People’s Town, he said to himself, as it was fondly known among his De-Andhrese friends.

Seeing a cart pull up in front of their house, Mr. JeyaweeraSinh cam out of the house, dressed in his usual white suit and tie. “Hello, Milton,” he said, as Milton got off and walked towards him. “Oh, so this is the girl”, he said, as he watched mom and daughter get off. In class one day, the teacher had asked the class if they knew of anyone who could find a domestic for him. “She’ll serve you well, I assure you, Sir,” Milton said, as young Mrs. JeyaweeraSinh, with hair as long as the girl’s and the mother’s, appeared at the door. Like Tangamma’s mother, she, too, had a red pottu on her forehead, as if to remind the whole wide world that she was a married woman. As she played with her cross she wore on her neck walking out of the house, he was reminded of the women he had seen at St Paul’s Church. Now Milton caught the eyes of the girl’s mother watching the cross, and quickly looking down. Tangamma was scratching away at her chest, as she had been on the bus and the train. Perhaps, then, he thought, it was not like in his case when he fell off the bike. The scratching started as the wound began to get healed, and then it was no more. But why then? He was disturbed in his thoughts when Mrs. JeyaweeraSinh said something to the mother. Soon she was, with head down and in measured step, following her daughter’s new Lady of the House, along the side of the house to the back, as if to indicate, he thought, that this was the door to be used by them and not the front. He watched Tangamma follow her mother, still scratching. He found he could not resist taking a last look at the girl. “She’s peace alright,” he said to himself.

But where have I seen those eyes?

“I’ll make sure the girl’s mother is taken back to the station,” said Mr. JeyaweeraSinh, as he kept his eyes on the three women now entering through the side door. “You’ll have to buy a ticket for her, Sir,” he reminded him.
After a few more words, Milton was on his way out.
“Goodbye, Sir.”
“Good-bye.”
Milton got off the tramcar at Lotus Road and walked towards the Regal Theatre keeping to the left pavement. Turning the corner at the Right House Circle, he walked up to the three-storey building that extended an entire long block. He went up the steps, opened the door and walked to the receptionist. Soon, a peon in a white tunic coat with a line of black buttons and a collar trimmed in gold appeared with a smile. Milton followed him to an oak-paneled Office, displaying the name ‘Mr. Wijewardhena’. Knocking on the door lightly, the peon opened it. Through the opening, Milton saw a stocky man with a moustache, in tie and coat, staring at a pile of papers.

As the peon walked out, shutting the door behind him, Mr. Wijewardhena stretched his hand across the wide table. Still standing, Milton took his hand with his fingers. “So you’re the hot shot Gold Medalist from Churchill,” Mr. Wijewardhena said, flashing his white teeth. “Sit down, sit down. I’ve heard so much about you.”

Milton grinned, not knowing what to say. Then, not looking directly at the imposing figure standing in front of him, he said, “Sir, You can put me to any test, I’ll try my best.”

“Oh, a poet, too!” he said, as Milton watched the smiling face. “I don’t have to. When can you begin?”

Suppressing the shock, and looking down, as a mark of respect, he asked, “When do you want me to?”

“Well, how about tomorrow?”

Milton grinned from ear to ear.

“Nine o’clock.”
There was a now new feature in the paper. A section on literature, focusing more on the local scene than ever before. Milton knew he was building on the tradition of earlier and small-scale newspapers – like the Buddhist Lakmini Pahana, and the Christian Gnaanaartha Pradeepaya. They had, beginning in the eighteen sixties, introduced through their pages the forerunners to what was to become the contemporary novel in the De-Leonese. There had come to be lively debates, both among the readers of the individual newspapers but also between the rivals.

However, the local literary and cultural scene in English had somehow not hit the pages in any serious manner. During his Churchill days, he had attended many a play presented by the Theatre Circle of the newly created University - Gogol, Moliere, Chekov. But they barely attracted the attention of the media, mostly pre-occupied with cultural news of Mother Colonial, even when Shakespeare came to be staged. “I don’t want to see Shakespeare butchered by a bunch of neophytes,” the Editor is said to have commented. “I want to lavish in my memory that splendid performance at the Royal Alex in London.”

But now there was emerging interest in works on local themes, such as Leonard Wolfe’s Village in the Jungle. And in local works like J. Wijayatunga’s Grass For My Feet and Martin Wickremasinghe’s Madol Doowa – Children’s Island Paradise. The Museum on Green Path was beginning to display the works of local artists such as George Keyts. And the Lionel Wendt Theatre was beginning to be a venue for University productions.

The innovative focus on local literature in the Daily Misnews was such a hit among the readers that it now expanded into literary criticism. Publisher Wijewardhena was beaming to see how the readership had expanded. Capturing the moment, Milton soon launched a Sunday Literary supplement. The paper came to be inundated with requests for reviews – of books, plays, musical events, literary de-
bates. Soon the signature MAbh, for Milton Abhiman, came to be the standard seal of approval.

Writing the Editorial on February 4, 1948 was one of Milton’s most triumphant moments. He was glad to usher in a new era for the country. Under the title, “Independence without shedding a drop of blood”, the Editorial went on to sing praise of the efforts of the first Prime Minister Sir Don Stephen Troopleader, and other Freedom Fighters such as Sir Ramalord and Sir Baaron Victoryspot. Noting that it was a De-Andhrese, Sir Muthu Princelylord, that the De-Leonese had voted in as the first elected local member of the Legislative Council, the Editorial proudly proclaimed. “It was our De-Leonese and De-Andhrese leaders working together that brought us our freedom.” It also did not fail to thank the British, for not only a smooth transition but also preparing the country for self-governance. Sir Winston Churchill got special mention for his role in leading the charge to have English crowned in, and rained on, the world. “Nothing to do with your school, hanh!” somebody had quipped with a pat on his back, something he had taken as a complement.
Thirteen

Apsaraa

It was like any other day for Milton. He went to work that Friday morning, in shirt and trouser, and attended to the correspondence. Finally, he wrote the next day’s Editorial. Then he left the office on half-day leave, taking the Saturday half day off.

Coming down the steps of the Right House, he turned right, next approaching the roundabout. Although he had gone past this street sign every day as he came to work, he was surprised how his mind went wild reading the sign Lotus Road. Lotus. Suddenly he was imagining himself to be a bee in search of a lotus … in prime bloom. Turning to York Street, he felt as if he was gliding through the air, to land on the pollen, awaiting the arrival of the bee, impatient to give a taste of its succulent nectar. Only when he saw the beaming faces of his friends did he realize that he was at the Registrar’s office. His two friends and their wives waved at him. Even as he exchanged smiles with them, he looked around unobtrusively. Noting the question mark on his face, one of the wives walked away quietly. As Milton started chatting with the others, the wife reappeared.

“Looking for someone?” she asked teasingly.

Tangamma’s face appeared through the doorway of an adjoining room. He contained his heart seeking to jump out and mesh into hers. She looked at him with a feather smile, but immediately cast her demure eyes down. Gazing at her as she took slow step by slow step towards him, he saw a beauty in her face he had never seen during their clandestine rendezvous outside the Hindu Kovil at Wel-lawatta. With hair parted in the centre and tied in a bun at the top, her elongated face, heightened by a sharp nose, she now truly was the Sigiriya Apsaraa nymph hanging on his wall in his room. He had always seen Tangamma with her hair down – down to her waist, and always in the long dress
of a domestic, never in a sari like she was wearing today. Or perhaps he had had no time, he thought, to see her blooming beauty. Their only opportunity to meet was on Sundays while the JeyaweeraSinhams were at Church. It was no more than an hour at the most, and barely allowed much time to walk beyond a couple of long blocks.

His mind went to the time he had visited his teacher upon getting his job at the Right House. As he sat in the living room with the teacher and his wife, tea was served. “Remember her?” the teacher asked, as a young girl appeared with tray in hand. It took him a moment to realize it was Tangamma! It had been over three or four years since he had brought her to the teacher’s house. This was the first time he’d sort of seen her head down to feet up, not surreptitiously as during the train ride but openly. And invited. In a long dress, she looked mature, but not particularly beautiful by any means. In fact, what he remembered was how her face brought him thoughts of an ancient ruler, King Vanka Nasika, Crooked Nose. Her nose appeared a bit off centre. The ears were a bit too long, too, for her small dark face, he remembered thinking. But yet he felt a strong pull towards her, something he couldn’t explain. And then, for the briefest moment, she looked up, eyes meeting eyes. And the thought again, I’d be darned if those eyes did not belong to someone …. As when he saw on that train ride some years ago, the question continued to haunt him. But where had he seen them?

It was as if to find an answer to that question, he remembered, that he had found excuses to visit the teacher more often, always looking forward to tea being served. It was at one such visit he had come to learn of Tangamma’s practice of being in the vicinity of the Kovil on Sundays. Yet he could not figure out why, however much he enjoyed being in her presence, he felt sort of repulsed at the same time, as if by a negative magnetic current. Keep away, keep away, he could swear he almost heard a voice say, as if he was being veered off a hostile encounter.
Nevertheless, the lure of seeing her outside the Kovil, unnoticed by her, was too powerful to be overcome by any push factor. What if I were to begin appreciating her for what she is? Just then, the lines of a 13th century poem by King Parakramabahu he had read in the Kav Silumina Crest-gem of Poetry, appeared on his lips. It was just about the only one he remembered, the De-Leonese teacher at Churchill, in tie and jacket, coming to be the butt of jokes. However, his gestures, as he explained the poem, had remained grooved in his memory.

_Sisi vana vuvana,_

Face like the moon,  
_inga suñga gata haeki mitina._

narrow waist a fit into a fist!  
_Nisi pululukulu riya sakayuru_  
Cart-wheel of a wide hip, and, oh,

_tisara tana._

the swan-like breasts.  
_Disí rana liyew roosiri yut_  
_Urban beauty, a golden_  
_mepurañgana._

statuette of a damsel.  
_Aesipiya helana pamanin_  
_Goddess she isn’t, batting_  
_noweti dewañgana._

eyelids her betrayal.

A poster of a Sigiriya Apsaraa figure, a carbon copy, almost, of those at Ajanta and Ellora, immediately came to his mind, giving life to the poet’s sentiments.

Suddenly, he was in front of the Apsaraa in his room. It was after one of his rendezvous with her. Her face awash in his memory, he looked at the nose in the painting. Hm… looking closely, a little off centre? Yet the positioning seemed to add beauty to the face. He closed his eyes
and tried to visualize Tangamma’s face. And nose. Yes, it was beautiful.

On another occasion, he remembered, standing below the painting, he was looking at the Apsaraa ears. Yes, they were indeed long. Even more than those of Tangamma.

He remembered how over time, he found himself spending more and more time with the Apsaraa, adoring her from a distance, from near, from this angle, from that. He was beginning to see Tangamma’s face in it more and more. The pull towards her was now stronger than ever, and he was glad the repellent factor was weakening. Particularly as he watched from a distance near the Kovil. And oh, her long hair.

Next, he remembered the day when he had taken her by surprise. That Sunday, as she stood at the Kovil gate, not so much watching, as always, the hundreds of devotees going in and out, and yearning how she wished if only she could see what was inside a Kovil, she found herself intently gazing at the multi-coloured tall turret again, with the many figures and designs of gods and goddesses. Now her eyes had fallen on her favourite figure, Lord Ganesh, with an elephant head, and trunk reaching down. Back at the JeyaweeraSinhams’, though churchgoers, it had been explained to her how in Hindu mythology, Lord Ganesh stood for learning. Ah, that’s what I’d want, too, she had told herself, having heard, though barely understanding, what she had figured was all the educated talk that went on at the JeyaweeraSinhams’, specially when there were visitors. All the fun and laughter, and the merriment were like a soothing balm to her.

As she stood on that Sunday gazing at Lord Ganesh, she imagined the Lord trying to reach her, with his trunk. Soon, as she closed her eyes, she found herself coiled in the trunk, which had now come to be very long, ending up nostril to nostril. She felt an incredible lightness all over her body. Then a warmth, the warm air gently blowing out of
the Lord’s pumped-up nostrils. She closed her eyes and inhaled every bit. Mmmmmm ….. Suddenly, she felt the lightness giving way to a heaviness in her head, as if all knowledge had come to be deposited in it. Oh, it was all the knowledge Lord Ganesh stood for, she was sure…. She felt lifted off her feet, as if she was now being transported to a different world…. a world where she did not have a gate shut on her, to merely stand outside the walls …..

Then, she heard a faint voice… a voice calling her name. Tangamma. She was taken aback. Who would know my name? Heart pounding, her hand went to her chest and began scratching scratching scratching. She quickly brisked away from the gate towards home. The JeyaweeraSinhams must be waiting for me.

“Tangamma, it’s me…,” she heard it again, as she tried to walk faster. “It’s me….from Baduruppa.” Hearing the word Baduruppa, Rented Grove, she turned her head back ever so slightly even as she continued to walk. Then stopping, she slowly raised her head. He splashed a smile. It only took her a moment to recognize the familiar face. It was only the other day she had served him tea. She smiled in turn.

Now he recollected how at the beginning, communication between them was sparse. The few English words she had picked up at the JeyaweeraSinhams’ were all the slabs available to her to pave a new path.

Suddenly, Milton was awakened from his daydreaming by the sound of shoes shuffling, as Tangamma joined the rest in the room. His eyes rolled over her tenderly. I’ll be darned…. Those eyes, the thought came to him again. However, just looking at her face, he thought, brought him peace. Yes, she was Shanti – an epitome of peace all right. He was glad that everything had worked according to plan. Tangamma had come in the company of his friend and his wife whom Milton had introduced to her near the Kovil the Sunday before. She was to meet them at
the same place when she came to fetch groceries on that Friday.

Now his friends were ready to witness their marriage. He was sure the outside world would not understand his choice of bride any more than the choice of groom by her. So they had opted to get married the same way they had been meeting over the last few years. Clandestinely.

Following the registration, one of the wives took out a small container from her handbag, and wetting her right index finger on her tongue, dipped it into the red powder. Then, as Tangamma stood motionless, eyes closed, the wife placed her index finger and thumb of her left hand under her chin, and with the right index finger, placed a red pottu thumb-mark between her eyelids. ‘Married’, in the book of the public eye. Everybody clapped as Tangamma looked down as if trying to take in the moment, trying to contain a sob… Marriage … something she could never have imagined in her wildest dreams. She felt as she was being carried away by a current, as she once was taking a dip in the ocean. But now … oh… now… it was a reality. Torrents of tears now flowed as she lowered her head and rested it on the shoulder of the woman who had imprinted the pottu. Taking the edge of the fall of her sari, she held it to her nose and mouth as if to muzzle the sounds. After a moment, she raised her head, with the helping hand of the woman. Wiping her face but careful not to take away the powder, she looked in the hand mirror held in front of her. How different, she marveled at her own face. No longer the scrawny kid in the Rented Grove, not the servant girl in a gown, she reminisced, but a grown woman…. A fully-grown up woman… She took a deep breath as if unable to comprehend it all but taking it all nevertheless. Beaming with a smile now, she looked at the lady in sari who had placed the pottu on her… as if to say Thank you… thank you thank you. Then she turned to Milton who himself was all smiles. “The lotus in full bloom,” he said to himself as she offered her full face. He moved closer to her, careful
not to touch her. Not in public! He felt a tingling sensation all over him by being so close to her, their not-so-often rendezvous amounting to no more than passing a few words. The busy Galle Road hardly gave them a private moment.

“It’s alright to get closer,” a friend teased, as another nudged them. She smiled in embarrassment as he did, too, as the sensation of an electric current passed through his senses. One of the two women walked to Tangamma and embraced her. Tears flowed as she envisaged her to be her mother. An unspeakable loneliness took possession of her heart, as a rivulet found a path down her cheeks. She continued to hold on to the image of her mother as she was embraced by the second woman in the company… Mother… what would she be doing now….If only she were here… She looked forward to the day she could go home to the Rented Grove… proudly beside her husband…

Now moving towards Milton, the two women brought their palms together as Milton returned the salutation with folded palms. The two men were standing as well in front of Tangamma with folded palms. Tangamma held her palms chest high in return, a bent thumb reaching out to the chest for a scratch. “Well, let me shake your hand,” said a friend, turning to Milton. “Why are your hands so cold,” he teased with his usual kind smile, as Milton took his hand, and looked down, as if unable to explain why through all the excitement he had felt a chill all the while. “Don’t worry,” the friend said, “you’ll be in very warm hands … soon.” He looked at Tangamma as she looked down coyly. “Here’s wishing you both long wedded bliss,” he said, as his wife joined in with the words, “and lots of children.”

“But not too many,” jested another, “Only 1.3!” Everybody broke out in laughter as Milton and Tangamma stood beside each other smiling, and feeling the electric of their bodies, now with a brand new freedom to spread its wings outside their bodies. He now felt like a magnet attracted to her.
Milton and Tangamma bade goodbye to their friends. Glancing a smile at his new bride as if to ask, “Shall we go?” Milton walked to the tramcar stop with Tangamma four steps behind. His friend walked toward the Central Telegraph Station to send a cable to Tangamma’s parents. He himself waited for an opportunity to let his own parents in on the news.

As the two of them continued to walk towards the tramcar, she kept looking around as if to make sure there was no one around. And careful to be four steps behind her, as she had seen amma walk behind her own appa. Milton knew the fear gripping her - the Jeyaweera Sinhams looking for her. He could not have possibly let them know about it ahead of time. They would never agree to it, both Milton and Tangamma were sure, any more than his own parents would. She was too young for him, of a different religion… and, good Lord, untouchable!

As she rode the tramcar, her thoughts went flying back to her mother and father. What might they be doing now? Did they receive the telegram? Soon she was back home, inside the house. Sitting at the hearth, of three stones, she was blowing air into it to make the amber come alive. Before long, she was scraping a coconut, sitting on a flat wooden scraper. As if to balance herself on the scraper, barely six inches high off the floor, she stretched her legs sideways. Holding with both hands the half of a coconut split in two, she scraped the kernel against the serrated edges of the flat disk hooked on to the rising neck of the scraper. She watched the white kernel fall on to the shallow, wide open tin bowl just beneath. She now saw herself adding water to the scraped coconut in the pot. Taking a fistful the shredded coconut in hand, she squeezed out the water into a smaller tin pot - oh how pure, and tasty, and dropped the dried out shreds into a third pot. After repeating this until there was no more coconut left in the first pot, she now added water to the third pot. Squeezing the coco-
nut again, she put the residual back into the first pot, to be thrown as plant food around trees.

If the vivid memory brought her nostalgia, it also brought her pain. She began to scratch her chest. How hard she had to squeeze her life to get a morsel of happiness.

Before long, she was back in the ocean near her home in the Rented Grove. She was in the water with mother, and father nearby. She was frolicking in the water, even throwing water at mother. She visualized herself running along the beach as fast as she could and then running into the big waves as her mom screamed to get her back. And then, the vivid memory of the night someone had walked towards them, bringing them jitters, and how they had rushed out of the water as the stranger began to talk to her father. She had not seen his face that first night, but somehow, when her father began to talk to him, there had come to reside in her a fondness of the voice, even though she understood nothing. A tender kitten finding its way on to her mat, the imagery appeared to her. She now remembered the day when she got the first glimpse of the face when he had enquired of her father. “Tangacchi?” he had asked. It was the first time she had heard anyone call her sister, and she remembered how she took a peek at his face even from a distance. She now remembered how she watched the imagery grow in her, particularly after seeing his face at close quarters in the nightglow inside the bus. Now the kitten had grown into a purring cat.

Looking around as if to make sure that nobody in the tramcar was looking, she placed her right hand on the seat, just touching his. The warm nudging brought Milton the image of the Apsaraa beauty, as he cast a glance at her. He placed his hand carefully on hers. It was as cold as his own was. Anxiety perhaps, he suggested to himself, as she quietly pulled her hand away as the tramcar rolled on. Listening to the unsteady sounds it made, her hand went to her chest as she began to scratch scratch scratch. She felt her heart romping as she closed her eyes.
Fourteen

A Death Sentence?

“Telegram, telegram”, the postman cried out as he waved the folded paper in the wind. From the perch of the ladder made of burnt logs, taken from a funeral pyre of a few days ago, Muttusamy looked back, coir rope in hand. He was almost taken aback at the voice so close to his wattle shack in the Rented Grove, home to the buried. It was only just that morning his wife had murmured about the ominous sounds of hyenas the night before as a sudden wind had tugged away at the thatched roof, and a steady bucket of water had rushed its way through the ribs. Muttusamy was putting the finishing knots over some new cadjan leaves over the lower roof, no more than six feet at the entrance, when the first ever postman’s visit had startled him. Sounds began to reverberate in his ear, the sounds of a funeral drum that often made its way to this deserted patch of hot sand, past the edge of the village. He smelled danger. He called out to his wife who came out and stood at the door frame made of bamboo. “From Colombo,” the postman said as he handed over the folded paper.

His hand fluttering as a dry leaf in the wind, he held the folded paper, as he watched the postman struggling his way back through the sand, kicking an occasional bone sticking out of the sand. Then the distant cry of a solitary mourner at a fresh grave reached his ears. Going past some coconut shells lying around, he stopped at the sharp-edged iron rod sticking out of the sand used to chip off the coconut husks. Hands still shaking, he placed an edge of the paper on it, and picking up a wide-blade-knife, sent the blade back and forth along it. The knife slipped off, biting the sand. “Let me do it,” offered his wife. She took a safety pin from her jacket and pierced the corner gently. Pushing the sharp pin into the paper, she pulled it towards her along the
fold. Soon, some scribbling showed. But neither could figure it out.

Soon his wife fell into a crying hysteria. She banged her head against the wattle wall and then against the bamboo doorframe, as her husband tried to stop her... “I told you, didn’t I, I didn’t want her to go to the city....,” she said in De-Andhrese. “Now we’ve lost her....for ever.. we’ll never see her again!” With a loud wailing, tears began rolling down her cheeks. Wiping her nose with the edge of her wraparound cloth, she went to her little altar inside, and knelt at Goddess Kali, bending over. “Please Kali-amma, please, do me this one favour... this one favour to this humble supplicant...please... please send my daughter back to me,” she pleaded. Muttusamy sat at the entrance and looked at the not too far away ocean. The waves rolled unrelentingly. A distant outrigger swayed to the movement of the ocean. Silhouettes of two or three people appeared against the sun and the horizon, as if they were puppets in the hands of a mighty power.

Looking farther, to the horizon, he reflected upon the rosy picture Milton had drawn when he convinced him to allow their daughter to go to the city as a domestic. “I only wanted a good future for you,” cried out Muttusamy, as he pounced on his bare chest, drained now in a torrent of tears.

“I never agreed to this,” said his wife coming out of the hut. “It was you who....”

“But I only wanted her to have a life....Just look at us.. We get this piece of paper... and we cannot even read it... And look at where we live .. Nobody wants to touch us... We get a meal a day only because nobody else wants to smell the.....” He stopped..., and added, “I go in there, pushing my cart, day in day out....”

“Yes… but she would be alive now ..”

“Going hungry everyday? Bad enough God has punished us .. banishing us to the wasteland of untouchabil-
ity… I only wanted her to not go hungry… so that that your damned God, or Goddess, couldn’t punish her.”

“Appan,” she said sternly, “don’t talk like that… Please! … Kali … Kali is the only protector we have.”

They were walking along the burning sands of the beach, he ahead. His bare upper body was getting roasted in the sun, highlighting the ribs as on a circular iron grid. He watched the angry billows constantly competing with each other. When the seething waters of a breaking wave came in search of his legs, he pulled up his knee-length sarong higher. She kept to the dry sand, covering her head with her sari. Taking an end-piece in her hand, she draped it over her face, as if to hide herself from the world. She felt as if she wanted to be left well alone to her crying, which she could now do in the wilderness of the vast expanse of the ocean. She wiped her tears with the cloth, sometimes blowing her nose into it. On occasion, she stopped to cry out louder even as Muttusamy continued on. Noting her far behind, he would wait for her before starting to walk again.

Now they heard the sound of drums. Yes, they both immediately recognized it. A funeral.

\[
\text{Tah ta tah ta ta, tah ta tah ta ta,} \\
\text{tah ta tah ta ta, drum.} \\
\text{Tah ta tah ta ta, tah ta tah ta ta,} \\
\text{tah ta tah ta ta, drum.}
\]

As they reached the end of town, Muttusamy found the sash across his bare chest all wet from wiping his eyes. Tightening his headband, he let his sarong fall below the knee. Making sure that his wife was close behind him, he walked up the beach to a concrete wall that separated the road from the sand. Walking up the steps, he stepped on to the tarred road, slowing his pace for his wife to make it up. Now he sent his eyes along the strings of coir rope running along both sides of the street, festooned with tender yellow coconut leaves hanging down. A man with a bare upper
body as his own was running forward with a white paawaada cloth in hand, and beginning to lay it on the ground helped by three others. As the last ends of the paawaada of about four yards were laid, another man with paawaada in hand, was rushing from the back of the people carrying the coffin. The new sheet now stretched beyond the earlier sheet, as the coffin-carriers stepped on to the cloth to the beating of the Tah ta tah ta ta, tah ta tah ta ta, tah ta tah ta ta, drum. The high-pitched wailing sound of the horn, held in hand by a man following the drummers, hovered in the air as mourners, all clad in white, walked behind the coffin, supporting each other, holding hands, resting their heads on shoulders, sobbing, breaking out into loud crying. A stray dog or two ran by with heads down as crows flew silently as if saddened by the sight.

Hearing the wailing sound of the horn, Muttusamy’s wife, still below the steps, beat her chest with her hands again and again, and gave out a loud cry, as if getting out all the imprisoned air in the lungs. As she, minutes later, climbed up to the street level, looking up at the passing procession, she could see the long white cloth of a parasol held over the coffin by four posts, held high from the four corners. Tears began rolling down her cheeks again as she began to think of how, or even if, she would ever see her daughter. She visualized her cold body, inside the coffin, face up, more peaceful than ever. “Oh Kali Amma,” she murmured as she buried her face in her cloth.

Waiting for the funeral to pass by, they continued to walk up the hilly road, until they reached the Post Office.

He turned his head slowly to the left, and right, and then behind, as if to see if anyone was watching. Noting a few people coming and going, he went up to the counter as his wife stood at a fair distance, her face still partly covered. Looking back, and placing his left hand on the chest area and moving it slightly around as if to massage it, he unfolded a tucked part of his sarong at his waste. Taking out the crumpled piece of paper, with hands shaking, he
handed it over to the clerk who looked puzzled. Taking it back from the clerk, Muttusamy opened the folded paper, pointed to the letters, and moved his head from side to side.

‘Oh, he can’t read it,’ the clerk said to himself. Realizing it was not in De-Leonese, he turned around and looked. Walking over with paper in hand, he put it on a desk. ‘This is in De-Andhrese.’ The man in pants and shirt looked at the crumpled paper, trying to put the pieces together. “It’s opened the wrong way,” he said, looking at Muttusamy. Comforted at hearing him speaking his language, he looked on plaintively. Now, putting the pieces together, the postal clerk ran his eyes over the words…as the man looked intently at his mouth… Oh Kali Amma, please, no…. not that news….he said to himself. He glanced at the wife, standing at a corner, covering her face, and visibly sobbing. He gave a sigh, as the clerk raised his eyebrows, looking at Muttusamy again through the counter window. The wife moved the cloth away from her eyes enough to see what was going on. “Is that your wife?” the clerk asked as she moved the cloth over her face. “Call her.” She felt her heart jump out, and instantly fell into a loud cry as she leaned against the pillar. Muttusamy looked back. Allowing time for her to subside, he walked over to her. Then, as he walked back to the counter, she followed him, keeping the cloth over her eyes so as to cover the tears flowing again. The clerk noted her walk the way he had seen people walking behind a coffin, step after slow step. She gave a deep sigh, as if getting ready to receive a death sentence.

When she was at the counter, the clerk looked at them both, and raising his eyebrows, and sporting a smile, began to read aloud. “Got married. Coming home soon with husband Milton.”

Muttusamy looked at the clerk in disbelief. Did he hear him right? He asked him to read it again please please please. He could not believe his ears as he heard the same words repeated. “Got married. Coming home soon with
husband Milton.” His face changed to a sunflower in mid-morning, as he turned to look at his wife. He looked at the counter clerk again, beaming, and asked for the paper, now with fewer wrinkles, as he noted the postman who delivered the telegram looking from a distance. He looked at it with questions written all over his face. He looked at his wife again, still face covered, still sobbing. Tears of joy, he said to himself. Not knowing what to say, or do, they both stood there, looking at each other. Then she looked down and covered her face fully. More tears began to wet her cheeks, but this time she felt a warmth inside. Muttusamy tucked the paper in his waist, and keeping his hand at it as if to ensure its safety, he began to walk away, wife following closely. “I knew it was going to be good for her,” he said without looking at her. The wife kept walking quietly, sporting a welling of happiness inside of her.

Suddenly she stopped. As Muttusamy turned back, he noted a fear gripping her face. “But… how would they take it?” she asked, staring into his eyes. “Is this the end of the Rented Grove for us?” Muttusamy cast his eyes far. A cat, chased by a dog, gave out a loud meow.

“Iskowla Haaminay, Madame Principal… Is Iskowla Mahatteya Respected Principal home?” asked the postman, wheeling his cycle past the gate and leaning it against the wall. Just then, Milton’s father walked in. The postman took him aside and whispered something in his ear. Then, getting on his bike, he took off towards the village boutique where a few people gathered. He stopped by one of them, and then another, as others gathered around him. He gave them the news with abandoned glee. Almost in disbelief, they all looked in the direction of Milton’s house.

“Has he gone mad?” thundered dad, walking inside.
“Who?” asked mom.
“Your son... That’s who...”
“Son?... Why, what has happened?”
“Happened?” he said, repeating the word. “Happened, happened, happened.” Then turning around, he said, “Ask the postman...”
“Ask the postman what...?”
“About the telegram?”
“What telegram?”
“Ask him.”
“But he’s gone...”
“Well... there was a telegram today...”
“So where is it?”
“Not to us...”
“Then?”
“Even as we talk, I can hear the postman whipping through the village and telling the whole world the news.”
“What news?”
“That your son ...” He stopped as if unable to continue. His wife looked on.
“Your son...” Again, he paused.
“What about our son?” she asked.
“He got married?”
“Married?”
“Yes... He got married.”
“He got married,” she repeated, in a barely audible voice. He felt herself thumped, nearly putting her off balance by the blow.
“Yes, your son got married,” he thundered. “And brought great fame to the family,” he thundered again. “How could we now face the world?”
She looked, still perplexed.
“Your son got married ...to the latrine cleaner’s daughter...”
“Our son married the latrine cleaner’s daughter?”
“Yes, the latrine cleaner’s daughter.”
“What?” she asked dumbfounded.
“Yes, what’cha call it... Tangamma.”
“Is that her name?”
“Yes… That’s what the postman came to tell us.”

Mom ran into the bedroom and threw herself on the bed as she heard father yelling out the words, “Oh we’re ruined!” He paced back and forth, with hands taut, held at the back. He pursed his lips and clenched his teeth as he closed his lips. He nodded and nodded and nodded. He felt dizzy as he held on to the back of an easy chair, plunging himself on to it. Resting his legs on the two extended arms of the chair, he closed his eyes, feeling a rush of blood into his eyes and all over the body.

A few minutes later, mom came out of the room and walked to where he was. “What shall we do now?” she asked sobbing.

“Well, what’s there to do…? Now it’s tar all over our face. How can I face the world…? What will my staff say? Can you imagine? They’re going to laugh behind our back, if not spit in our face… How can I walk the streets of this town again?”

Even as he spoke, mom saw someone walking by, eyes focused on the house. She walked to the window, and closed the panels.

“What a prize catch …huh huh huh…”, she heard her husband say, “The latrine-man’s daughter. What a catch!!”

The mother beat herself on the chest again, Dasa trying to stop her. “What’s there to live for now?” she intoned towards Dasa.

“I’m sure Podi Mahatteya is not foolish.”

But then, he began to think. He began to reflect on Milton’s interest in finding out where the latrine-cleaner lived, walking in that direction, the late nights on his holidays.

“Now we know why he was often late, coming home in pitch dark… Always an excuse. …the sneak,” mother said looking at Dasa. She sat in a chair in the corner and started sobbing again, this time burying her face in her
palms, elbows tucked on to the side. Dasa walked behind her. “Don’t, Loku Nona, don’t.”

“Did you know anything about this?” father blurted.

“Oh no, Loku Mahatteya…, not at all.” Lowering himself to the floor, and squatting, Dasa said, “I would’ve been the first to tell you had I even got a whiff of it.”

“How can we continue to live here? It will be the talk of the fishermen, the farmers, the storekeepers, the temples….I can see people snickering at us… though they may be polite in our presence.”
Reaching his flat on the seaside of Galle Road in Bambalapitiya, he held the door open. Tangamma cast her eyes to one side, then the other, as if to make sure no one’s eyes were on her. Then she rushed past the door as he shut it behind them. Once in, she stood there motionless, her heart thumping, and her mind alternating between awe and fear. She rolled her eyes over. Her own place to live in! She cast a glance at her husband standing beside her. He smiled, as the waves in her heart began to flatten out. Sending her eyes past him now, she glanced over at the window, moving her head ever so slightly.

The sun was still moving towards the horizon, continuing to paint the inside of the flat with the strokes of its dancing rays. As if to join in the dance, she tiptoed towards the window as he watched her. Sending her eyes past the train track, she watched the wide ocean that lay in front of her with wide eyes, as she tried to listen to the sound of the billows breaking in the distance. She stood there for a long time, taking in every sound, smell and sight. It was the first time since leaving home, oh what a long time, she thought, that she could lay her eyes on the vast expanse. Her mind went back to her mother. What must she be doing? She tried to visualize the excitement in her as she read the telegram. If only she could have been here! And appa?

Exhausted by the day’s excitement, Milton walked to the sofa in the middle of the room, leaving her to her thoughts. Sitting at the edge, he looked at Tangamma invitingly as she turned away from the window. She lowered her head coyly. Moments went by, neither moving. Then, getting up, Milton measured his steps towards her. Looking up at him for a fraction of a second, she lowered her head. Tangamma, he called out with a smile, stopping. She moved just a tad away as if not let his fingers touch her.
Minutes went by as two hearts played hide and seek, but one looking for a new hideaway each time the other was almost within reach!

Milton returned to the sofa, turning his head from side to side, a smile still on his lips. Then with the side of his eyes, he noticed movement. He pretended to see nothing, as quarter-step by quarter-step brought Tangamma closer to the sofa. She kept smiling without a word. Reaching the edge of the sofa, now he watched her lower herself. He watched motionless. Soon she was sitting on the floor cross-legged, the way she would at home as a child, in front of her Goddess. Then she lowered her head. Now bringing her palms together and raising them chest high, she bowed in the direction of Milton. “What’re you doing, Tangamma?” asked Milton in a soft voice. She now took the edge of the sari in both hands and covered her face, when a sobbing began to fill the air. “Oh, Tangamma...,” said Milton, watching her from where he was. It was perhaps the daylight that wedged a wall between them, he thought. Milton waited in silence, feeling, to his surprise, equally uneasy – to be in her presence in a private space, away from the eyes of the Kovil-goers, or the passengers in the tram-car and the train on their way here.

After what seemed an hour or more, Milton moved to the end of sofa closer to her as she continued to sit on the floor, casting the rare glance but immediately looking down. Now getting closer to where she was, he reached her chin, and gave a slight tilt up, as an electricity ran down every vein she thought. “Let me see.... those beautiful eyes of yours,” he said, barely audible. She looked at him with half open eyes, but shut them down just as fast. “Let me see,” he said again, as he gently bent forward to bring his face closer to hers. She opened her eyes oh ever so slightly and glanced at him briefly, with a tender smile, before looking away again. Fingers still under her chin, he said again, “Let me see... Can you keep those deer eyes open ..?” - he opened his eyes as if to show what he meant, “...
so I can take a close look at them.” With a wider smile, she opened her eyes, fully, and kept them there. Yes, I’m sure… These eyes do belong to someone… But I’d be darned. But who? He kept looking at her eyes, taking away the hand. Her face now in full view; he took it in. Isn’t it ever so lovely, oh, the Sigiri Apsaraa that she is!

Now, she surprised him as she reached out and held his chin in her fingers, and stared into his eyes. Now she moved her head to a side and now to the other as she gave his eyes a workover. Yes, she was convinced… these eyes… Yes, she’d seen them before, but where? She smiled, and closed her eyes, as he moved his face towards hers.

She did not know how long it had been, but now she stood up and walked towards what appeared to be the kitchen as Milton followed her. “Like it?” She looked at him with grateful eyes. She felt a sense of comfort, to be among pots and pans. Oh, so many of them. Her mind went to what passed for a kitchen in the Rented Grove. Three stones to hold the only pot – clay pot it was, and firewood under it. Three metal plates, three coconut shell cups, two wooden ladles. But here, the hearth in a corner, out of the way, three stones placed in a triangular position, clean and neat as at the JeyaweeraSinhams’, a cupboard with six each - glasses, and plates – oh, how beautiful, ceramic, tea spoons, table spoons. In a drawer, a tablecloth, napkins.

Suddenly, a fear gripped her, as she looked around, a frightened deer, as if to see anyone was around. Milton moved close to her as he heard a sob. Leaning her head against the wall, she took the end of the fall of her sari and clutched it against the eyes. He stood there until he heard a sob no more.

It was dark now, and Milton had changed into a sa-rong in the bedroom. He lit the Harricut lamps, one in the living room and another in the bedroom. Tangamma was still in the kitchen, now with a ceramic plate in her hand. He stood beside her, and taking the plate away gently, put it
back in the cabinet. Smiling, she gave a sideward glance. He started walking, motioning to her. Tangamma followed. He entered the bedroom, and sat on the edge of the bed. In the room, she stopped suddenly, staring into empty space. A sense of wonderment appeared on her face as she saw herself in a mirror, dressed as she was for the first time in a sari and with hair up. Gazing into it for a few minutes, as if sizing up herself, she quietly turned away from him.

Milton now found his eyes immediately falling on the contours of her body, silhouetted against the flickering flame of the lamp a few feet away. There was stillness in the air ... an air of expectancy. His heart began to throb as he found his feet moving towards her.

Standing behind her, he tried to put his arms around her waist. Taken by surprise, she wiggled away, but only a step. In a moment, he moved closer to her noting in her eyes what he thought was an invitation. Now he put his arms around her waist again, gently pulling her towards him. Moments passed, and tilting her head back, she placed her hands on his, as he tried to guide her gently towards himself, stroking her face. She let her neck fall back deeper on to his left shoulder and closed her eyes. Now, moving his lips along the side of her neck, he bit it gently. She reached out to the lamp, and waved her left hand over it in a swift motion. The flame flickered, and ... died out, opening new unlit vistas.

He turned her around, moving himself closer to her. Then, she quickly escaped from him, as Milton watched her go scratch scratch scratch in the light glow of the moonlight now peeking through the window. She suddenly fell on her knees, and with palms folded and holding chest high, lowered her head at Milton who watched it with questioning eyebrows. “How can I thank you,” she said to herself, “for releasing me from my misery... Oh Kali-amma, you’ve answered my silent prayers....” Milton thought he heard a slight sobbing, and a hand reaching the chest and going scratch scratch scratch. Now she sat cross-legged on the
floor, and stayed motionless. Milton sat on the bed watching. Minutes turning into over an hour, he lowered himself on to the bed, eyes still glued on to her. Then, with his fingertips, he touched the bed beside him, motioning with her head, smiling.

Still holding her palms together, she took a quick glance at Milton in bed. Gazing at him for a moment, her head went side to side, as if to say, “How could I, just how could I … No no no,” she said to herself. She went scratch scratch scratch again. After a few seconds, she gradually moved away.

Unwinding her sari off her body, Tangamma lay it on the ground as if to make a bed, a few feet away, as Milton watched in surprise, perplexed. Lowering herself ever so slowly, she crouched, face turned towards Milton. A surprised Milton watched her every movement, not knowing what to do. He decided it wise not to enter her space.

Soon, he was fast asleep, exhaustion of the day taking over. As she watched him, she felt a thirst. Still keeping her eyes on him, she lowered herself to her sari bed. Then, as she listened to the rhythm of his snoring, she too fell asleep.

She was running down a pebbly footpath towards the ocean. Reaching a smoother sand, she stopped as if waiting for him to catch up. And then, as he caught up, she suddenly dashed towards the water, bursting out in laughter. As a jet of water kissed the sand, she fell flat on, face up, hands and feet stretched. Now she raised her hand towards him, as another jet of water overran her. Grabbing his outstretched hand, she pulled him down, as sweet sheets of water after sweet sheets continued going in search of the beach …
... And then it was voluptuous Radha in embrace with Krishna - the wall hanging she’d seen at the JeyaweeraSingham’s ......

She did not know how long it had been, but finally, aaahhh, she heard her own voice ..., as it meandered with the music of the breaking billows and the coolness of the soothing breeze. She opened her eyes casting a glance at the crescent moon emerging from behind a cloud, and closed them again as she deliciously enjoyed the sensation of the spreading water. The stillness was broken only by the music of the waves... and... an occasional moan...

A Little Police Matter (Two):

As Milton walked to the Police Station, Tangamma following eyes glued to the floor, he saw his teacher and his wife. He looked away as if not knowing what to do or say.

“Oh I see”, Swadesh said to himself, as he noted the title. “So this is the continuation of the Introlude.”

“Oh, I’m so glad you’re here... I was so worried,” said Mrs. JeyaweeraSinhm, as she walked towards Tangamma. She looked down as if feeling guilty that she had left her employer’s home to the waiting friends of her husband that would take her to the Registrar’s office without a word to them. However, she was hoping to visit them today with her husband. Which is when the cops had showed up. But why had she been accused of theft, she wondered.
As if reading her mind, Mrs. JeyaweeraSinham called Tangamma to a side. “I’m sorry it had to happen this way, Tangamma”, she said, her right hand reaching her shoulder but stopping just short of touching. “Complaining of theft was the only way I could be sure you were safe….,” she said in De-Andhrese. “Had we simply reported that you were missing, I know they wouldn’t have done a thing… They’d figure out your caste by your name, and that would be the end of that…. Don’t we know our people…nambadal.”

Though stunned at her words initially, Milton’s mind ran to an Editorial he had written. It was about one Mr. Beautyphallis, highly respected senior civil servant and now cabinet minister…. about how he had used all his powers to successfully bar untouchables from entering a Kovil. His train of thought was interrupted when Mrs. JeyaweeraSinham spoke again. “So I thought the best way was to bring a charge of theft… That would most certainly prompt them to action.” Then, moving closer to Tangamma, she said, “I’m sorry… I only wanted to know you were safe… But why didn’t you even leave a note?”

Tangamma continued to look down as Mr. JeyaweeraSinham invited Milton to come with him. Walking over to the officer-in-charge, he said, “We want to withdraw the charge.” He looked up as in disbelief. “I think you should talk to our OIC – officer in charge.”

Getting up from his seat, he walked past a door as the two men stayed at the desk. After a few minutes, the officer returned and invited the two men to follow him. “I’m sorry for all the trouble”, Mr. JeyaweeraSinham said, “but you know, we wanted to make sure this woman was safe…After all, she had been with us for many years, and we couldn’t possibly sleep without knowing what had happened to her.”

“I understand, Mr. JeyaweeraSinham. Surely, there could have been a better way to do this… I’m sorry I have
to lay a charge against you and your wife… for public mischief.”

“We’re willing to pay the price…. For my student here….” He paused as he looked at Milton “…and for our domestic of several years…” He looked at Milton as he returned the look. “But aren’t you happy that she’s well and alive… And… married.”

“Oh, congratulations, Mr.…”

“Oh, Abhiman,” Milton offered.

“Yes, congratulations… Mr. Abhiman … Tell you what. As a wedding gift, we won’t charge your teacher,” he said looking at Mr. JeyaweeraSinhham. “I’m beginning to understand the circumstances. I sure can explain everything to my ASP – Asst Superintendent of Police.”

“Thank you,” said a beaming Mr. JeyaweeraSinhham, as the Inspector led them out. “Thank you.”

As they walked out of the station, Mrs. JeyaweeraSinhham said, “I’m sorry for all the embarrassment… But I hope you will excuse us.”

“I understand,” said Milton, as he looked at Tangamma, who was still looking down. Then, walking towards Mrs. JeyaweeraSinhham, she said, “I’m sorry,” in De-Andhrese, as she went down on her knees, and touched her feet. Then, moving over, she likewise touched Mr. JeyaweeraSinhham’s feet. As she stood up, she said, “Thank you ….”

Now Milton, speaking in English, thanked both his teacher and his wife, for keeping Tangamma all these years, and more importantly treating her well. “We would not be together today had it not been for you.”

“Well, isn’t it the other way around?” asked Mr. JeyaweeraSinhham. “Without your help, we wouldn’t have
had the invaluable help of Tangamma all these years.” Tangamma looked at both of them as a smile appeared on her lips, noting the sense of gratitude in the eyes of the JeyaweeraSinhams.
INTERLUDE

Not in the sky, not in mid-ocean,
nor in a mountain cave –
no spot on earth,
where consequences of evil
may not seek you out!

- *Dhammapada*, 127
“Three thousand pieces of gold”, the King of Wanga had announced, “for the head of the Lion.” Sinha-baahu, the Lion-Arm, woke up to the announcement by the Royal Drummer just outside the Palace Courtyard.

In Royal Session the evening before, he had listened to the Courtiers describe in gory detail how several brave young men had come by their end at the hands of the uncompromising beast, limbs pulled hither and thither, and torn apart, turning the grass into a pool of blood, glittering in the bright sun. Sinha-baahu had wiggled his fingers in anguish, opening and closing them into a fist, as he listened. He had writhed in his seat, as unnoticeably as possible so as not to compromise the decorum of the Assembly. Guests of the King they were, he reminded himself - mother and sister and himself taken under royal personal care. After days of roaming, and not knowing where to go or how to find the next meal, it was the King’s Men who had discovered them and brought them to the King.

This morning’s announcement erased the discordant note struck the night before that saw him toss and turn over in bed, again and again, into the wee hours of the morning. Listening to a harmonious note reverberating inside of him, he suddenly leapt out of his four-poster bed, parting the mosquito net draped around and falling off the canopy. He dashed to the window to listen to the announcement again. He watched as more and more people gathered around the Royal Drummer. In their movement and gesture, he thought he read the same sense of despair he had been feeling all night.

Leaving the window, he created a walking path between it and the bed sitting against the opposite wall. Feeling as if an iron box had been dumped on his shoulders, he found himself bending forward as he held his hands firmly
stretched together at the back. Walking on the thick rug, his pace was brisk as he glued his eyes on the floor. Building a thin layer of sweat, he lay on the divan sitting halfway between the bed and the eastern window. His eyes caught the winnowing ceiling fan as it moved back and forth…. back and forth, back and forth. Suddenly he found his eyes resting on the flickering flames of the oil lamps on the chandelier hanging in the centre of the room. He closed his eyes for a moment, to open them to the dance of Shiva of the Nataraja figure on the teepoy between himself and the eastern window. Soon he made his way to the window, and bent over it, placing both his hands on the sill. Taking in the morning sun, he, with head thrust outside, panned the wide vista that lay open before him. He sent his hand up along the silk window curtain that danced in the wind as if to feel its choreography.

Stroking his stubble with his left hand, he returned to the divan and closed his eyes again. Feeling the pulsating heart, he moved his right leg off the divan and placed it firmly on the rug as if to ground himself on to the floor. Still lying, and feeling a new rush of blood, his two hands quickly came alive as they clanked together, like two cymbals against each other in a loud percussion.

Now he walked towards the full-length mirror on the leathery-looking west wall, just outside his Royal Bath. Taking a deep look into it, he raised his eyebrows as he pursed his lips. Seeing not one single wrinkle on his forehead, he raised his right hand to a level with his shoulder, his forearm upright with clenched fist standing like a sturdy post with a knuckled head. He looked at the taut and bulging biceps, and held his unmoving eyes there like a new owner of a prized possession. Next, he clenched his left fingers as he raised the hand to shoulder level. The biceps jumped at him again. Looking straight into the mirror, he raised both hands, holding them above his head making a U. As he turned and twisted his clenched fists, he watched
the biceps move, reminding him of a moving herd of cattle. Then, with lips pursing, he nodded to himself.

“After all, I am Sinha-baahu, Lion-arm, am I not, the son of a Lion”, he said aloud, running to the east window and thrusting his head out again. “I’m the son of a Lion,” he roared into the wind. Returning, he jumped into the bed and gave out a big laugh sending the row of cloth-awning fans hung from the ceiling into a rhythmic wave. He looked at the tall and wide windows that brought light into the room. The world was inviting him!

Springing out of bed, he dashed towards the leather sheath hanging from the wall. Pulling out an arrow, he sent his left index finger around the tip, centre outward, to make sure his fingers were safe from the razor sharp blade. Then, opening his left palm, he pushed the tip against it. “Ouch”, he cried as he pulled the palm away. Returning the arrow to the company of its cohorts, he took the bow hanging beside the sheath in his hands. Holding it with one hand, he pulled the string and let go of it. The taut string returned to its place with a twang.

Placing the bow on the divan, he pulled the sword resting in its scabbard just next to the bow and arrows. He grabbed hold of a leather strip hanging next to it by its tail, and taking the sword in his right hand, stropped against it – slap dash, slap dash… First one side, then the next … slap dash, slap dash…keesh … keesh down and up, keesh … keesh again.

Replacing the sword in the scabbard, Sinha-baahu went to his clothes closet and moved his fingers across the hooks holding dhoti-pants. He picked a silken one, mom’s favourite. Pulling a silken kamisa over his head, he slipped into his favourite shoes - open, with a curved front befitting a prince.

Leaving the bedchamber, Sinha-baahu now headed across the hallway, like a cock braced for a prizefight, as the Royal Attendants bowed their heads. He was unaware how the moving pillars giving company to the corridor had
delivered him to the door of mom’s chamber. He gently knocked, as a maid opened it. Led to the Queen’s bedchamber, he immediately fell at her feet, supporting himself on his right knee and left foot flat on the ground, forming a ninety-degree angle of the knee. Soothed by the stroking hand on his head, he rose as he exclaimed. “May I seek your permission, respectful Queen mom, to enquire how the night fared with you? Did the night’s balm massage your weary body … and mind?”

She moved away from him. He thought of a cat licking a recent wound. The silence was audible for miles, thought Sinha-baahu….

Minutes ticked away, and she turned around and walked towards him. The thin wedge of a smile on her face was borrowed, he could tell.

“And you, my Prince son, how about you?”

“After last night’s Royal Session?” he murmured, his head rising as in a slow-moving series of motion picture frames. “How could I, mother, how could I?” he said as he got close to her.

“What an embodiment of youth’, Suppa Devi said to herself, her eyes taking him in, head to foot.

“I’ve made a decision, mother……” Turning his head down, he fell silent. He could hear his heart thumping. Looking up, he said, “I’ve made a decision, mother… and I’ve come to get your blessings…”

He took hold of his kamisa at the buttons as if not to allow the sound of his pounding heart pierce the veil of silence.

Minutes went by. But suddenly, he was taken aback. “No, my Prince, no….”, mom said, as she placed her hands on his head. He could see the tears in her eyes as she looked away. “It’s … it’s…” She knew she could not tell him. She stopped short, as he heard a sobbing… “It’ too dangerous, Prince…. far too dangerous! You are only a boy, a boy of sixteen. Other young men, much older than
you, have fallen.” She stopped again, sobbing. “You heard last night, didn’t you?”

“But mother, I’m the son of a Lion. And I can see it in my biceps…”

“Yes, but…”

“Mother, I have father on my side … I can feel it in my ribs … the vibes of love he’s directing at me …”

Queen Suppa tried to say something. “I know he’ll be proud of me.”

“Yes, but…”

“I may only be sixteen, mother. But I am strong. See,” he raised his right hand and pulled back the sleeve for her to see his biceps. She looked away, tears torrenting down her cheeks again. “Oh, please mother… I know he’ll be behind me all the way…”

All the way, all the way, he murmured, as he closed his eyes, and stabbed the air with his right hand.

“But, Sinha-baahu, listen to me. I want to tell you something…..”

“It’s my duty mother,” cut in Sinha-baahu, “It’s my duty!”

“But Sinha-baahu, you must listen to …”

Before she could finish, Sinha-baahu was gone. The attendants watched him as he pursed his lips and shook his head as if to say, “No.”

In the evening, the Queen watched him pace up and down in the garden. As he walked by a tree, he whacked it with his right hand. Then he imitated the pulling of an arrow off an imaginary bow. Next, he jumped on his favourite bull, and whipped off, seizing it by the horns, and giving it a sharp kick in its groin.
Returning to the palace, sweating all over and with mud all over his silk clothes, he washed up, and was soon asleep. When he awoke in the middle of the night, everything was still. Not a mouse stirred. He tiptoed to his closet in the thick dark … to where the clothes were, now beginning to wait on him like palace attendants. His familiar fingers graced the crumpled dhoti then, ignoring the pleadings of the silken ones. He pulled the baggy-pants up his legs through the narrow leg-cuffs, and tightened it at the waist by tugging at the thick chord around the waist, and putting a male-knot. Now no untying by tugging at the end! He wanted to make sure that it would not give way in the thick of things. He looked at the dhoti in the dim light of the oil lamp, noting how it fell just below the knee. Perfect, he said to himself. Next he put on an upper vest, sleeveless and in near tatters.

Lighting a small oil lamp, he stood in front of the mirror. Then, pushing his fingers into the charcoal in an urn next to the lamp, he slapped his face enough times to turn it black. It was next the turn of his half-bare body and the feet, shoeless. Just like when, in the company of the King, he had gone out into the midst of the people in disguise to get a first hand knowledge of life in the Kingdom, he could now move himself into the crowd unnoticed. In his bare feet, he would now look every inch a poor villager, roaming the wilderness for a hunt.

He now moved to where the sword hung, and tightening the leather belt over the waist-chord, gave it a tug. Taking the sheath heavy with arrows off the wall, he swung it over to the back with a heave. Taking one end of the rope under his right armpit and the other over the left shoulder, he tied another male-knot. Picking up his bow off the divan now, he put it across his right shoulder.

He now whisked his palm over the lamp a couple of times. The dim flame flickered, and quickly went dead.

Making sure he was at a safe distance from the palace, he gave out a loud cry. “It’s my duty, mother, it’s my
duty.” The words escaped from the tight grid of his mouth into the bosom of the night as he waved an “until I return” to the palace.

‘Yet another human, wondered I,
to slay me? But surely not you, why?
You’re my own, my very own,
Your inheritance my very marrow and bone.’

The mighty Lion withdrew his legs, and curled down to the ground, tucking them under his belly as he yawned, assured of a friendly visit. He wiped his eyes with his paw as if to take another look at his long-lost son. Eyes glued on him, tears pouring, the words escaped his lips, ‘Oh, tendermost Sinha-baahu, how lucky I realized in the nick of time….’

Sinha-baahu took another step forward.

‘Now, finally, you can lead me to your sister… and mother’.

Sinha-baahu advanced cautiously, raising one foot and then another, bow and arrow at the ready, and the sword dangling on the side.

‘How is little sister. Oh, the little one just cannot take care of herself…. I hope you’ve been looking after her well.’

Sinha-baahu moved closer, arrow firm on the taut string of the bow.

‘And the mother? Does she sleep well?’

Now Sinha-baahu moved his right foot to the side. From his better vantage point, he had a bigger body mass to shoot at. He could not help his eyes taking stock of the rolling contours of the huge body. Turning his head down, and almost ignoring the movement, the Lion continued, breaking into poetry, happy to have his son back:
‘Oh, how miserable I felt that day,
finding the slab hurled away,
the cave, entrance open,
of all three of you riven!’

Sinha-baahu moved the left leg closer.
‘There hasn’t been a single day I haven’t roamed this wide and thick bush in search of you. I’ve gone hungry many a day, my throat dry-parched for want of water. I have scaled the mountains and surveyed the terrain…. For weeks on end. It’s only on a hunch, just a hunch, that I began to scour the villages and towns in search of you.’

Still crouched, the Lion looked up at Sinha-baahu, tilted his head back as if to breathe in that familiar smell in the downwind. His eyes began to glow as he began to lick himself, face now, body again, as if getting ready to greet the visitor. ‘Go tell the King I’m reee..ally sorry … that several young men were killed at my hands. That’s hardly what I wanted….’ He continued to look at the robust young man in front of him. ‘All I wanted was you….your mother, your little sister…to hold you in my arms …, to caress you…, to play with you… to be lulled by the soft touch of your mother…. to hear the sweet words of your sister… Oh, how is she? Tell me…tell me.. If only she knew how it hurt me when she, too, who always enquired after my health, every single day when I returned to the cave with food, when she, too, left me? …Or perhaps you convinced them, did you, my son, and carried them on your big shoulders? Did you, my son, dijya?’

Turning his head, and with mouth open as if taking in wonderment what was in front of very own eyes, he looked at Sinha-baahu, now no farther than 15 feet away. ‘Yes, come near me, son, come, so I can caress you… Soothe me with that tender touch … and heal my wounds.’ Just then, he heard a twang, and watched in amazement an arrow zooming his way. He rolled over to avoid it. The arrow grazed his skin and fell at his feet.
‘Watch it, Sinha-baahu, watch it, will you’, he said, voice a little gruffer. ‘Your bow and arrow games, you know, can hurt me… badly’.

Sinha-baahu moved to the right. The Lion sprung to his feet. Sinha-baahu took another step to the right. The Lion pushed his hindquarter back, stretching it, as he sprung upon his forelegs, to look at the face again. Yes, he was sure. It was Sinha-baahu all right. But then, Sinha-baahu moved to the left, and sending his hand over his shoulder, grabbed another arrow from the sheath. The Lion moved to the left. “Drop that silly bow and arrow of yours, son. I mean no harm to you,” he growled.

Then, zing… another arrow. Flying in a straight line, it touched the body, but not doing even as much as ruffle his skin, fell at his feet. Sinha-baahu pulled out another arrow and took a quick look at the tip. Glittering in the sun, it nearly blinded him. Resting it quickly on the bowstring, he pulled again.

The lion moved sideways, and after a few steps turned around, then turned back, and back again, his head always faced in the direction of Sinha-baahu. He cleared his throat, and spoke out loud. “Perhaps you think I am just another lion. But see. Remember these teeth you used to brush everyday as your sister poured water fetched from the well? See.” He made a wide grin, showing all his teeth. Just then, zing, a third. It touched the lion on the mouth, but again fell at its feet.

“Oh”, the Lion roared now, “So my dear son, you HAVE come to slay me.” Opening his mouth as wide as he can, he gave another roar, enough to blast Sinha-baahu’s eardrums. It nearly threw Sinha-baahu off, feet collapsing like matchsticks, and for a split second, the Lion father thought it worked… Regaining his balance, Sinha-baahu steadied himself, and took one more step forward.

Now the Lion could feel a sense of disappointment and frustration. Moving away, he roared again, wishing to be as far away as possible from this evil. Deluded perhaps
more than wrathful…, he wondered. He thought he would rather be somewhere else at this very moment, perhaps somewhere in the Southland of Bharata, far far away from this northern habitat, so neither he nor his son would have to go through this drama, this trauma.

Undaunted, Sinha-baahu steadied himself on the bow. An ocean surge of a rage gripped the Lion in his every limb as the hair all over his body raised, as if in readiness for combat. His tail shot straight up as he felt a layer of skin, just beneath, dissipate, and begin to shed, cell by cell. Was this not his protective vest of fatherly love no bullet could shatter? Just, then, eyeing an arrow aimed at his heart, he now gave himself a mighty heave and lunged towards Sinha-baahu, as he felt the last pieces of protective skin abandoning him. Just as he was air-born, Sinha-baahu took aim and let go his fourth arrow.

Twang!

I’m impressed, Swadesh said to himself, how Milinda had given a literary touch to the well-known story in the Great Chronicle of the people, the Mahavamsa. “But, no, dear reader, don’t be fooled,” Swadesh said to himself again, imagining himself to be a narrator in a traditional nadasgam play, coming on stage between scenes to bridge the gaps … “The Lion sheds a layer of compassion. To what tragic results!”

He stretched himself on the chaise-lounge of his hotel room, as if to stretch his imagination. But first things first, he yawned, as a waiter went by. Wait-er! Hm, he thought, one who waits… with patience….
Even as on a heap of rubbish thrown on the road, a lotus flower may grow and bloom, pure perfume giving a joy ever so broad…

- Dhammapada, 58
BOOK THE THIRD:

In the World

Who having been heedless formerly,
but later is heedless not,
such a one this world illumines,
like the moon set free from a cloud.
- Dhammapada, 172
As Swadesh stepped off the tramcar…

What? Swadesh? My own name? Swadesh thought to himself, as he began reading this section of the novel Milinda had given him. I wonder how he came up with the name for a fictional character. He continued.

…. As Swadesh stepped off the tramcar, he nearly tumbled over as he stepped onto the hem of his own waittyya wrap around. He remembered how he had draped it carefully around his waist, making sure it did not fall below the upper heel. He did not want to be the new city sweeper! Not wanting to make a fool of himself in public, he had practiced draping it around his waist many times the night before. As he walked back and forth in his room, he did not find it comfortable. The trouser legs kept well out of each other’s way, but the waittyya drape always seemed to want to hug itself on to the legs as the double layer rustled against each other.

That morning, he had pulled the flap sideways to make sure the drape did not slip too low. He tightened the white belt around his waist, and tugged at the upper baeniyama, falling below the waist. He then did up the top button, to look exactly the same way he had seen himself in the mirror, with the three black buttons standing out against the whitey-white, like unblinking eyes keeping a constant watch. He looked at himself again as if to make sure he looked respectable in his new National Suit.

As he walked towards the Fort Railway Station, he was taken aback by a picture hanging from the station roof that opened up to the sky, but dwarfed by the expanse of the station frontage. It started to gradually zoom towards him, in very slow motion, as he continued to walk. It was
the familiar face all right, he noted as he got closer, but he took another look. Him at a spinning wheel? There was something odd about it, he thought, as a picture of Gandhi, at the spinning wheel, in loincloth and naked waist up, appeared on his memory palette. But here was Mr. Bandleader himself, at the spinning wheels, formally dressed, in lily white, shawl delicately draped around the neck and all. As a light breeze made a cooling pass at his own collarless neck, his hands moved up and around as if to cover its nakedness. With his bespectacled face looking down, the figure seemed intent on his weaving and spinning…..

As Swadesh read the section, he began to wonder how identical the description was in every detail to what he remembered to have done himself on that day nearly half a century ago. Puzzled as he was, he continued reading.

….Swadesh was familiar with the story of how the Honourable Dias Bandleader had, upon returning from Oxford after sparring across the table in debate with the likes of Anthony Eden, made a bonfire of his suits. The woolen suits and neckties had had difficulty catching fire, the papers had reported, even as the nearby oil tanks at Welampititiya sat idle, giving no hand. However, what Swadesh had not known was how he had been inspired by Gandhi. The fully attired man at the spinning wheel had an artificial air to it, he granted, but Swadesh added another brick to the monument he was building.

The sun was still low on the eastern sky just over the train station. The seven o’clock train screeched in. As Swadesh walked towards the station, he gave a playful tap to a pebble with his new slippers, even as his feet felt a nakedness, missing the comfortable housing around them they had been used to since his school days. As the pebble rolled along, a startled crow, looking for an early morsel of food, took flight. He moved to the left to avoid receiving its white discharge. Looking ahead, he saw the train-bound
passengers pumping their stubs into the palm of the ticket collector standing at the narrow gate, slick in his khaki pants, tunic and cap. An iron fence stretched from wall to wall, giving way to the only opening in the centre – the gate he stood at.

Continuing to walk into the wide stretch of the station porch, Swadesh noted with some dis-ease the sea of trousers and shirts, come past the collector, and continue their way out of the station. Was he the only one, he began to wonder. Then he noticed a group of young men in their slow gait. He found comfort in the thought that he wasn’t the only one in the National struggling not to tumble over. They began walking towards the picture hanging at the end of the station. As Swadesh followed them with his eyes, he saw a few others in the National coming from the opposite direction, joining them.

The fifteen or so now gathered exchanged smiles but said little. They all looked like rookies on a cricket team. Swadesh decided to break the ice. “First time?”

“Yes.. Sort of finding my way into it.”

“Wrapping it around took quite some time this morning”, added another. “Magay trouser-ekat genaawa,” he said in De-Leonese, adding, “just in case I needed to get back to my trousers.” He laughed, holding up a rolled up bag in a chord.

“Fools seldom disagree I guess!” Swadesh joined in, showing his own rolled up trousers. “Always good to have insurance, in case of an accident.” Everybody laughed.

Just then, he watched someone, in sarong and shirt, pedaling his way on a bike and parking himself beside a sewing machine sitting at the end of the long frontage under the open roof of the train station. On his pillion behind was a cardboard box, jutting out about a foot in all three directions and rising above the man’s head. It was manacle around by coir rope. Untying it, he looked around as if looking for help. One in a National walked towards him,
and with his help, the man took the box off the carrier, and placed it on the raised concrete floor stretching the entire width of the wide frontage.

As the young rookies in their National gathered around the box, the man opened one flap, then another, and then all four. He dug in. “Take a look,” he said, looking into the eager faces now staring into it.

“Oh, some waitties…,” said one.

“Now, why didn’t I think of that?” joked another. “I could’ve quit my job …to sell the National.”


“Try next life” joined in another.

“But I must say, umba hari handsome ne National eken!”

“Oh, of course, I’m very handsome in the National!” he retorted with a grin.

The vendor took another item out of his box. “Bae-niyam, too”, he said, holding it up with both hands, making a circle as if to display it to everybody around.

As more and more trains began to unload office workers over the next half hour or more, the station was getting to be busier by the minute. Swadesh began to walk towards the farther end of the station verandah when he heard the words, “Twenty four, fifteen, fourteen.”

Turning around, Swadesh saw the man in sarong and shirt taking measurements of a young man, his age. Baeniyam length, collar and sleeve length. Attired in trousers and shirt, he stood motionless, allowing the measurements to be taken. A man at the sewing machine was jotting down the figures on a piece of paper. The customer continued to give a measured grin. “Why not?” he said, as if rhetorically, and with a smile, as he looked at the bunch of eyes in National glued on him.

As the cloth cut to measurement rushed under the needle like on a conveyor belt, Swadesh watched it getting
into shape. The man with the measuring tape in his hand cried out, in De-Leonese:

“Any size, 
any cloth, 
any cut, 
no sweat!”

As Swadesh watched the ranks of men, arriving in their National, or fitted into one upon arrival, swell, a gallery of role models paraded in his head. His high school History teacher nodded in approval, while the Principal entering the classroom with Latin book in hand, cast a smiling glance at him. Dad, panning the listeners attending a community meeting, held on to an eye contact made with him standing on a side. However, largest of them all was the larger-than-life figure of the man at the spinning wheel, looking upon the crowd from the station roof…. Swadesh was convinced, now more than ever, about his decision to answer the call to government employees to trade their un-national for the National. The best way not only to mark the end of an era, he had argued, but also to celebrate the total defeat of the first post-Independent government headed by the Uncle Nephew Party, crushed by the socialist Revolution. Even as he was talking himself into the National, however, he remembered, with a fond smile, how he had fallen prey to any and every trend and style – bell bottoms and bamboo bottoms, four loops at the trouser waistband to two wide strips on either side to no loops at all, pleated front to straight front, side pockets and hip pockets to front pockets…. Now he could laugh them all away as adolescent fancy.

“So what made you come here?” he asked, turning to someone standing just beside him.

“You know, I come from a farming family…. Da-kune. In the South. A farming family for as long as I can remember. We have lived a hand-to-mouth existence… In
this blessed country of ours, all you have to do is throw a seed on the ground, and water it. Before you know, budding leaves are waving at you, and soon challenging your taste buds. No soil could be richer anywhere on earth more than on this Paradise of ours.

“It wasn’t for nothing that our forefathers called this land Tambapanni – Brazen Sands,” quipped another.

“So you must have had good crops then.”

“Always bountiful”, he said. “But,” he added after a pause, “it wasn’t our crop….”, emphasizing ‘our’. “You see, we were sharecroppers …always working for the landholder…” He sighed.

“So you got paid in kind…”

He nodded, pursing his lips. “I remember something that breaks my heart,” he continued, as another train unloaded several hundred or more passengers, screeching in as if in great pain after a long run. “My sister was to be given in marriage, and mother had somehow saved up enough over the years to buy a gold necklace for her. What’s a girl with no dowry, dannava ne….don’t you know!”

“Oh, I know, I know.”

“But then, that year, the crops failed, and guess what, we had to buy our rice!” He looked away, moving his left cuff to his eyes. “As if to add insult to injury, it was the very rice we had harvested ourselves the year before!” He looked away again with another sigh. “As if to rub salt in our eyes, mother had to pawn off the necklace … to the same damned landowner!” He kicked his foot against the tarred ground, clenching his teeth as if in helpless agony.

“Familiar story, I guess….,” said Swadesh.

“That hardly makes it any less painful, does it?” Looking at Swadesh, he balloon ed his nostrils and next looked askance. Then, he smiled. “But now we have our Mr. Bandleader at the helm. He has promised the Paddy Lands Act – to parcel out, to the sharecroppers in particu-
lar. So I’m here to show my support. Because now, we can finally have our own piece of land.”

Swadesh nodded as if in assent.

There was no doubt in Swadesh’s mind now that this Swadesh fictional character was none other than himself. He remembered Milinda saying that the novel he was giving him to read was sort of biographical…. However, … how did Milinda know about the events I participated in? We didn’t know each other then. Still puzzled, he read on.

….Turning around to see what the sound of a vehicle stopping was all about, Swadesh saw a busload of boys in National Suit descending upon the station. “Long live our Band…leader”, read a banner of white letters against a red background, carried high by two of them, walking towards the station. “Long live the Revolution”, said another. Two other slogans caught his attention: “Down with capitalist pigs.” “Power to the workers.” Then the busload broke into a chant, in De-Leonese:

“The rich in whiskey ever-so tipsy,”
sang one group.
“Hunger pangs the workers’ lotsy,”
responded another.

Now he watched several of them walking towards the end of the station verandah where the figure at the spinning wheel hung. One of them took a bulky package off his head, and untangling a coir cord, dumped something on the cement floor. Getting closer, Swadesh noticed some trousers and shirts. Then one, and another, and another, from among the group, added their trousers and shirts to make a pile of them now.
Someone joined Swadesh’s conversation. “You want to know why I decided to ditch the colonial unnational?”

Both looked in expectation. “Can you see the clothes I’m wearing.”?

“Yes, why?”

“They’re not wet, are they?….Before the buses were nationalized by Mr. Bandleader, you know how it was?”

“Oh, you mean having to hold an umbrella in the bus when it rained?”

“I just want to see the fat cat bus owner mudalalis snivel in the dirt.”

“Well, nationalizing the buses is one thing, but must we think of revenge? He looked at Swadesh as if to say, “Where did this loony come from?”

Looking back, Swadesh watched another busload adding to the numbers, as he remembered how he had tried to topple a bus near Right House. They were returning from an election rally at the Galle Face Green. The crowd had stood in front of the bus. Yelling the passengers and the driver off the bus, the crowd gave it a mighty heave. But as the double-decker stood its ground, the crowd pumped their fists into it in frustration.

As the new arrivals walked towards the pile and each tossed off a trouser or a shirt, the hunger pangs Internationale reached a fever pitch.

“American interests were what oiled me into the revolution”, said a third, joining the conversation amid the din. “When our crops ran low, and the government was still looking to issue the weekly free rice ration, the Yankees withheld the shipments trying to force the government to cut back on the ration. And, had it not been for China who came to the rescue, we would’ve been starving. But oil revenues ended up in Yankee pockets.”

“I can’t wait to see the day when Shell would be nationalized”, joined in another.
“Wasn’t that part of the election platform?”

“That’s why I’m here.”

A fifth and a sixth and a seventh joined in, one of them offering why he was here. “What school did you go to? City or village?”

“City,” said Swadesh. “Why?”

“Village,” offered another.

“Then you know the pathetic facilities you had in them,” he said, turning to the one from a village school. “I come from a government school, too. I loved science, but had to give up.”

“No labs?” He nodded.

“So I guess the Bandleader platform to bring Catholic, Buddhist and government schools under one umbrella is what attracted you.”

“You got that right, my friend”, he said, as others nodded in unison.

Turning around, Swadesh noticed that the pile of trousers and shirts were now shoulder high.

“But what about you?”

“You know what won him my vote? …His promise of making our De-Leonese the official language.”

“I’m going to play the devil’s advocate here,” Swadesh said looking into his face.

“Which one, devil, or advocate?” someone quipped. Everybody laughed as the hunger pang refrain echoed in the air.

“Both…and neither!”

Another hearty laugh.

“Wasn’t it Mr. Bandleader himself who asked, “Can you eat De-Leonese?””

“Sure, that’s true,…but, you know what,” volunteered the speaker. “Yes, you can…”

Swadesh looked in astonishment. “You can eat language?”

“I’ll show you how…”

“I’m all eyes.. and ears!”
“You know that you and I, and most of us here I’m sure, got into government service because of our English…”

“Yes.. what about it?”

“But thousands of young people, who speak only the De-Leonese…” He looked around. “They are yoked to the land…”

“De-Andhrese speakers, too, wouldn’t you say?” added Swadesh.

“Indeed indeed… If our poor rural folk ever wanted to leave the village, all they could hope for is to join the urban poor.”

“Hobson’s choice, isn’t it?”

“Exactly…”, came the rejoinder, quickly drowned by the chanting,

\textit{Hunger pangs the workers’ lotsy}

\textit{The rich in whiskey ever-so tipsy…}

“It’s not only the landless peasants we’re talking of here, are we now?” he looked around. “Hardly… take the village veda Mahatteya physician, for example. I remember following him to his house for some medicine. He does his daily village rounds, attends to emergency calls any time of the day or night, prepares the medicine with his own hands, gives it at no charge, and yet, he doesn’t have as much as a chair to sit on, never mind a bed…” He paused. “But the doctors coming out of med school…”

As the Nationalled tributaries were beginning to make a sea of the tarred compound in front of the station, it suddenly dawned upon Swadesh, panning it, that there were no women among them. Upon reflection, he comforted himself. It was, after all, a male thingy. Throughout the British occupation, only a few women would forsake their sari. Anyone who did would have been far far away from the public eye, hushed away in cars so as not to be a thorn in the flesh, or living within high walls of government, or
in households with acres of land. While the men aped and
aped and aped, for a full 500 years under European rule,
few women, it occurred to him, wanted to have anything to
do with the Portuguese kabakuruttu jackets or the Dutch
flowing dresses or the British skirts. So indeed it was the
men’s turn now, he convinced himself, to recover the past,
to shed the vestiges of colonialism.”

“Want to know why I’m for the Revolution? Not
that I want more for the Buddhists, but because even today,
we Buddhists face discrimination….”

“Here, here.” A round of applause.

As the sun got hotter, and the crows had begun to be
scared off, by a braking car, the roaring of a van, the speed-
ing of bikes, more and more trains unpacked people on to
the platforms, many of them in the National. The few who
had not, found their way to the waitty and beniyam vendor,
now with rupee notes wrapped around his ring finger, still
pushing his wares aloud, or to the man at the sewing ma-
chine with his eyes glued to the needle.

Not far from where they were, Swadesh now
watched a man, older than himself he reckoned, taking off
his shirt, showing his singlet underneath over a potbelly.
The vendor handed him a waitty, and the man started pull-
ing at the edges. As he held the now-unfolded waitty waist-
high, the vendor opened it up, and taking one edge of it,
walked around him, bringing it to the front. With the two
ends together at the front, the vendor took one of them in
his hands and began pleating it with the fingers of his right
hand into a folded fan. Then asking the man to hold it tight
at the waist, the vendor took the other end, pleating it, too.

The man now lifted the two ends, one flapped over
the other, nose high, and over the shoulders. Holding them
in his clenched front teeth, he looked around with a grin as
he began to work his hands within the safety of what was
now a cloth-cylinder. Swadesh could guess that he was un-
buttoning his pants. Soon, he was wiggling his back as he
tried to let the trousers drop on to the ground. All smiles, he
tried to say something, as the waitty ends, as if ravishing its release from the crutches of the clenched teeth, rushed to its freedom, dropping to the ground, sending a wave of laughter all around. Standing half-naked in his brief and singlet, the man quickly bent down to pick up the waitty. The vendor and a few others provided cover, getting closer to him.

Looking around as if to say “phew”, his smile returned to his lips, as the vendor now helped him with the waitty, taking one end around him once again, and then once more, as his customer held on to one end. With the waitty now tied around, the vendor gave a tug tug here and a pull pull there, and then bending down, pulled on the waitty all around to adjust the height to be just below the ankle. Next, he helped the man tuck the open end of the waitty at one side of the waist. He took a step back and looking at the customer, and running his eyes down and across the waitty, asked, “Tight enough?” The man nodded. And the vendor asked, turning to the crowd, “Doesn’t it look great?” The round of applause pleased the customer, as a wide grin appeared. “I like it…How do I look?”

“Well, let’s put on the baeniyama and see.”

He now opened a wrapper, and handed it over to the man who pulled it down over his head. The vendor moved closer to him, pulled it down firmly, and buttoned up the two lower buttons, leaving the neck open. There was another applause as the man started walking, only to be drowned by the sloganeering of the hunger pang internationale.

The Nationalled were now beginning to move in on the pile of trousers and shirts. A man with a candle in his hand was speaking. “Today, comrades, with this bonfire, we will have put behind us, for ever, our colonial past…,” he said in De-Leonese.

“Power to the Revolution”, roared the crowd. “Soon, we’ll show everyone that the patriotic sons of Mother Tambapani will stand by the Revolution.”

“Long live the Revolution”, soared the crowd again.
“Are we ready?”
“Ready we are!” bounced back the voices.
Now turning to a man standing beside him, he asked, candle in hand, “Is the petrol ready?”
“Should be here any minute. But I have the matches.”
Swadesh moved forward to take a closer look at what was going on. “Bonfire?” the man said pointing to the pile. “Our message must be clear,” he continued as he panned the crowd.
“Of course, of course,” said Swadesh, trying to catch his attention. “But…”, he paused, and then, “Must we burn them?” Pursing his lips, he cupped his chin in his right hand.
“Isn’t that what Mr. Bandleader did?”
“Yes, yes, but…”
“But what..?”
Just then, somebody cried out, “Here it comes. The petrol.” Everybody looked at the car which had just braked to a halt. A man in a sarong got out of the driver’s seat as another in tie and coat sat in the back. Opening the dickey, he took out two red gallons, slammed it shut and walked in the direction of the pile.
Scared off by the screeching wheels, a dog dashed to the pile, as someone yelled, “Out out.”
“Kick that dog out of there,” joined in another. Just then, it lifted a leg, and squirted in the direction of the pile.
“Blessing our discards with holy water,” quipped someone, some cracking up.
As Swadesh’s eyes followed the man approaching the pile, he remembered how he had given away his trousers and shirts the night before. There was this man-servant at the YMBA, and he was studying English in his spare time. So why not wear some decent clothes? He remembered how he said, “Thank you, Sir” a million times.
Suddenly Swadesh felt surfing a brainwave. Taking his slippers in his hand, he suddenly took off, nimble-
footed as a deer, and jumped on to the pile. Losing his balance, he almost toppled over as a slipper took leave of his hand and sought the company in the crowd. “Wait”, he said panting, jabbing the air with his right hand, like an excited kid in a classroom who has the answer to the teacher’s question. Perched high on the pile, he looked at the sea of heads. With left palm towards the crowd, he began to speak. “It’s such a shame to let so much labour go to waste… I mean the labour that’s gone into making these clothes… It’s your labour and my labour… Or at least the labour of some exploited brother-comrade or sister-comrade.”

Though surprised at his own sudden conversion to Marxist nationalism, “Yes, indeed,” he said to himself, he continued. “Or is it the labour of our tailors, our mothers, our sisters, our wives? Like all of us gathered here, these people spent hours cutting the cloth, sewing, adding buttons, pressing … they are workers, too.” He panned the crowd. “Perhaps not as visible, but labour nonetheless.”

The crowd seemed to become restive. He looked over the heads and raised his voice as if talking to the Nationalled standing at the back.

“What’s he talking about”, shouted one from the crowd.

“Who is this mad-hatter anyways?” asked another, nearer the pile with candle in hand.

“This mountain of labour…,” Swadesh continued, jabbing the pile with pointed finger, “instead of letting this mountain of labour be consumed by a heartless brute of a hungry flame, why don’t we let some really hungry ones, in flesh and blood, benefit from it?”

He noticed a shuffling of feet and a turning of heads towards each other.

“Why don’t you stop talking your Apabbhramsa nonsense and talk some sense”, yelled one from the middle of the crowd.
“What I’m saying, comrade, is that we can make better use of these cast off vestiges…..” he tried to reason.

“Like how?”

“What if we made a daane of it …?”

“Daane? To the monks you mean? But they wear robes.”

“We offer only food to them,” joined another.

“Monks need robes, mister, not trousers and shirts!”

“Who knows… may be there are some hora ganayas rogue-monks who perhaps secretly wear trousers…” The jab came from the crowd.

“No, I mean, what if we gave it away to the hungry masses? Daana means giving, isn’t it? Where does it say it’s got to be just food?” he asked piercing into each face of his startled audience. “Or just to the monks?”

“This man is nuts”, yelled the man with the candle in hand, climbing halfway up the pile. “Hungry masses need food… Not the colonizer’s cast-offs.”

“No, I mean… to anyone who wants them. After all, there are any number of poor people.”

“Give these to poor people?” asked another man now moving closer to the pile. “So you want to make Brown Sahibs of them…!”

“They already are…”, said someone now, moving himself up the pile, too. “I remember them well, comrades, I remember them well. From my campaigning. They were dirt poor. They had damn-all nothing in their sunken bellies, not even, as they say, shit to shit… Yet they were voting for the Uncle Nephew Party!” came the angry voice.

Swadesh watched the man with the candle in hand signaling. “That’s all well and fine.. but what do the poor do with trousers and shirts?” asked someone from the audience. “They want food!”

“And clothing”, added Swadesh.

“Got your matches?” Petrol can in hand, the man moved forward. Swadesh watched a match come out the
matchbox drawer. The petrol-man opened the lid of the gallon.

“A bonfire alone would send the message, comrades.”

Looking around, Swadesh noted that some people were now closing in on him. He read anger in their eyes. “Like a rock in the wind”, he said to himself, thinking of the words in the Dhammapada. “Stand your ground, Swadesh, stand your ground.” The line seemed to travel through every nerve cell. The men now rushed towards Swadesh. He felt a push and a shove. Taken off-guard, he tipped over.

Encouraged by a few who had come to his rescue, he climbed back to his feet, and ran up to the top again. “Alright, alright…”, he said, putting up both his hands this time, in part surrender, part exasperation. “I have a better idea…,” and panned the crowd. “If the idea is to send a message, how about if we strung them on a line across the station …for everyone to see? It’ll last longer than a few hours of burning! We could keep it there for days.”…

“Hey, that’s an idea…,” someone in the crowd said, pouring some soothing oil over his tensed-up nerves. “Thousands of people go past this place,” he continued. “What better publicity can we get?” Now Daya, who had made his acquaintance earlier, joined Swadesh up at the top of the pile. He invited the crowd to pay attention to what Swadesh had to say. Swadesh smiled a thank you back to him as he ran down towards the petrol holder, and whisked it off his hands.

“Brilliant, Mr……?” said an older man in a National, getting a closer look at him.

“Oh… Swadesh.”

“Brilliant, Swadesh, brilliant idea.”

“So who’ll do that, mister?” asked the man with the candle in hand.

“I will”, responded Swadesh, as Daya joined, “Yes, we’ll handle it.”
Soon, murmuring bees were making the rounds. Looking at the black arm ticking away against the white face of the clock on the roof panel, someone said, “Why wait for them. … Let’s get to work.” He climbed up to the pile and began to take trouser by trouser in his hands, as a few others joined him. Soon the crowd began to disperse. Watching many more now getting away from the pile, the men with the candle and the matches stood there like stranded ships with sails clipped by a strong gale.

As Daya whispered something in his ear, Swadesh watched the matchsticks go into hiding and the candle light receiving a puff. As if seeking to make amends with the two men, Swadesh, with Daya right behind him, walked down the pile and started up a conversation. He kicked a pebble, and watched how far it would go. When it hit a metal bin standing at a side, he went “For whom the bell tolls.”

“Can you get some coir-rope for me. Here’s a rupee”, Swadesh said to an onlooker, as he returned to the pile. As the man walked towards the shops in front of the station, Swadesh, with the help of his new friend Daya, began sorting out the clothes. Trousers on one side, shirts on the other. Before long, with the help of a few more hands, there were now two mini-pyramids.

“Take whatever you want”, he said to people who had by now gathered around. “You were brave”, someone said. “You made sense. I was watching the whole thing. They’re crazies… What difference does it make…. Whether you cut up a piece of cloth in the middle and wrap around each leg or spare the trouble and wrap the uncut piece around both legs?”

“So you don’t think it matters…” said Swadesh. “Symbols do matter… Take our flag, for example. Today, the Lion with sword in hand is accompanied by two stripes…”

“Aren’t they supposed to represent the minorities, ethnic and religious?”
“Precisely… The Buddha’s teaching was to work for the welfare of all… Not just the majority.. or just the minority.”

Holding one end of it, Swadesh now threw the ball of coir to Daya, as he passed the rope through the loops of a pair of trousers. “Careful”, Swadesh called out as a bystander scrambled to the roof of a taxi Daya had hailed. He tied one end of the rope to the roof, pulling up the trousers and the shirts strung together. “Whippee”, he cried out as the taxi inched forward with him still standing on the roof.

“Oops,” Swadesh said, as he slapped his head with his palm. “How are we going to get them off the rope when someone wants one?”

“I have just what you want, Sir,” said a man in disheveled hair, the sarong alone covering his nakedness. He opened a folded pleat off the sarong tucked in at the waist. “My traveling companion”, he said, taking out a little pen-knife.

“But how could this help?” asked Swadesh.

“Just cut off the loop… Anyone can sew it up at home.”

“Brilliant. Yeah, that’ll work”, said Swadesh taking the knife in hand. “No, why don’t you keep it…. ” He grinned, showing his stained teeth.

“Do you live around here?”

“Yes, Sir. I work that corner …”, he said, showing his teeth with gaps big enough for an elephant to pass through.

“And your name is…?”

“Kiraa.” Swadesh and Daya both nodded.

As time went by, people stopped by. “What’s this all about?” “Great show!” “About time!” “May be the media should be here.”

A man in a hunchback walked up to them and asked if he could try one on. “Well, sure, our first customer,” said Daya.

“You mean I have to pay?”
“Oh no, it’s free..”

The man reached out to a pair. Kiraa snipped the loop off, the man catching it before it hit the ground.

As the station got busier everyone heading home after work, Daya and Swadesh found themselves falling into a busy routine. That one. Snip. Here. Thanks.

Swadesh noticed a boy of about ten looking at the line of clothes as he held on to his mother’s hand. “Why are they up on a string? Taatta doesn’t hang them that way.”

“I don’t know, puta son.”

“Can we ask?”

“We’re going to miss the train.”

“Oh, please, amma.”

Swadesh watched the mother walking towards him. She smiled as the son looked up. “Can we give taatta’s ones, too?” Seeing mother’s disapproval in her face, he promptly started unbuttoning his short pants. Suddenly, freeing himself from mom, the boy pulled down his pants, and running back to Swadesh, gave it to him.

“Son”, mother said sternly, as she grabbed the pants, and held him firmly. Lifting one leg, and then another, as he leaned against her, she put them back on and buttoned it up. Then she walked away briskly towards the platform dragging him when a train pulled in.

By about five, the sun was setting on the far horizon, and Swadesh decided to call it a day. “What do we do with the rest?” asked Daya.

“Oh, we’ll leave them here... Our friend Kiraa is going to be here, and I’m sure he’ll have a ball of a time giving them away ...” And turning, he said, “Won’t you, Kiraa.”

“Whatever you say, Sir.”

Swadesh thanked Daya for all his help. In a few minutes, he was himself ready to leave. Leaving the station, he did his usual double-step, thinking himself to be on the cadetting troop.
“See him there… Kiraa…Give him a good meal”, Swadesh said, stepping into the Station Hotel. He went to the cashier, paid, and turned back to look back. Kiraa bowed, with a smile on his lips. Swadesh headed for the tramcar. He did another double-step, this time kicking his heel with the toe, as he remembered another time he had fed a panhandler. He had asked for change, but instead, Swadesh took him to a restaurant….

“Lunacy. Sheer lunacy. Dethroning English, Swabhasha in 24 hours is political madness…,” Milton wrote editorially. He had received the report from the Snoop planted by his publisher at the Fort Station trouser-burning rally. Carrying the story on the first page but cutting the twenty-page report to three short columns, he headlined it: ‘Dog pees on nationalists’. “How does that read?” he asked the publisher with glee. “Terrific… That’ll teach the bloody revolutionaries a lesson or two….”

Reading the pages in Milinda’s novel, Swadesh remembered how he had walked to the office the next morning, feeling as if a firecracker had exploded inside of him.

The morning sun zoomed in on him, and he felt an intense heat, as if he was standing by the great big bonfire at Wel lampitiya. He visualized Mr. Bandleader watching with glee the pile of his western clothes consumed by the hungry fire. Were these the fires of nationalism, he wondered. A sort of frustration had now entered his mind as he remembered how many in the crowd spoke in what he had now come to call ‘Singlish’ – English mixed here and there with De-Leonese. He remembered the lines. “National eka aendama tamusay very handsome ne!” You look great in the
National. Or “Onna tawa train ekak.” Here’s another train. He had decided that from then on, he would speak among the De-Leonese only in De-Leonese.

Breezing through the morning, Swadesh asked Thavarajasooriyar if he wanted to go for lunch. On their way to the Navalar thosay kadey restaurant, Thava, as he was known, asked him about the events of the day before. They were now sharing a bench in front of a table with five or six others. A man naked waist up came around and placed a banana leaf in front of each of them. Soon a big spoonful of rice found its way on to the leaf, as another shirtless waiter poured a spoonful of watery shodi. Mmmmmmmmm, went Thava, as he dipped his finger into and licked it. A smiling Swadesh all five and licked them together. Fried fish followed as both Thava and Swadesh crunched into their papaddums served by a third. Finally, it was dhal curry cooked in spinach. For their seconds, they went for thosai, again with a lot of shodi.

On the way back, Thava tapped Swadesh’s on his shoulder. “You know what, Swadesh…?” Swadesh turned his head. “I think I’m going to get into a National myself.” As if in disbelief, Swadesh tilted his head back, and looked at his colleague. Had the shodi got to him! He stopped right in the middle of the road, and said, “Dandy, that’ll be wonderful…. With you and me both in the National, perhaps it’ll catch on.” Thava smiled as Swadesh put his arm around him. “Comrades, huh!”

Walking along, Swadesh stopped his friend on the middle of the road again. “You know what else…We should try and make sure that in public we speak in each other’s language – me in the De-Leonese and you in De-Andhrese.”

“But you don’t speak my language.”

It struck Swadesh for the first time how that indeed was true. Working in English all his life, it had never occurred to him, not in any conscious way at least, that he did not speak the other language of the country. But then, he
exonerated himself, assuring himself that there had been no
need to. Thava did not speak De-Leonese either, and eve-
rone at work spoke in English. So why bother?
Then he stopped again in the middle of the road, and turning to Thava said, “Isn’t that a shame! Even after
Independence, our education system never prepared us to
speak each other’s language.” He thought for a moment, and added, “My father was at one time keen to send me up
North… precisely for that… But it never materialized.”
They continued to walk. “So here’s my chance,” He re-
peated, “Here’s my chance.” Then turning to Thava, “Do
you know of any place that teaches De-Andhrese?”
“No, not really… But you know what, why don’t I
teach you… And who knows, within a year you’ll be run-
ing in De-Andhrese…”
“You mean I’ll have enough De-Andhrese to run
with a gun at my head?” They both had a hearty laugh.
They were now entering their office. “Alright,
here’s your first lesson…. After a pause, Thava said,
“Namaki Perr Thava,” pointing to himself. “Enna Perr?”
Swadesh looked confused. Wearing a language teacher’s
hat, Thava encouraged him: “Namaki Perr…”
Swadesh repeated, “Namaki Perr…”
“Swadesh…. Namaki Perr Swadesh.”
“….Namaki Perr Swadesh,” he repeated.
Pointing to himself, Thava said: “Namaki Perr Tha-
va…” And pointing to Swadesh, he asked again, “Enna
Perr?”
“Namaki Perr Swadesh.”
“Splendid….You got it… My name is Swadesh.”
As Swadesh sat at the desk, he repeated, glancing at
Thava, “Namaki Perr …” As Thava kept smiling, Swadesh
blurted out, “Namaki Perr… Thava.” Both laughed as they
settled down to an afternoon’s work.
Swadesh left the manuscript aside. The moment was pre-
cious to him. … to re-visit his youthful nationalism, after

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nearly four decades, when his life overseas had completely obliterated everything of his past life.

If there had been any resentment on the part of Swadesh towards Milton now Milinda for having sent a Snoop to spy on them, he was now beginning to be grateful – that someone has actually recorded his youthful Marxism to posterity. Returning to his room, he thought of calling Milinda, to thank him for retaining his memory to posterity. No... He decided to wait until he finished reading.

Hm.. But where’s the Lion story, he wondered.
“It’s right in there,” a voice said.
“It is?”

He quickly changed into his swimming trunks and dashed to the ocean. Watching a rising wave, he crashed on to it head on, the way he had done in those youthful days. As he dived into it, he felt a heaviness in his ears, and a little drumming in his head. But now he was diving in and out of the waves, and frolicking, like a fish released from captivity.
One of the first things her husband had done, Tangamma remembered with gratitude, was to encourage her to learn English. As if to give meaning to the old adage that a second language is best learned in bed, the first word she had learned from him on her wedding night escapade was ‘kiss.’ Naturally, she reflected, wetting her lips, it came by way of demonstration. After her first informal-formal lessons, she was soon attending the Pembroke Academy. Founded by the Chief Monk of the Ohday Temple in his own premises in Maradana, he had said that it was a second-chance College, the place that nursed failed exams and strained upward mobilities.

She could not wait to get home after classes the first day. “Kovil …”, she said as she stepped in, her eyes widening.

“I mean your class,” said Milton.

“Kovil … pansal”

“Oh, you mean …...” He thought for a minute as Tangamma looked on.

“Repeat after me,” Milton suggested.

“I saw..”

“I..saw..”

“… a Kovil..”

“… a Kovil..”

”.in the temple.”

”.in the temple.”

“I.saw… a Kovil…. in the Temple,” Milton repeated the sentence in full. She repeated.

“I….saw… a … Kovil…. in the … Temple.”

“Good … So?” said Milton.

“I saw a Kovil at the Temple,” she said, confidently.

This was the first time Tangamma had actually been inside a Buddhist Temple. And certainly seen the inside of
a Hindu Kovil, albeit a tiny one, at close range. She had been allowed even in the vicinity of the Kovil – the big one in Wellawatta, through the intervention of the Jeyaweera-Sinhams. “Kovil … … Temple,” she said haltingly, but with continuing confidence.

“You mean Kovil in a Temple.” She nodded headily, beaming. Next, her face showed a question mark. “Kovil… Hindu ….. Temple.. Buddhist?” she said again, looking at Milton.


Tangamma nodded with a smile.

Using the whole gamut of his communication tools – body, eyes, gestures, he was glad he was able to get across the idea that in just about every Buddhist temple, there was a Kovil.

She looked at him intently as if to say, “What? A Kovil in every Buddhist temple?”

As she went about her work that day, she felt a sense of comfort. She had never known her husband go to a temple. Or heard him talk about a religious life. But she knew he was Buddhist. Born low, live low, die low was the mantra that had been drummed into her all her life. Yet, seeing a Kovil in a temple in some strange manner piqued her. After classes, she found herself now spending time in the presence of her Goddess. Kali amma. Up to now, all her prayers had been in the privacy of the kitchen, where she had both worked and slept, within the Christian household of the JeyaweeraSinhams. Now, she could be with her Goddess publicly. Imagine! She mingled with other devotees, Buddhists all, they would come to the Kovil, after homage to the Buddha, and doing all the other Buddhist things. She was elated at the new sense of inclusion, as she mingled with other devotees, although none wore a pottu as she did.

Soon she was looking for her husband. Finding him in his study, she tiptoed towards him, from behind, and
sending her hand in front of his eyes, covered it. “You’ll never guess who it is”, she said mischievously. Coming around, she moved close to him, and pressed her lips against his head as she put her arms around him. “What’s this all about?” he asked, returning to his book. She quietly removed the book from his hand and kept on the desk. And then she plumped on his lap, and sending her arms around his neck, brought his face and placed against hers. ‘Thank you thank thank you.”

A year or so passed by, and many a time, she watched devotees with flowers in hand head to what by now she had found out to be the Buddha-house, then to the Dagaeba reliquary mound, ending up at the Bodhi Tree. But in the end, they all, or at least the older devotees she noted, visited the Kovil. She watched in glee as they lit a lamp, burned an incense stick, or petitioned, for a favour – success at an exam, safety on a trip, recovery from ill health. This was as much as she could understand from the little De-Leonese she was picking up at the Ohday temple. On occasion, she joined them.

Milton was beginning to notice the change. At the beginning, it was no-yes when he talked to her in English. Then there were the Yes, I will’s and the No, I can’t’s. Even when later she spoke in longer sentences, it was in answer to a question. But now she was beginning to speak English on her own, taking the initiative. Even though, as her husband teased her, she is still ispoke borrowken Ingilis, that was alright, he said, because that’s what everyone is-spoke at the beginning.

Still enjoying her first discovery of a Kovil in a Temple, Tangamma found herself now increasingly enjoying her association with the Pembroke. “No, it’s not the place where pem ‘love’ is broken”, she said once, teasing her husband, “but the place where pem is made.” “Not your everyday love,” she added after a pause, “but love of knowledge.” He was impressed at the level of her sophistication. He discovered, too, that she now found herself spending
more and more time, not just in the classroom, but gazing at, walking around or sitting by the small Dagaeba that stood in the centre of the premises. At such times, she said she had felt such a sense of calm and comfort.

As her English classes progressed, her spiritual life also began to take off. “Let’s go to the Temple,” she intoned, sitting on his lap one day. “Don’t you think the Oh-day Temple is symbolic of our marriage? Buddhist Hindu, Hindu Buddhist,” she said. He smiled, impressed at the progress she had made in her English. “Perfect,” he said.

Though born a Buddhist, Milton was, like his English-educated colleagues, no temple-goer. Not even a closet practitioner. With no religious life at Churchill College, or at the boarding house in Colombo, the daily homage of his kid days at the home altar was now a distant memory, a faint line in a cloudy sky.

She laughed at the whole affair when, one day, she was able to literally drag him to the Temple. He stood at the edge of the compound, looking away into the sky. “Trying to pull something out of the thin air”, she teased him. He smiled.

She remembered the first day she had walked towards the Bodhi-tree at the temple. Impulsively coming to the temple in the night that day, she had prayed to her Goddess, and stood in front of the Kovil, in a sort of silent meditation. Then, as she turned to leave, she heard a rustle. Turning her eyes, she caught the silhouette of the branches and the leaves of the Bodhi-tree against the brightly lit sky. It was a Full-Moon day, and there were more devotees at the temple than usual. Just then, she heard the sounds of the Temple gong, signaling the opening of service. Soon, sounds of *saadu saadu saaadu* reverberated through the air.

As the devotees began to assemble in front of the Buddha Hall, she found herself taking a step in the direction of the Bodhi Tree. But, after another step, she halted. She felt a sense of guilt. At the same time, she felt a calm-
ness. Standing where she was, she closed her eyes. She thought of her Goddess. Then, she opened her eyes, and looked in the direction of the Goddess. She saw her as standing within the belly of the small, dingy room. She smiled, as if to beseech her permission. Then she walked a few more steps. She stopped again. Soon, as if attracted by a magnet, she found herself continuing to walk towards the Tree. She was overawed by the vast expanse of the sky bathed in the moon’s flowing waters. She let her eyes run along the leaves now dancing in the breeze against the sky, convinced they were waving at her, inviting her.

Having approached the Bodhi-tree, she sent her eyes up the trunk, again to the leaves, and then back down. Dipping her index finger into a clay oil lamp sitting on a ledge around the tree, she pushed the wick slightly above the oil. Moving her hand up, she wiped her finger on her hair. Then, taking the lamp in her hand, she held the wick close to the flame of the next lamp. Watching the flame come alive, she took a deep breath, and held up the lamp, over her head. As she lowered it, the wick began to glow brighter. She returned the lamp to its original place, and with palms folded against her chest, she closed her eyes, a smile in her face. She now dipped her finger again into the lamp, and pulling her jacket with her other hand, applied it to the chest. She rubbed it gently, and scratched it again.

After a few moments, she looked for an empty spot under the Bodhi Tree, and sat with legs to the side. She gazed at the majesty of the tree. Having sat there for a few more minutes, she stood up, bent forward, turned around and paced her way back out of the compound. The Temple gong, announcing the end of the service, vibrated through the night air. She thought it was announcing to the whole world some significant event.

As her English lessons advanced, she began using the public library at Horton Place. On one of her visits, she came across a book by an author whose name looked Bharatan. She read it out to herself: Am-bed-kar. She ap-
proached the shelf, and pulled out the book. *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, it read. She had never read anything on her husband’s religion any more than she had of her own. But this book attracted her attention. As she thumbed through the preface, she felt even happier. It was by a Harijan, or at least a former one, as it was said in an opening page. She read how, as a student of philosophy at Harvard on a British scholarship, he began to question his untouchable status. Then upon completion of his PhD, he had started exploring the various religious teachings. He read on Hinduism extensively, beginning with the Bhagavad Gita, explored both Islam and Christianity. But it was the lines in the Buddha’s Vasala Discourse that had got him excited.

*Not by birth is one a Vasala.*  
*Not by birth is one a Brahmin.*  
*Action alone makes one a Vasala.*  
*Action alone makes one a Brahmin.*

Looking through the back cover, she was pleasantly surprised to see that this Ambedkar was none other than the Father of the Bharatan Constitution in Nehru’s government right after Independence.  
What turned her into tears, however, was a different story:

“Sister, can I have some water please,” asked a monk sitting under a tree, returning from his alms round.

“I’m a Vasala untouchable,” mumbled the woman, eyes cast on her toes, announcing her status, as was required

“I only asked for water, sister, not your caste.”
"Did she hear it right? Slightly raising her head, she looked in the direction of the voice. Noting the calm composure of the figure seated cross-legged with bowl on lap, she now sneaked a look to the left and then to the right as if to check if anyone was watching. Puzzled as she still was, she fetched him some water, in her own coconut cup. Then, she fell down on her knees, tears pouring, as she heard the words, "May you be happy and live long!"

Now she began to visit the Temple more often. At first, she started at the Kovil, and ended up at the Bodhi Tree. Before long, she found herself finding more and more solace under the Bodhi Tree. Her prayers became shorter and shorter. The many books on Buddhism she had picked off the shelves of the Public Library on Horton Place had deepened her knowledge...

While Milton noted that she was now visiting the temple more often, he said nothing. Nor did she tell him of the changes taking place within her. He was of no help anyways. There were no books on Buddhism in his personal library, the closest to anything spiritual being some works by English Humanists, Julian Huxley and Bertrand Russell. She appreciated Russell’s comment that if he were to ever look for a religion, it would be Buddhism.

It was not rarely that she found herself joining the devotees in the evening service at the temple. And the temple gong announcing the service always reminded her of that first day she walked towards the Bodhi Tree.

“You know what maybe I want to be one day?” she said looking at him after returning from the temple one night. “A Nun.”

“A Nun? Whatever for?”
“They look so calm and peaceful..”

“Are you off your bonkers?” he asked. “Don’t let going to the temple get too much into your head.”

“Oh so you’re this nominal Buddhist – born to it but never pay attention to it. You’re like most of your friends, aren’t you? Have you ever considered….” she paused.

“Have you ever considered that you’re all still in the grip of colonialitis?”

“Colonialitis?” he smiled. “What’s that?”

“You know… the itch to monkey the colonial master!”

Wow, he thought. How politically savvy my dear wife’s come to be! Then he said, “What’s that got to do with anything anyways?”

“The British civil servants who ran the show may have been born Christian, or even Anglican.”

“Anglicans are Christians”, corrected Milton.

“OK Mr. Smarty Pants. …There you go … your rational mind…”, she said with a chuckle. “I know that, my dear husband. But let me continue….”

Milton sat down in a nearby chair, turning his face towards her. “Those civil servants”, she continued, “they didn’t have much use for religion. They left it to their churchfathers, attending church for show and tell.”

Milton could not believe his ears, or her exuding confidence.

“Remember, where they came from, religion was getting kicked in the teeth by the advancing Enlightenment craze. Christianity was, to them, the very epitome of what was wrong with religion… the anti-Christ, if you’ll allow me the phrase, of the Enlightenment.”

Milton listened with his mouth agape. He had never seen his wife so animated. He was impressed by the connection she had made. “Now that was the mind-set that you and your colleagues have internalized, Mr. Secular Humanist … as if Enlightenment is one, Buddhism another.”
Milton stood up and started pacing up and down in slow motion.

“Remember, Buddha means ‘the Enlightened One’.”
Leaving home, Milton walked towards the beach. He thought he heard the sounds of his heart going pell-mell. A speeding train was fast approaching. He waited for it to pass. The compartment at the front, he noted, was practically empty, while the rest of the cars were jam-packed. Yes, he was familiar with the one at the front. It was the one he had traveled in…. to work. First Class. He looked at the passing train again, people standing inside, with hands raised, as in surrender, the thought came to him. Others were hanging on to the railing at the sides of the door, hanging on to dear life. Those sitting on the steps, he thought, were staring at him. Yes, they were people…. People of the country…. the masses. His eyes set on them as if he had never seen them before. Hm… Did I somehow miss the train, another thought came to him, as the last compartment whizzed by him.

Leaving home for work the next day, he walked to the ticket wicket at the train station. The words ‘Ticket wicket’ over the counter where a clerk sat issuing tickets, reminded him of cricket. A game of fairness, and gentlemanly decorum and behaviour. “Third class return ticket please,” he said, pushing some change through the cutout below the iron grill facing him. The clerk looked up, and with a smile, said, “But, Sir, you already have a First Class Pass.”

Recognizing the familiar face, Milton blushed as if in embarrassment. “Yes, I know,” he said, looking down. “But I want to…..”

Before he could finish, the clerk added, “I don’t know how you’re going to get past the mad-rush of everyone trying to get on… You’ll just have to elbow your way in…. ” Milton kept a smile on his lip, avoiding eye contact,
as the clerk passed a ticket through along with some change. “Good luck,” he said, as Milton moved away.

Arriving at the platform gate, Milton received the usual “Good morning, Sir!” greeting from the ticket collector. He returned the good morning as he walked towards the train, just arriving at the station. A throng of people rushed towards it, as Milton watched them jostle their way up into the cars. There were still people around when he finally got a foothold on the lower step. He pushed himself up to reach the grab-handle on the side, but just then, he found his hand accidentally pushed aside by someone on the second step also trying to reach it. He missed his step and almost fell, when somebody still on the platform grabbed hold of him and another on the step extended his hand to pull him up. Soon standing just near the entrance, he inched his way to the inside, finally finding enough space for himself to stand. He sure was glad he would never fall between the cracks of this tight squeeze.

As the train pulled away, he held tight on to the grab handle on the ceiling, sharing it with a few more fingers. Feeling a pain in the hand, he raised the other, and holding the handle with it, lowered the tired hand. As the hand moved down, it touched the tip of his nostrils as if to ward off a smell. Then he realized it was indeed a smell… of people…. The smell of, yes, people… his own people. The hand stretching to give him a hand, to pull him up, now came to his mind. He closed his eyes, and as he swayed back and forth in the speeding train, he took in a deep breath … of the smells around him … as if it was a breathalyzer … for an existing ailment … Oh, yes, it came to him. What did Tangamma call it? Yes, colonialitis.
Tired as he was traveling third class, Milton had a dream that night. It was Mother…. at the gate, drawing his attention to something. Or perhaps somebody….

“Churchiana,” he heard a voice call out. He moved in his sleep. He could see a silhouette against the colourful beyond of the changing hues of the morning sun, uncovering its face over the horizon, ever so slowly, like a new bride uncovering her veil for her new lover. She was looking up to the sky, with arms stretched as if to reach the sky, her eyelids opening up wide to allow in a gleam of the morning sun. Her hands glowed against the morning rays, and her hair was done up in a way that looked like a pointed dome. Looking from behind, he could not tell whether her shoulder-length hair was blonde because of the morning sun or it was naturally so. Her flowing white dress reached all the way down, touching the sand.

As she fell on her knees, her hands began to shake, as if by an electric current running up her arms. He heard the faint words, a murmur, leave her lips: “Thank you, oh Lord, for this daily bread. I shall enjoy this fruit, scraping to the very core, scraping it to its very belly, hoorang kanawa as the natives put it, raking out every morsel.” She sank into a quietude. Then, “Thank you for leading me to this Brown chimera… I adore its Lion head…” Then, raising her left hand, she began etching a number in the void with her index finger. 1505. Drawing a line across it, she wrote another number. 1658. Crossing it out yet again, she wrote a third number. 1815.

Suddenly, her flowing dress got a taste of the salt water as a breaking wave engulfed her all around. Opening her eyes, she began to stroll along the beach, her dress lapping up the water, like blotting paper. She reflected how, upon conceiving their first child, Prince Trouble of Home, she had developed a penis envy, a kind of craving for the uncommon. It was for the beyond, for the multiple beyond in fact. As Trouble grew, out in the hinterland, as he began to brew a concoction of mischief, day in day out, Churchi-
ana’s envy for the beyond turned into a compulsion. Doctors had cautioned it could render her manic-depressive unless the condition was addressed immediately.

In her illness, she could not help envisioning herself dance with partners of different colours – Black, Yellow and Brown. Each looking at her adoringly while on the floor, careful not to step on her toes, she visualized how she would sometimes seek the warmth and comfort of being in bed with them, one after another. He watched her reach out to a bedside drawer, and take out a small something that looked like a pillbox. Reaching into it with her nimble fingers, she took a pill and popped it in her mouth. Closing the box and returning it to the drawer, she closed her eyes as if to enjoy every last strain of its taste. As Milton, still in his dream, sneaked into the drawer that was still ajar, he could read the lettering on the box. It read ‘Superior Complex W’. And it was white, or perhaps an off-pink. He had the sense that even though it had hit the market even before the Industrial Revolution, it had gained in popularity as the years went by.

She knew how her compulsion continued even after childbirth. By osmosis, was it? Lord Younghusband had not one but two obsessions - firearms and expanding his landholdings. As Prince became Earl, the concoction of trouble – pillage and murder and mayhem in pursuit of dad’s compulsion, spread to the expanded landholdings. She was amused how her own compulsion was linked to her husband’s target practice.

Every morning and evening, he went to the firing range where he had put up three targets. The bull’s eye of each of them was of a different colour -- yellow, black and brown. Each centre faded into a lighter shade in the outer circles. Oddly enough, he used a different bullet on each of them. For the yellow target, he used what he had nicknamed ‘opium’, and for the brown, what he had called ‘cricket’. For the black, he had had a bullet specially made
“sleigh-very’. Sometimes he pronounced it differently – as ‘slay-ivory’.

“A sort of double-entendre, isn’t it”, said Churchiana.

“Roubles? No no, it has nothing to do with Roubles. Isn’t that some kind of currency in some goddamn country?”

“No, my dear Earl…I said double-entendre. Something that cuts two ways, sort of a double meaning.”

“Why don’t you say so?”

“Well, you know, in the business we’re in, we need to be able to do things like double talk, double-cross … to keep the barbarians confused… So they can’t figure out what we’re doing.”

“I’m with ya.”

“Good. So do you say ‘sleigh-very’ when your target is slaves … Slavery. And ‘slay-ivory’ when your target is elephants, for their ivory?”

“Something like that.”

While she enjoyed her husband’s skill at scoring many a bull’s eye, she somehow did not like his choice of colour. Black, brown and yellow looked rather dull.. They definitely paled in comparison to her own favourite colour, off pink, which she often thought of as white. But now, on the beach, she was, in her penis envy, fascinated by one of the dull colours. Brown. Was it perhaps driven by her desire for penetration, often denied to her by a husband preoccupied with land and firearms? It was not that the Lord did not desire to go to bed with Churchiana. That would be to topple an ancien régime, the secretive link between state and church. However, his prolonged illness had provided neither incentive nor opportunity.

A wave reached her waffling feet. Jolted out of her train of thought, she now rushed up the beach, past the sand, towards the pebbles that lined the ocean. Stepping on them gingerly, her steeple hair still silhouetted against the sky, she began to walk along the open expanse, taking a
deep breath of pride. This was her own little land now, a fallout of her husband’s expansionist compulsion. The Green, as she had now come to call where she stood, had been given by her husband, as a memento to keep and be enjoyed, for her ongoing support and understanding of his obsessions. She remembered the pitched battle her husband’s troops had to wage and how the last Dutchmen were driven away at gunpoint. The men began to talk about the ‘flying Dutchmen’ – who had had possession of the Green since 1658.

A strong wind blew, and she put back a tussle of hair sweeping her face. As Milton tossed in his sleep, he entered her thoughts that were now hovering around her arrival in the island. It was by ship, carrying a cache of rifles. Throughout the journey of three weeks, all her husband had done was polish the firearms, and done target-practice. On this trip, he had left behind his yellow and black targets, but had brought enough brown ones to practice on.

Her thoughts went further back. She recollected how for her husband, Prince Trouble of Home was a great asset – in putting down the peasant revolts back home since about the 12th and 13th centuries. Without him, it would have been difficult for her husband’s compulsion - to clinch the last pieces of lucrative land still out there in the country, to come alive. Prince Trouble, artfully trained in firearms at dad’s range, would go to such holdouts, in some remote part in the country, and round up the many smallholders. The whiper-scatter bullet would do the rest. As the family’s territorial holdings now extended practically from sea to sea, the Prince had come to be honoured, given the title Earl Trouble of Home.

Now that his compulsion had borne fruit, she thought of how she longed for the day when she could finally spend a cozy night with her husband in bed. However, he had come to be afflicted by a new illness, a new compulsion, shattering her hopes. He had taken to drawing. She
remembered how elated she was when she first discovered one of his drawings – under his pillow. It looked like lips, and from the narrowness of it, like the lips of a woman. “Sweet”, she had thought. “Finally he’s getting back his love-life.” But then, as the pile of drawings grew, she began to notice the changes. Every drawing now began to look like a vagina. How horrified she was, she recollected, at the discovery. She remembered how she began to fume, and demanded an explanation of what indeed was going on.

“It’s a sort of extension of his compulsion for firearms and target practice,” the doctor had explained. There was, in fact, a name for this: vagina-envy. She thought this was hilarious. How could his illness be offensive to her any more? After all, he was only trying to complement her own penis envy! In any case, she had no reason to worry because his drawing phase gradually tapered off.

However, in its wake was a new compulsion. He began to complain about the food he ate. Meat and potato, potato and meat. Every day. What’s this? Last meal of a condemned man? He parted his legs, and wiggled his rear. As she heard the sound, “Ah, that’s better”, he said. She sent the back of her left hand across the nostrils as if to divert the smell.

The Yorkshire pudding was still tasty, but it was the main course that needed some spicing up. “That’s it”, she remembered how his eyes brighten as it had hit him.

“Yes, that’s it.”
“That’s what?” she asked.
“Spicing up. Don’t you see? The meat and the potatoes need spices.”
“But we have no spices”, she had said.
“Precisely.”
Soon, the decision had been made to go in search of spices, even coining an adage, ‘Variety is the spice of life’. But where? It had to be in some god-forsaken place where only barbarians lived. “Churchiana!”

“Yes. dear.”

“Where’s that map that showed where the infidels live?”

“Which one? The one I got down from Rome or the one that our London cathedral keeper made?”

“Are they different?”

“Some differences….. but not in any real sense. An infidel is an infidel is an infidel! Outside the Church, no salvation.”

He walked towards the long dining table sitting in the centre of a large room as Churchiana opened up the map. “OK…. here we are. We’re here….”, Younghusband said, placing his index finger on Europe. Moving it eastward, and almost reaching the end, he murmured to himself, “Oh, my goodness, this landmass is almost 50 times the size of ours, and it’d be a hell of a thing to try and get anyone there to help us.” In a moment, he added, “Nah, too much trouble for a lousy spice.”

“Why don’t we send the Earl of Opium there. He’s young and gregarious, and has his ways…?” suggested Churchiana. “Our second son has come of age, hasn’t he?”

“Yes, why not? He has not had much luck with the Ladies here anyways, and who knows, perhaps he can kill two birds with one…”

Pleased at themselves, Churchiana and Younghusband spontaneously embraced each other. Oh, what a refreshing rainfall after such a long drought, Churchiana thought. She was glad that the spark was still in him. She pressed him tight into her, but then, he broke away from her, and strutted to the next room. Standing in front of his only bookshelf, he sent his eyes to the top shelf, but then moving to the middle, began fingering the books, from right to left. “Here we are”, he said stopping halfway. Tak-
ing out a book, he turned to the contents page. Then, flipping through, he stopped at a page as a smile came upon him. He began reading it. “Churchiana”, he called out.

“Must you yell, darling? I’m right here”, she said, having followed her husband to the doorway. “Read this.”

Taking the book from his hand, she looked at the title, keeping her finger on the page her husband had opened up for her. The Travels of Vasco de Gama. “Who is that?”

“You don’t know, dear? He was the Portuguese vagabond who made a killing of his travels in Asia.”

“Oh!” So saying, she started reading it as he went to a divan sitting near the window and lay on it. “Read it out loud, will ya.”

“Yes, milord…. This tropical beauty has all kinds of spices, old and new, to spruce her up. All of them, of course, with weird names – miris (makes your tongue burn), twins suuduru and maaduru (spruces up the taste of anything cooked), sudu loomu (garlic, as it has come to be called, smells awful but good for the heart) … The list goes on and on.

“Oh, I can’t read these tongue-twisters,” she said But just then, the next line caught her attention. ‘…uluhaal (makes the Christmas gravy thick, and with karapincha leaves, gives an exquisite taste.)’

“Did you read this, my dear?” she said, and then read aloud. ‘But more importantly, it helps with the wind.’

“Yeah, that’s something we definitely can use,” she said, sending the back of her hand up to her nose again as if by habit. “No more farting again,” she said quietly, as Younghusband looked at her sternly.

“Why don’t you just go to the bottom of the page.” She started reading again.

*The land is not only full of spices, but something else, too. King coconuts, the run-taembili in particular, seducing you at every turn, baring their golden breasts of a heavenly damsel in the morning*
glow, hanging as they do from the tree tops, as if waiting for a lover, to quench his thirst with the ambrosia waters protected in its ample bosom with a layer of thick juicy ‘loňda’, the jelly-like kernel. After a spicy meal, there is nothing more heavenly than sipping her juice in the dark, fanned by a light breeze as you rest on a hammock strung between two trees.

Churchiana paused to enjoy the moment, and imagined herself to be in that hammock. Then she continued.

They have medicinal quality, too. Good for the heart, it rejuvenates the brain, I learned from the natives. Even more fascinating to me was that they zipped up your sexual energy, something I can attest to from my personal experience.

Yes, that’s where I want to go, she told herself. She closed her eyes again, and imagined herself in a bedroom, with the tropical air flowing through the window, with her husband standing in front of her, with not a thread on and awakened and steely, moving towards her. Sending her hands down her parted legs, she waited, in expectation of the tickle, and then the ... As she enjoyed the moment, she felt herself wet.

Opening her eyes, she rushed towards the divan and began to shower her husband with kisses, as she embraced him tight and tried to pull him down. But Younghusband pushed her away, and getting up, walked back to the map. Now, even though she was not pregnant, she felt as if she was welling back to her penis-envy days. But this time, her envy seemed to have narrowed. She now wished to have but a single partner. The Island that loved golden breasts.

Walking out to the balcony, Younghusband now felt the ire of his vagina-envy on the rise again. He could not resist the temptation to want to have all the spices. He
closed his eyes, and drew in a long breath. “Ah, the aroma….”, he said, as he wiggled the nostrils. “Oh, what variety…” However, he felt the aches and cramps in his belly only got worse. He belched again.

Now he visualized himself to be on the deck of a ship. He panned the view, imagining a vast blue moving in ripples around him. “Churchiana”, he called out.

“What now, my dear.”
“We’re going….”
“Where!”
“For spices….” He belched.
“Where’re your manners, my dear.”
“I can’t help it… I feel my belly … I can’t bear the pain, my bellyaches, any more.”
“Can we?”, asked Churchiana, as she followed him.
“Can we what?”
“Go to the Island of the Brazen Brown?”
“Yes, why not…”, he said looking into the thin air, as he wiggled his back again. “I can get all my spices there.”
“I can get….” She did not continue the sentence but kept the moment to herself.

Churchiana’s eyes lit up. Ah…, the thought of getting to dance with Brown partners… With her husband’s preoccupations, she could count the number of times in bed with him, on her fingers. She sent her hands to her breasts and took it across pressing it hard as she closed her eyes. Ah…, the thought of getting to dance with Brown partners… she thought again. “I’m with you dear….”, she said, “all the way. Just say the word… And we’ll be on our way.”

Still there was the matter of the younger son. Earl of Opium. Taking him along would be more than what he would want to handle on a foreign tour. So he was glad he was able to arrange for him to be in charge of the one-way ticket holders being dispatched further west across the ocean. He could see his expertise with the whipper-scatter
bullet doing double duty – to hunt down the natives into slavery, and to keep in line the jailbirds and the prostitutes, and other ‘dregs and scalawags’ as they called the riff-raff of society, sent on a one-way ticket out east.

Pleased at the arrangement, he licked his lips with his tongue as if tasting something savoury, and took a cricket bat in hand, even as he scratched his ball again, a habit he had come to have as a result of his vagina-envy.

As Churchiana walked along the Green recalling all this, Milton awoke, trying to make sense of the dream.

Strangely, Milton had a second dream… the next day. What’s this, he remembers asking himself… Some nada-gam folkplay, staged night after night?

“You should have seen the flying Dutchmen, Your Majesty … how they ran for cover under our fire power”, Younghusband bragged, through the translator.

As King Sri Wickrema Rajasinha watched the translator’s stiff upper lip barely opening to let the sounds escape, Younghusband took in a bird’s eye view of the Royal Regalia. The gilt jacket with puffed up shoulders, the docked pants tapering into a tight cuff at the ankles, sandals curled up at the toe like the stern of a Chinese ship. Sending his eyes up surreptitiously, he took in the Throne. Enough gems, he said to himself… As wide as our own King’s, too. Not bad, hm, he thought to himself. Would be great at an auction. He returned his eyes to the King, restraining a smile… “We can give you protection”, Younghusband said, waiting for the interpreter to finish his words. He bowed in the direction of Her Majesty the Queen, watching from a distance. The King cleared his moustache with his right index finger and thumb, and smiled as he studied Younghusband intently, fixing his sharp eyes sitting firm beneath the pitch-black, brush-thick eye lashes.
“From whom?” the King asked, with no smile on
his face.

“The Dutchmen are sure to return, Your Majesty. They already have a Fort in Galle,” Younghusband re-
ponded.

The King shrugged his shoulders and flattened his
thick dark-brown lips. And then said, “Oh, I can call in re-
inforcements any time … from South Bharata…. a mere 22
miles of water.”

“But Your Majesty…, do you want to rely on your
ancient conquerors?” Younghusband was happy he had
done his homework.

“You will not talk about my people in that man-
er….,” the King thundered, stamping his right foot, as
Younghusband felt taken aback. The decisive invasion,
from South Bharata, which finally ended a 1500-year-old
De-Leonese rule, had been in the 11th century. He had not
expected this long-time descendent of theirs to be still so
umbilically linked.

“Oh, I’m awfully sorry, Your Majesty…” He
bowed at him, happy that the King had not dism issed him.
“But, if you’ll pardon me, Your Majesty,” he tried another
tact, “you don’t want to bring in any more Hindoo to your
island… You’re Boodoo. You’re the Protector of the Boo-
doo’s Tooth Relic!”

“Hm,” the King said, calming down. “Whether I’m
Boodoo or not is immaterial, but yes, I am its Guardian…
That’s the Sceptre of my authority.”

“Oh, I understand, Your Excellency”, said Lord
Younghusband most politely. “But, why go to all that trou-
ble and expense to bring in an army from that far when
we’re right here?” He paused, and looked in the direction
of the Queen again, bowing, “to your Majesty’s Royal
Family,” he paused again, adding, “at no cost to you?”

The King cast a glance at the Queen as he stoked
his moustache.

“I’ll contact you if I need your help.”
“But what about from your own people?”
“Oh, their loyalty? It’s solid rock. As long as the sun and the moon last.”
“So glad to hear that, your Majesty…. Nothing like a trusted Minister”, Younghusband continued unaffected.
“But, there’s another matter, your Majesty, if you’ll pardon me. The Dutch are misleading and misguiding your people. Theirs is not the true teachings of our Lord the Christ.
“But they wear the cross, too, don’t they “, quipped the King.
“Yes, they do, Your Majesty. But they shouldn’t ……They’re heretics, you know.”
The King smiled again. “That’s your problem.”

Now Milton looked forward to his dreams. He sort of enjoyed being part of the drama. It brought to life the stuff he had read up night after night for exams in the dry pages. This dream had a new twist. He watched it from the front seat.

It was Churchiana again. She was beginning to feel overwhelmed as the Chief Minister Ehelepola entered the hallway of the Office of the British Protectorate. His eyes, tender and luminous she thought, exuded a rustic power … “enough to pierce through anything really… more powerful than a radar.” Almost unconsciously, she placed her right hand over her chest as if to cover the low cut v-neck. He was dressed in the same kind of formal wear of the King that her husband had described – a jacket ending at the waist with puffed up shoulders and sleeves ending halfway up the arm, over baggy pants tight at the ankle. And upturned slippers. “Only perhaps fewer studded stones’, she
decided. The aura of royalty around him, she came to be convinced, was even more powerful than what she had encountered in the homegrown variety.

“For someone of your age, Your Excellency, first time on the dance floor, you’re not doing badly at all,” she said as she twirled the Chief Minister, bringing out the giggle in him. She could not get her eyes away from the robust figure in front of her. Sexy, she was sure. As they went round and round, she reflected on how he had convinced her husband, dejected by his failure with the King, to let her handle the matter. Wearing her favourite long dress, with a low cut V-neck, she threw her right hand in the air as she pushed her face back and up, putting on display her ample bosom. She had looked forward to this encounter, with this Highest Brown of the land after the King. She half closed her eyes and looked up as her husband acceded to her request. Dashing to the altar room, she had fallen on her knees, resting her forehead on the fingers brought together in an arch. “Thank you, Lord.”

Minister Ehelepola remembered the first time he entered the Dance Hall. There was a picture of the King, right at the centre in the far wall, with the words that were translated to him as meaning, ‘God Save the King’. Below were some other words. He recognized the year on either side of what appeared to be two words. 1918. Noting the question mark on his face, the translator helped out. Merry Christmas. And he had been initiated into a whole history of how a pagan festival of the Romans had now turned into the birthday of their Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the World. ‘Saviour’, he had wondered quietly...

What had attracted his attention even more was a roof high green tree in the corner. It was the first time he had ever seen a cone shaped tree... and with no roots... “Oh, it’s our Christmas tree...,” Churchiana had explained, getting closer to his warm body.
“Not very wise of you, people of the De-Leonese, to allow a Hindoo to wear your Crown, is it now!” teased Churchiana.

“But he’s not.”

“You want to know what your King told Lord Younghusband. That he was merely a ‘convenient Boodoo’ – to have the legitimacy to be on the Throne.”

“Well, you see, it’s difficult to know…. We don’t really practice our religion either… unlike you. There’s no requirement that we attend temple. Sure, we do the rituals…. like the Annual Parade of the Sacred Tooth Relic for the Veneration of the public. But that’s about it. So, as long as he performs his public rituals, that’s all we want to see.”

“Oh, that’s how you see it.”

“Yes.”

“But he’s a De-Andhrese, Your Excellency, not your kind. They’ve always supported South Bharatan invaders, have you forgotten Your Excellency? Remember the 11th century invasion. Your temples were desecrated, monks de-robed….”

“But, you see, when the last De-Leonese King NarendraSinha married a Nayakkar Queen from South Bharata, the fate of the Throne falling into non-De-Leonese hands was sealed. Tradition decrees that the oldest male be the successor. And the Throne fell into Nayakkar hands, to Sri Vijaya Rajasinghe, the brother of the King’s first Queen.”

“But your present King is four royal generations removed surely.”

“Yes, but …” he paused. “We couldn’t agree on who should be King. Remember, we are the De-Leonese. And political back-stabbing is the name of the game. We’d rather kow-tow to an outside devil than to one of our own. And we proudly sing,

‘Fools indeed the De-Leonese are.
But eating oil-cake, now there, giants by far!’
“Poor you,” Churchiana said, tightening her hold of him across the back and pulling Ehelepola closer to her as she twirled him around to the music. “Tell you what…we can help you get back your Crown…. You’re every bit fit to be King, Your Highness…” She twirled under his raised arm, and looked at him, tilting her head back. And returning in a twirl as he watched, she continued. “You come from a long lineage… over 2400 years,” she said looking into his eyes.

“So you know about my heritage…”

“Do I ever! We make it our business to know every bit of the people of the country…. specially the leaders..”

Ehelepola tightened his grip, and pressed his body against hers to the music, which was now playing a slow rhythm.

He watched her looking intently at him. “You’re smart, and…,” she paused as she gave a coquettish smile “….and handsome.” He smiled from ear to ear. “I’m looking at your face… how … what’s the word…. ebullient … Exuding energy.”

“Ebullient … Exuding energy,” he repeated after her.

“That’s what you are, Your Excellency, that’s what you are …like the sun,” she whispered in his ear as she now, in the hall with lights dimmed, placed her face on his shoulders, breathing into his neck.

“Your mere presence…” she continued, “is enough for your subjects to fall at your feet.”

“You think so?”

“I know so!” She pop-eyed him.

She was proud how fluent she had come to be in De-Leonese. Her many hours of practice with a tutor had paid off, she said to herself.

As she continued to lead on the Chief Minister, a smile made a permanent berth in his brown face. She congratulated herself for getting him, after several attempts,
into bed… She closed her eyes, but, oops, she suddenly re-
alized, she’d got the better of herself…. I mean on to the
dance floor. Perhaps the case of whiskey did the trick? As
she held him tighter, she closed her eyes again and took in
the Royal Brown aroma.

“We’ll take you under British protection .. in the
name of His Majesty ….and Our Lord Jesus Christ the Savi-
our…we’ll do everything.”

“You’ll do everything,” he repeated.

“Remember Don Juan Dharmapala … when the
Portuguese arrived some three centuries ago … when was
it.. oh, yes. 1505… he not only got protection, but also got
a chance to enter God’s Kingdom … and enjoy the luxu-
ries.” She paused as she looked into his eyes, and then
added, “But you can’t imagine the life of luxury awaiting
you, and your family … And you don’t even have to leave
your country… this beautiful island… You can stay right
here and rule the people…We will even get you a Knight-
hood. Imagine. Just imagine. His Majesty King Sir Ehele-
pola.”

“His Majesty King Sir Ehelepola,” he repeated. And
nodded, as he placed his face on hers, giving the tip of her
ear a lick with his tongue.

Milton now routinely expected the dream to con-
tinue.

Forgetting to take the pill, Churchiana found herself
with child. “Now what in the devil’s name have you done?”
screamed Younghusband upon hearing the announcement.

“Well,” she asked, “do you, or don’t you want your
spices?”

“Well….”

“Then?”

Younghusband fell into a silence. With each gunny
bag of spice arriving at the doorstep, his displeasure began
to be buried under the smell of the spice.
Half asleep, Milton tried his darndest to figure out the meaning of the dream. Then Mother appeared.... First, it was a smile... then a face... a face at the gate..... then a tear... getting thicker, first at the bottom, then gradually moving up... and soon, soil, fields of paddy, trees, oh yes, coconut trees, rivers, mountains, a breathtaking seashore around... Milton looked in amazement as tear turned solid. Now a stretch of water beyond the north, and another tail-piece of a land, widening towards the north.... Then a voice... I have a dream, son..., I have a dream... that the ..the... Abhiman in you will, that the Abhiman in you, my son, you will stand up... to be counted...

Then the face disappeared. He slept restlessly during the rest of the night.
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A Gradient of Six

Preparing for the Advanced Level towards a London degree, it was a new love for Tangamma. History. She was thankful that the Ohday Temple was a second chance College – for people like herself who had not had the opportunity to go through the regular system. She had worked hard at the General Certificate of Education, O(rdinary) Level, earning an upper division. She knew it was thanks to husband Milton that she pulled off an A in English. However, unlike at the O level when history was mere numbers and dates to be poured down into the funnel of memory, to be wrung out back into frustration, now it came alive, she thought to herself, as if she was witnessing history in the making. The first day in class was enough to smell the new aromatic flames rising out of a magician’s uncorked bottle. However, it was with a certain amount of discomfort she sat among five other males on that first day. She took a seat behind the semi-circle. But when the teacher walked in, she somehow felt many times more comfortable.

Noticing that the teacher was looking at her, she looked down. “Shame on you, boys…,” he said smiling, as Tangamma caught herself scratching around her chest even as she covered it with her left hand as if to cover it from the ten pairs of male eyes. “You offer no front seat to a lady?” One of the boys immediately stood up, walked to the back and brought a chair, and placed it in the semi-circle.

“No, that’s better,” the teacher said. “What’s your name?”

“Wimal, Sir.”

“Oh, the Pure One!” Wimal smiled, as the teacher who was now looking at Tangamma, and moving his head towards the chair, smiling. Tangamma kept looking down, but then, stood up slowly and joined the semi-circle, beside Wimal.
“Well, I am Mr. Rajaratna.... And I hope you'll like my teaching....” He panned the class as everyone smiled approvingly. “So let’s get on with our lesson....” Heads nodded.

“OK... What did you eat last night?” asked the teacher in the National, a robust hunk of a man, she thought, seated behind the desk. The six students looked at each other, one or two even looking outside as if thrown off by the question. “Well,” the teacher panned the class, smiling. With five others in class, none, unlike her, out of their youth, Tangamma lowered her eyes. One of the students looked at his new friend to his left, and then to the right. As if sensing what was going on in his mind, the teacher, looking straight into his eyes, said “Yes,” just as he was himself about to raise his hand. “Rice and curry, Sir” he blurted out. A few heads nodded as Tangamma continued to avoid eye contact with the teacher, or anyone else.

“Your name is?” encouraged Mr. Rajaratna. Tangamma appreciated that he had not called upon her. “Sensitive teacher,” she said to herself.

Others looked on. “Brian.”

“OK Brian, with what?”

“Fish, some vegetables, and coconut sambol.”

“OK....What about the others?”

“Same,” Sepala volunteered, after a few seconds.

“Fish and vegetables,” came the refrain. But then another voice. “Different for me, Sir... Vegetables and fish!” Everybody cracked up as a smiling teacher asked, “Your name is?”

“Aboobakr.”

“A Muslim name.” Tangamma told herself. However, Tangamma’s mind was on another question: What had all this got to do with history? The teacher’s voice brought her back. “You see,” he began to explain as if reading her mind. “We all eat rice, fish, vegetables and coconut. Have you ever stopped to think what a well-balanced diet that is?”
Everybody looked at each other. “Rice – especially the husk, gives us proteins. Same with fish, good for the bones and teeth.” All eyes were on the teacher. Brian’s chin rested on the arch of his thumb and index finger as his elbow rested on the desk. “And veggies? What do they do? They give us vitamins. And also helps in our digestion.” Pressing his lips tight against each other, Sepala nodded as he looked at Wimal. “What about the coconuts? Maybe a bit high in cholesterol, but all in all, full of nutrients.” A lip unpursed at one desk, and ‘hm’ went another, as the teacher seemed to enjoy the moment. Continuing, he said, “Now you know why our life expectancy is high and infant mortality low.”

“Is it?” came the question to Tangamma’s mind. It had never occurred to her, because both her parents had died young, mother when she was barely 50 and father a bit older.

“High meaning what, Sir?” came out her voice, barely audible, as she limped up her hand, feeling a lump in her throat.

“Your name is,” asked the teacher.

“Tangamma.”

“Yes Tangamma. High meaning 70, high meaning compared to the rest of the world… Say England, US, Canada,” the teacher clarified. Walking up to the blackboard behind him, he wrote some numbers.

“Oh!” Tangamma heard someone say as she turned towards the voice.

“And infant mortality? Lowest in the region, per thousand”, he explained.

The question still lingered on in Tangamma’s mind. What’s all this got to do with history? Again, Tangamma was pleased that the teacher seemed to be on the same wavelength. “Do you know why I’m asking this?” He panned the class. And added, “You know that this island was called the Granaries of the East.”

A hand went up. “Yes, Sir, I’ve heard so.”
“Good. And your name is?”
“Chaminda.”
“Do you know when that was?”
“Haven’t got a clue, Sir.”
“Sixth seventh centuries C.E.”
The students looked at each other.
“You know what AD stands for, don’t you? *Anno Domini*, in the Year of our Lord. But today we use CE, meaning ‘Common Era’.* A teacher in a post-Revolutionary era, he wanted to make sure that not only any vestiges of colonialism were gotten rid of but that the students benefited from the latest scholarship.
“But, Sir, it’s still based in a western event,” said Chaminda.
Brian nodded in agreement.
“That’s true,” the teacher said, “but that’s how western scholars use it, too. Besides, that’s the way the cookie crumbles…. After all, we also got English from the west.”
“That’s true,” agreed Sepala.
“Everything we got from the West is not bad, surely. True the country was robbed of its natural resources, and we were forced to export our rubber in the form of latex and import it back in the form of tires, costing an arm and a leg. It was like ….. forcing food on, and making you pay for it, too! Our cultures were overrun by an alien culture, and our religions by an alien religion.”
Suddenly, Tangamma felt a coolness from the light breeze blowing in through the window to the left as she noted how everyone in class seemed to appreciate the point. ‘Hey, this class is going to be fun,’ she said to herself.
“So, to get back, good you know your history… Not like the one here .. right Wimal,” the teacher said teasingly.
“Of course, you know your history, don’t you, Wimal?” the teacher said, bringing in a response from Brian. “No, he doesn’t!”
“Is that your mischievous way of making friends?” asked the teacher smiling. And Brian was happy when Wimal smiled.

“So the good health we enjoy today is a direct result of the great efforts made by our ancients to make the land cultivable,” the teacher explained, holding on to the shawl around his neck and raising his eyebrows. Tangamma noted him pursing his lips and wearing a smile, and nodding as if to say “Shouldn’t we all be proud of it.”

Her thoughts were interrupted when he heard the teacher’s voice. “Have you ever had floods in your neck of the wood?” Wimal immediately put up his hand. “A few years ago at the Tangalu Waylla.”

“The stretch of low-lying paddy fields down South, I presume?”

“Oh you know of it?”

“You want to describe it for us?”

“Well, it was water water everywhere…”

“And not a drop to drink?” added Sepala, bringing a smile on Tangamma’s lips, too.

“Oh, is that somebody’s line?” enquired Brian, looking around and feeling a bit foolish.

“Yes, Brian”, said Sepala, putting up his hand. “From Chaucer.” And, as the teacher broke into laughter, he said, “No?”

“Sepala, When was the last time you read Chaucer?”

“May be in his last life, Sir,” joined in Chaminda.

“I’ve never read him, Sir,” admitted Sepala. Tangamma felt a sense of pride. ‘Hey, I’ve read him,’ the thought ran through her mind as she visualized herself in her husband’s library at home.

“It sounded good, didn’t it?” Brian said, joining in the laughter.

“Well, do we want to hear Wimal tell us about his flood experience?”

“It wasn’t much of an experience, Sir.”
“That’s OK, tell us anyways. I’ve never seen one myself,” said Brian.
“Nor have I,” joined in Chaminda.
“Well, it was towards the end of the town… There’s a two-way road, and fields on either side. Covering that stretch are four small bridges. Sometimes I’ve seen one or two sarong-johnnies fishing there. But it rained for … I believe may be ten or more days, almost non-stop…”
“The monsoon rains,” said the teacher.
“Oh, is that what it’s called?” asked Brian.
“That’s when I heard about the floods. I’d never seen one myself. And my father said he didn’t remember one either in his lifetime.”
“So it’s rare then,” added Brian.
“Smart, aren’t you,” teased Sepala.
“All I saw was water, and water, and more water… It was as if the fields had disappeared… But the day we went, it had stopped raining.”
“So the bridges had been washed away?”
“No, they had gone under water…That’s all.”
“How did you know?”
“I saw people standing on one – the one nearest the edge of the town. The road just disappeared into the water.”
“So did you join them on the bridge?”
“No way, Sir, he was a scary-crow,” said Brian.
“You really want to know what I did?”
“Tell us.”
“I stepped out of the bridge!”
“And?”
“As the water inched its way up, I felt I was being carried away by the undercurrent. I stood firm. However, when I looked around, and it was like I was in the middle of the ocean. For a minute, I felt sort of dizzy… and a bit scary, too. Then I looked at the clear blue sky. Horizon to horizon, it was like an upside down bowl, and with the rains stopped, looking every bit innocent… calm and serene even, like a monk in meditation!”

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“Very poetic!” said the teacher. “You should try your hand at poetry.”

“Yes Wimal, why not?” teased Sepala. Tangamma looked straight at him for the first time. He smiled.

“So were you alone?”

“No, with some friends.”

“Phew… that’s better… You want to continue?”

“We saw some people far away at the other end coming towards us. So we started walking in their direction. They were carrying stuff …on their shoulders and heads. When we met them halfway through, they said they had been waiting for the bus, but thinking that there may not be one, they decided to wade through. And guess what. As they were half-way through, the bus went by …without stopping!”

“What? A bus went through? With passengers?” Wimal nodded. “Yes, at the deepest point, the water level must have been no higher than the wheels I suppose.” He added. “You know, when I was in the middle, I was no longer scared. I felt the water still tugging at my feet, as if inviting me to go with the flow, like some cattle were doing. They seemed like having a good time … no farmers to beat them, no mud to toil in, no yoke to pull ……… ah, freedom, simply float free …It was such a beautiful sight … to see sets of horns above the water, surrounded by rice paddy leaves. I even touched one of them in its horn, and nearly got dragged away. But I let go of it just before I got pulled away.”

“Like I said, you should be taking to poetry…So, anyways, what were you wearing at that time?”

“Shorts… and shoes.”

“Oh, I know, Sir,” volunteered Brian. “He made boats of his shoes and they floated down the waters.”

“Another poet,” said the teacher.

“How did you guess?” asked Wimal, smiling at Brian.

“You know what he did, Sir?” continued Brian.
“What?” the teacher said with a smile. Tangamma was beginning to like the teacher even more. He was so fun-loving.

“Halfway through, he slid down his shorts …” Then, noting Tangamma, he said, “oops!” but added, “and enjoyed the water…”

Everybody burst out laughing as another added, “…when he felt some fish snipping down there…”

More laughter, as the teacher said, “Now, now,” as Tangamma looked down as if in embarrassment, the rest of the class promptly turning into serious faces. However, Brian, unable to contain himself, burst out laughing his guts out. The teacher looked at him, when he stopped immediately.

The teacher continued. “So, of course, the entire crop must have been washed away….That wouldn’t have happened in ancient times…” The teacher paused, and looked at the class. Then he reached out to his briefcase, and took out a stack of paper.

“You said it wouldn’t have happened in ancient times. Why not, Sir?”

“Because of a carefully constructed hydraulic culture.”

He now distributed a handout. “Read it to yourself first, and then we can ask some questions.” It was an excerpt from A Brief History of the De-Leonese People. The chapter heading read, ‘A Hydraulic Civilization’, subtitling it ‘The Anuradhapura Kingdom (third c. BCE)’. The class began to read in silence.

... Large-scale irrigation works were being built...The construction of tanks, canals and channels shows an amazing knowledge of trigonometry, and the design of the tanks a thorough grasp of hydraulic principles. The tanks had broad bases, which could withstand heavy pressures, and at suit-
able points in the embankment, there were outlets for discharge of water.

“Aren’t there any illustrations or photographs of them, Sir?” asked Brian, putting up his hand.

“I knew you were going to ask”, said the teacher. “I was going to pass along the book later, but here, take a look at it.”

Brian studied it with great interest, and passed it along, and continued reading. ‘The People of De-Leonese were the first inventors of the valve pit, called ‘biso kotuwa’...’, continued the excerpt, citing one H. Parker, 1909, London, and explained in a footnote what ‘biso kotuwa’ meant: ‘a square enclosure built of stone slabs, to facilitate the control of the pressure and the quantity of outflow...’

As the teacher’s book went from hand to hand, Sepala continued reading. ‘The tank Kalaa-wewa, built in the fifth century, had an embankment 3.25 miles long and rising to a height of about 40 ft.’

“Wow,” he said. “It must’ve irrigated a large area.”

“180 square miles, it says here,” joined Wimal.

“Hm!” said Sepala, looking at Wimal. Noting Tangamma, too, looking in his direction, he smiled at her, and continued to read. However, Tangamma’s eyes popped when she read the next line about the Jaya-ganga, the 50-mile canal off the Kalaa-wewa. ‘... The gradient of the first 17 miles of the canal was a mere 6 inches to a mile.’

“What?” blurted out Brian. “Six inches to a mile? Impossible!”

“That’s probably why it was called the Jaya-ganga ‘Victory-river’, ” Tangamma said, in her soft voice.

“That’s who our ancients were,” said Mr. Rajaratna, tugging at his shawl, and panning the class as everyone beamed.

Wimal returned the book to the teacher, pages still open. Mr. Rajaratna flipped through a couple of pages and read out.
'Nowhere in Asia does one find such a multiplicity of irrigation works..., not the Bharatan sub-continent, the fertile Crescent of West Asia, or China itself.'

Tangamma felt hot all over, a pride swelling in her. She looked outside the window and saw a flock of crows flying by as if they were returning from a feast. Feeling that her ears were on fire, she sent her palms over them as if cooling them off with a wet piece of rag.

“How did it actually work?” she asked. The teacher stood up, and went to the blackboard. “How’s that for a mountain range?” he asked, taking the chalk from left bottom, up and then down to the right. Then closer to the peak, he drew two parallel lines, vertically, and connected them at the bottom with a single horizontal line. Soon a sketch of a series of tanks appeared on the board, touching each other, but at successively lower levels, kissing the contours of the range. “This is how it worked,” he said.

“Neat-o,” said Brian. “You’re an artist, Sir.”

Tangamma continued to feel hot all over. She felt a strong yearning to see this place called Anuradhapura. “So that explains why the island was called the Granaries of the East,” she said, as the teacher nodded, wearing a smile. “But that was not all,” he said, and returning to the board, wrote the word, ‘Lift-irrigation’.

“What’s that?” asked Brian.

“Don’t you know anything, Brian?” teased Tangamma now. She flashed a smile, as Brian’s teeth showed.

“OK, you tell me what it is.”

“Isn’t it...isn’t it....What’s it, Sir,” said Tangamma as she turned her head towards Brian.

“Have you been to Sigiriya?” asked the teacher, in response.

Everyone turned their heads side to side. “You haven’t been to Sigiriya?” he raised his eye brows, with eyes
wide open. “Shame on you,” he said, splashing his usual smile. “Look at these future leaders ... Never been to Sigiriya... Oh yes, I forgot... your colonial education took you only to the Parliament Buildings, modeled after the Westminster Abbey, right?” He allowed a moment, and added. “Your teachers, with their colonized minds, didn’t take you much farther either, did they now?”

“I know the name”, offered Wimal, sheepishly. “Isn’t it a rock fortress…. or something like that?”

“That’s a good start...”

“It’s not very far from Anuradhapura, in fact.”

“So did something happen there?” asked Brian.

“You better believe it... Yes, as Wimal said, it was a rock fortress... of a patricidal King...There was even a castle at the top...”

“A castle at the top... How tall was it?

“Oh, about 500 feet.”

“So how did they build a castle at the top?”

“With slave labour, of course.”

“Slave labour... in a Buddhist country?” asked Sepala.

“Do you know any country in the world that had no slaves at that time?”

“I guess that’s true”, relented Sepala. “Still...”

“Troubled by it?...But guess what. They were all paid due wages!”

“No way!”

“Read the Mahavamsa?”

“What’s that?”

“Haven’t read it?” Mr. Rajaratna noted the bank faces. “It’s the Great Chronicle of the People...”

“Should be an interesting read”, quipped someone.

“You better believe it,” said the teacher. “Something more...The Taj Mahal in Bharata, you know, was built to show a ruler’s love. It meant, or gave, nothing to the people, except as a monument of humungous dimensions.... But the rock fortress, like the Buddhist Dagaebas, also
built with slave labour, was built for the social good... for the use of the public... not for any egotistical flight of aggrandizement..."

Heads nodded.

“It was part of a wider complex on the ground level that included places of worship, quarters for the ordained, and so on...like at Anuradhapura.”

“Well, that makes me feel better...”

“Good.... To return to what we were talking about before Brian rudely interrupted ..”

“Yes, sir.” That was Brian. Tangamma looked at him with a smile.

“The King’s Palace at the top was no ordinary one... It even had urinals and a drainage system...”

“A drainage system?” asked an excited Aboobakr.

“Yes, a drainage system... But you know what stunned me?”

“What, Sir?”

“A huge pond where the King and everyone else bathed ...!”

“A pond, up high there?” That was Tangamma, talking with piqued excitement, her right hand moving up to her chest for a scratch.

“Yes, a pond... You know how big it was? About 100 by 40 feet.”

“That’s more than forty times the size of this room,” said Aboobakr, making a quick calculation sending his eyes along the walls.

“Very good, Aboobakr, Very good. You must be a mathematician,” said Mr. Rajaratna, directing his smiling eyes at him. “Well, of course, the zero was introduced by your predecessors, Muslim mathematicians, borrowed even though as it was, from the Sanskrit Anuswara.”

“Wow”, somebody went. “You’re truly learned, Sir.”

“Well”, smiled the teacher.
“So it was Muslim mathematicians who introduced
the zero. Hm… I didn’t know that”, said Aboobakr.
“Well, yes…”
“Never mind…,” said someone. “But Sir, how did
they get the water up there?
“A million dollar question, isn’t it. That again was
part of the hydraulic civilization… That’s what’s called
‘lift-irrigation’.”
“Meaning?”
“The water was lifted up… with hydraulic pumps…
not only for the pond… but for the smaller fields, too, at the
level of the treasury… where the grain was stored.”
“I can’t believe this, Sir. I just can’t believe this
…,” said Brian.
“Well, you can see it for yourself when you go
there….”
“I sure want to go there”, said Tangamma.
“Good, Tangamma….You won’t be sorry.”
She smiled.
“You know what else you can see… Go to the top
and look eastward and westward… You’ll see a 20-foot
wide road in each direction, extending almost as far as your
eye can see. Make sure, if you go, to stop by the fountains
along the main road, that are never said to go dry .. Again
part of the hydraulic culture.”
Wimal looked at Sepala as Brian looked at Chamin-
da and Aboobakr. Overawed, Tangamma watched them all,
with mouth agape, unable to speak. And then the teacher
added, “I’ve never seen it myself, but I understand that
there’s a palace in Austria that has the same design – wide
road in each of the four directions leading up to the palace,
with boulevards of white sand lined by trees planted at even
distance on either side, and a fountain closer to the Palace.”
“Hm,” said Aboobakr and Chaminda almost at the
same time. “So what century was Sigiriya, Sir?”
“Oh, the 5th to 7th 8th centuries….”
“So over a thousand years before Europe!” That was Aboobakr doing some calculating again.

“Oh, I nearly forgot… You know what Sigiriya means?”

“Lion’s Rock?” offered Sepala.

“Very good… One more thing unique at Sigiriya,” the teacher said, unfolding a roll of paper. As it opened, the class watched a tip of a cone appear, gradually widening into a crown worn by a fair skinned lady. As the teacher unrolled it ever so slowly, there appeared a narrow forehead, adorned by two crescents over eyes that tapered towards the edge in the direction of the ears, in the shape of a lotus bud. “Can you see the deer-eyes, as eyes are traditionally characterized?” asked the teacher. The face was clearly feminine, as the class noted, with thin lips, highlighted with a type of red lipstick. Now the teacher flipped open the rest, holding the poster with one hand at the top and the other at the bottom. As the edges curled up, he asked two students to come up, and hold it from either side. “This is an Apsaraa, or heavenly damsel,” the teacher explained. “Frescoes.” Tangamma looked at the figure in embarrassment, noting the voluptuous breasts. An image of a swan with its short beak somehow came to her mind. “Note the narrow waist,” the teacher said. “That was the notion of beauty apparently in classical literature… A waist that could be held in a fist-hold.” He allowed the students to understand the obvious corollary. A hip wide as a wheel.

The teacher continued. “At one time, there were said to be 500 such Apsaraa figures halfway up the Sigiriya.”

The students looked at each other with raised eyebrows, wrinkled foreheads and closed mouths in obvious wonderment. “Something more, said Mr. Rajaratna. “Nearby is a Mirror Wall – meaning a wall the surface of which had a sheen and lustre, but also a quality that could be scribbled on. And visitors to the Gallery would express their feelings in poetic language.”
Now the students had their mouth open. After a few moments, Brian decided to break up the moment. “Watch out… Flies will fall into your mouth,” he said, looking at Aboobakr. Everybody’s mouths soon closed shut, still retaining a pensive smile.

“Are they still there?” asked Sepala.

“Yes… but only a few of the frescoes… However, the poetry have all been luckily deciphered and published as a UNESCO publication. Sigiri Graffiti. By Professor Paranavitana.”

“Thank goodness,” said Tangamma, rubbing her face with both hands, her right finger soon beginning to scratch her chest as the left hand covered it.

“Let’s go into more detail next time, if you like, OK? However, one other thing… that might be of interest to you. You know Arthur Clarke, don’t you, the sci-fi writer….”

Some heads nodded. “In his novel, Fountains of Paradise, Sigiriya is a base for a space elevator leading up to the stars,” said Mr. Rajaratna as the bell rang.

As Tangamma came out of that very first class, she saw some students laughing. Sepala put his hand on Aboobakr’s shoulder, and asked, “So what do you think?”

“The best teacher I’ve ever had,” he said, looking right into Sepala’s eye. Then after a pause, “He brings history to life, doesn’t he?” Overhearing it, Tangamma agreed silently.

“Well, what did I tell you? History is life… And yes, he’s a good teacher.”

“And so young, too.”

“Must be just out of University.”
It was a memory. Why it came to him, Milton didn’t know.

“Do you note, ladies and gentlemen, that these robe-bearers show themselves at Wesak time?” asked the speaker, raising himself on his toes and panning the audience with his right hand, index finger pointing. Milton watched from a side, as if mesmerized by the imposing figure, in his pearl-white collarless long-sleeved National. He looked at the black buttons lining up the front up to about a foot above the knee. The wrap-around waittyya draped down from under the white top. The audience, in the half-empty hall, looked on.

Heads nodded.

“And notice that this year there are many more of them? Have you noticed it? Yet how gullible we are! In this town, in which Buddhists account for over 98%, see how many of us are here today!” He panned the audience with his right index finger. “Part of our history, isn’t it? Nonchalance.” He raised himself up again, as if to make the point. “Nonchalance… Perhaps in the thought that if we could have survived 2,500 years of onslaught on Buddhism, from South Bharata first, and then from Europe over the last 500 years, what harm can a few imposters bring us?”

An agreeable laughter ran through the hall.

“Notice the length of their hair. At least one-month’s growth. Have you ever seen any of our Venerable Bhikkhus let their hair grow this long?” Pursuing the line of argument, the speaker asked pointedly, “Do you know any of our Venerable Bhikkhus ever drinking cow-urine?” he said, bringing together his hands with fingers apart as if he
was holding something. “They’re said to drink in a coconut shell…trying to impress, I believe, the gullible. Oh how holy!”

The audience looked at each other, nodding their heads again, some of them fanning themselves with a movement of their hands to get a little reprieve from the afternoon heat.

“This is nothing but going to the extremes. Our Great Teacher took the Middle Path.” Encouraged by the nodding heads, he continued. “So who are these so-called taapasa ascetics?” he asked, stabbing the air downward with his index finger. “They are nothing but hora ganayas, ladies and gentlemen, hora gana imposters… Rogue monks …,” he said, lifting himself up on his toes again. “They are here at least to undermine our respect for our Venerable Bhikkhus … and temples… However, we need to remind ourselves, ladies and gentlemen, we need to remind ourselves. Had it not been for our Venerable Bhikkhus of the De-Leonese, the world would never have seen the Buddha’s words in written form. Not until they were recorded in the Temple of Light in this land of ours, some four hundred years after His passing away, did they find a permanent home, saving them from the vagaries of oral transmission. Even before the compilation of the Tripitaka, it was the Venerable Bhikkhus, De-Leonese Bhikkhus, that carefully preserved his words, by committing them to memory, using this unique mnemonic method - some specializing, upon ordination, in the Long Discourses, some the Middle Length ones and those with a shorter memory span – like me,” he grinned showing his teeth, “the Shorter and the Miscellaneous ones.”

Clapping sounds now brought the audience alive.

The speaker continued. “Some have suggested these are Hindu seers from Bharata, on pilgrimage, simply passing through. In which case, ladies and gentlemen, we should all look after them. We should care for them. They are our guests. Our Teacher treated all spiritual seekers
with respect.” He paused. “But the question does arise, doesn’t it, ladies and gentlemen, why these people show up specifically at Wesak time, when everybody’s hearts are on compassion overdrive. Is it that they feel that we would be less likely to entertain doubts about them at a time when our minds are more open?”

He looked at the audience again, as a few more people walked in. “Now I don’t want to believe this,” he said lowering the pitch. “But there also has been the suggestion that the church, the Catholic Church, is behind this.” A hush fell through the audience as a hot breeze slapped across the hallway.

“The important thing, however, ladies and gentlemen, is not to jump to any conclusions…. And certainly not to resort to any violence. But to act in compassionate and wise ways.” He raised himself again. “Of course, we would want to continue to feed them, giving them the benefit of the doubt. However, you might want to talk to them – find out who they are and where they come from. Find if they have words of wisdom for you. Watch them come and go. Follow them. Watch them at night. And if you find anything that raises doubts in your mind, that would be the time to confront them.”

He concluded with the words, “Are you ready for the challenge?”

Milton now remembered how, as the audience started leaving, he had dashed to the stage and hugged his father as mom watched.

But….., why did this suddenly came to his mind, after all these years?

Going to sleep that night, it was the tear first, and then the Mother... He wondered whether this was Mother at the gate, or Mother Pearl o.t.e.
Milton had never seen it. Not even heard of one. A Nada-gam play? What is it? Billed as ‘a traditional folk drama revived for the modern stage,’ it was intriguing. The Director was known for his adaptations of Gogol, Moliere, Synge, Chekov, and his favourite, Shakespeare, for the University Theatre Group, and so Milton knew it was in experienced hands. However, he could not figure out how a folkplay Maname, performed night after night in the village for seven nights, could be cut back to three hours. Besides, a folkplay was a folkplay, and how could it ever be on a par with the sophistication of a western play by the masters? It was, therefore, with some scepticism that he took his seat in the front row. The Lionel Wendt Theatre in Cinnamon Gardens was packed to capacity when he arrived.

The Theatre went dark, and with the rich red velvet curtain drawn, a drumbeat resonated through the hall. He had never heard anything like it in his life. Very different from the sound and rhythm produced by any western drum he had listened to. As the drumbeat tapered, a spotlight flashed on to the curtain as an actor entered the stage from the right. The spotlight followed him to the centre. Dressed in a long golden robe, he had a long white beard. Elbows stuck against his sides, with palms facing up, he hit the posture of holding something like a scroll in his hands. As his voice boomed through the silent hall, Milton watched the expressive eyes, thickly made-up to bring out the lashes and the eyebrows, as the actor made contact with the audience. Although Milton could not understand the meaning of every word the writer-producer had employed for his poetic rendition, he understood that it was an invitation to watch an unfolding drama.

With the Narrator now off stage, the curtain opened as a group of men and women in bare feet entered the stage to a tempered beat of the drummer, visibly seated, along with a flutist and a harmonium player, at the left end of the
stage again st the black backdrop. While both men and women wore the same type of lower garment, colourful baggy pants with a tight cuff at the ankle, the men only had a sash of thread across their bare chest. The costume reminded him of Bharatan Princes and Princesses he had seen in pictures with make-up highlighting the faces of the group. Sounds competed with expression, as the chorus, walking in a rhythmic dance step, took their seat on two benches, one lower than the other, placed on the right edge of the open stage.

Following the invocation, it was again the Narrator’s turn, inviting the audience to meet Prince Maname who appeared to a dance step as the Narrator receded. Having been under the tutelage of his Guru since his childhood, he was now about to return, upon completion of his studies, to Benares to take up his royal duties. However, enamoured of the Guru’s daughter, he found himself unable to leave. Introduced by the narrator, enter the Daughter.

Milton’s critical eye now made mental notes of the innovative character of the play. Dialogue mostly in verse intermingled with short prose; drumming accompaniment with all movement, suggesting both local and distant travel; musicians, and the chorus on stage, women seated in front of men; dance steps complementing singing to musical accompaniment; all dialogue in melodic style; reminded of the Kabuki Theatre - points he would elaborate on later in his review. This was all in addition to the professional level of acting displayed by raw undergraduates, apt costume, bare stage…. Among the highlights he noted in his review was the rhythmic dance of the battle scene between the Prince and the fierce-looking Hunter King., In addition to the theatrical and dramatic quality of the play was the theme of the fickle woman, in apparent betrayal of the betrothed Prince in favour of the new love, the Hunter King. He predicted a long run for the play.

He had left the hall in awe. Yes, the producer had indeed done the impossible – transforming a seven night
folk play into a three-hour play. If his own signature Re-
view would contribute to the soon-to-follow Manamania
craze, it was the Review by the De-Leonese critic Jayadeva,
too, he was sure, that brought in the crowds night af-
fter night. The organizers had been careful not to seat them
near earth other. Sworn enemy of the University Gang as
perpetrators of an imperialist culture and creating a cultural
wasteland of the only centre for higher learning, the two
critics had never seen eye to eye. Maname had provided a
platform for not just for a ceasefire, but a joining of forces
for a dramatic trumpeting that was to take the country by
storm.

Days, weeks and months went by, but he was sur-
prised to find himself still electrified by Maname and its
artistry. He knew it was no temporary exhilaration he was
experiencing.

One early morning, he took a long walk along the
beach. Just as the wind was strong but cooling, the ocean,
too, appeared both charged yet calm. Tradition and mod-
ernity. The contrast, striking a chord with him, made him
ponder, re-think. His Editorial stance vis-à-vis the changes
taking place in the country, the slant in the new coverage
insisted by the publisher...

His own elephantine headline of September 25, 1959 con-
tinued to crush Milton, limb by limb, even more than when
he wrote it the day before. He was surprised at himself that
he would so feel. Never had he had a soft corner, a kind
word, for this man all these years since he had come to
power. Opportunist. Ultranationalist. Hypocrite. Socialist
Oozy-woozy. Caught in the grips of Marxists. These are the
words he had used, not just at the urging of his paymasters
at Right House, but through his own conviction. That the
critical stance fitted like a glove with the stance of the other
major media giant, the ‘Rong Times, was enough evidence for the correctness and sobriety of what he stood for. How orderly everything had been under the leadership of the Uncle Nephew Party. The tea, rubber and coconut exports kept the economy strong, English kept everybody happy, and the mail moved. Everybody knew their place in society, the English-speaking upper middle class ruling, and the rest benefiting from their benevolent rule. They may not have been the masters, but nobody starved. And there were no beggars on the streets. Then there was the free education, Kindergarten to University, free medical care and the free rice ration.

He could not, simply could not figure out, how on earth these masses would embrace these lefties. Made no sense at all. Not speaking English, what would they know of the world? How skilled would they be to run the affairs of a modern state? But now Mr. Bandleader had opened the floodgates and the uneducated masses were now on the move. With tea and rubber estates nationalized, the economy was going to smithereens, and as an UncleNephew MP had said it so rightly, there were some puduma sattu strange animals in Parliament.

Even though this was his take on Mr. Bandleader and his government, he had never envisaged such a dramatic event as had shocked the nation. So now his thoughts bounced off in his head like ping-pong balls falling off a factory conveyor belt.

He had arisen at 4.30 in the morning. A thick coat of darkness enveloped him as he stepped out of the house wearing a wig to camouflage himself. Tangamma still lay asleep. Cutting through the dark, he approached the gate silhouetted against the dim street light. As he turned left and continued to walk, he was both surprised and not surprised to see hundreds of silhouettes against the dim street-lights of the Borella intersection. He wanted to beat the crowd to the line, but found that many others had kicked themselves out of bed early, too.
A bus pulled into the bus stand and unloaded a load of sleepy travelers.

_Ginger-tea hot hot hot,
if you like, cooled on the spot,_
cried a street-hawker pushing a cart on four wheels. He thought the steaming metal teapot, surrounded by coconut shell cups hanging around it on hooks, was venting its anger in puffs of smoke. He walked towards it, and getting his nose onto the travel path of the smoke, took in a deep breath to make himself a bit warm. He paid the hawker who raised the teapot shoulder high and poured the ginger-tea into a cup in his other hand. Pouring it to a second cup, and back and back again from cup to cup several times, he asked, “Cool enough,” as he passed it on to Milton. “Such is life, Sir, isn’t it? Here today, gone tomorrow.” He looked at the hawker with a sense of gratitude. He felt that the sane reminder helped the thickness surrounding him weigh lighter on him.

Turning around and walking towards Ward Place, he found himself in step with a man, in white trousers and short sleeve shirt like himself. Although he tried to avoid him, the man slowed down. “What eats me’’ he said, “is that whoever did it will not have to pay with his life.” Milton pursed his lips. “He scraps capital punishment as soon as he comes to power... and it wasn’t even on the election platform.” He kept moving his head left to right as if to say, “I can’t get over it.”

“But, wasn’t his last words “Spare the foolish man?” Milton was surprised he was talking at all.

“Yes indeed … But isn’t it ironic that he is the victim of his own compassion?” Milton merely pursed his lips as they continued walking.

“Against all advice from security personnel, I’m sure, he threw protocol, a protocol of five centuries of colonial rule, out the window and wanted to be People’s Pre-
mier….to meet people face to face at his Residence …,” he said again, looking into Milton’s eyes.

“Yes, making himself available to the people seems to have been very important to him…,” said Milton not looking at him, again finding himself surprised. He fell silent as he continued to walk past an intermittent streetlight struggling to show itself up through the darkness. As if taking the hint, the man fell silent, too, the quiet of the morning disturbed only by an occasional early motorist.

“I’m still trying to fathom why good people leave this world sooner than …crooks,” Milton broke his own silence.

“It is hard, isn’t it, especially when it happens at the hands of someone who’s supposed to be holy.”

“But that was no monk who shot him… Must’ve been some political enemy dressed in a yellow robe with shaven head?”

“He had enough enemies alright, wouldn’t you say?”

Who was it that was seen jumping over the wall following the shooting, he continued to wonder.

By the time he got into the line, it was already hundreds deep. Milton remembered the coup d’état attempted by the Army Commander, in cohort with the Commanders of the Air Force and the Navy. It had been a delay of a minute by Mr. Bandleader that had thwarted the takeover attempt, when the Inspector General of Police had taken control, arresting the gang of four. All in D minor, someone had the levity to chuckle – de-Mel, de-Saram, de-Zoysa, di-Saanaayaka!

And what rankled him even more was how Dr Legalwin had got the case against Ossie and his cohorts thrown out on a mere technical point. He felt a rage building within. What a bone-chilling combination - Right-wing commanders and a left-wing lawyer politician! Did not augur well for the country, for sure, he asserted to himself. Oh, this idiotic country, he continued to rage.
He began to remember his own Editorials about the bewildering strikes that were beginning to make an economy, already paralyzed by the nationalization of tea and rubber estates, worse. The ‘we-shall-win hooligans’, as he remembered calling them, of the harbour, government and banks, couldn’t be brought to their heels as long as hammer and sickle designs warmed the cabinet table. He also remembered how both the Right House and the ‘Rong Times opened the champagne bottle as the wrath of the public now turned against socialism’s vision of a public owned transport system. They both had had one sotto headline, in all three languages. ‘Banda squished’, ‘Banda hammered & sickled in’! Milton had even waxed poetic of how things were developing. The ripe orange wedge of socialist victory was being squeezed too hard from all sides, turning it into a lemon!

Suddenly, the dream he had the night he traveled third class flashed into his mind. The island’s spices, Churchiana’s seduction of Chief Minister Ehelepola using the trick of the trade – driving a racial, racist, he corrected himself, wedge between him and the King of foreign lineage. Just then, Earl Mountbatten was talking to Mahatma Gandhi at the London talks. “But Mr. Gandhi, there’s Muslim Bharata, and then there’s Hindu Bharata.” And how he had put Muslim first, the minority. Teeth still clenched, Milton’s mind continued back on the dethroning of the King,

Another thought now occurred to him as he continued to inch forward. Malcolm, his cricket buddy - attending Sunday Mass Novena, and getting a job. Strange, he thought. Was this what the Chair of the Enquiry Commission on the Status of Buddhism, Mr. Happiness had called Catholic Action?

Was he now beginning to see a pattern? Was it accidental that all but one of the failed coup d’état leaders were graced by God? The thought rancoured him, even as the rogue monks his dad had campaigned against, suddenly
joined the ranks of his thoughts. Were they perhaps trying
to do what the coup-leaders failed to do politically? Gnaw-
ing at the body-religious of the De-Leonese people of two
millennia?

As Milton entered through the gates and got close to
the steps, he felt uncomfortable with what he had been
thinking of.

……..Solemnly walking up to the body lying in
state in the centre of the family room, Milton stood for a
moment at attention, and bringing his palms together chest
high, he bent forward, careful not to let his wig fall off.

On his way back home, Milton could not help think
how Tangamma might have been right all along. How he
and his ilk were in the grip of colonialitis.

Soon his thoughts were on the description he had
read in the Snooper Reporter story – the cultural pageant,
the happy faces of the people … Manamania… the cultural
resurgence....

“Aren’t you just coming from Rosemead place?”
“Yes. Why?”
“You seem to be in a cheery mood!”
“Why not?…. Oh, and thank you … for holding the
mirror up to my face … so I could see for myself who I
was. Mr. Secular Humanist. Wasn’t that what you called
me? Mr. Secular Humanist suffering from colonialitis.”

Tangamma smiled, as she took his hand and asked
him if he wanted to wash up before lunch.

“But where’s the Lion story?” Swadesh asked himself.
“Soon,” the voice said. “Remember the waiter, the one
who waits? One who waits gets double dessert!”
Before long, this body indeed will lie upon the earth
Discarded, void of consciousness, and worthless
as a log of wood [upon the hearth].

- Dhammapada, 41
“You didn’t sleep well last night, Mil… Anything’s the matter?” asked Tangamma. Restless throughout the night, he thought he fully experienced the line he had heard repeated by the elders: ‘The night is long for the wide-eyed’. I’m sorry, Tangie, I kept you awake, didn’t I?”

“Well, I was up myself anyways.”

“You know….I was with Mother…”

“Who did you say you were with? Mother? Are you alright?”

“Oh, I’m alright… But you know, I’ve been getting these visits from Mother.”

“Mother?”

“Yes… I don’t know if it’s Mother at the gate or Mother Pearl o.t.e.”

“Mother Pearl o.t.e.? Who on earth is that?”

“Oh never mind… You know, I’ve been thinking… I should be kicking myself, in fact… Shouldn’t I…. He looked away. “Shouldn’t I hold myself responsible for Mr. Bandleader’s assassination?”

“You?”

“Because the way now I see it, he wasn’t shot by just one misguided idiot …. It was all of us… There was, of course, the Uncle Nephew Party doing its darndest. Then there was the Catholic Church – fighting tooth and nail, sending off their nuns to vote for the first time with the warning, “A vote for Bandleader and his Marxist cronies is a vote for the Devil.” Then there were his own Coalition partners – smelling blood for International Marxism and the dictatorship of the Proletariat, bringing down the economy to its heels what with strikes - harbour unions, office workers, mercantile employees. Then there were De-Andhrese-speaking owners of the ‘Rong Times looking to separate the country. If that were not enough, we at the Right House,
we spoke in three tongues. Call it a forked-tongue. Just as the ‘Rong Times did, we told the English reader one thing, the De-Leonese reader another, and the De-Andhrese speaker still another.”

He paused, and started pacing back and forth, pursing his lips. “And thinking back,” he added looking at Tangamma, “I was a lackey in the hands of all these…. Wasn’t I, Tangie, wasn’t I?”

“But, Mil, you did what you had to do…. Earn a living… You were no lackey. You were trying to provide leadership the best way you knew.”

“The best way I knew…. Yes, that was the problem…. The best way I knew was the worst for the people… Oh, Tangie……” Suddenly he broke down, laying his head on her shoulder as she stroked his head, feeling drops of wetness. She helped him to a chair as she sat beside him, looking into his eyes, as if saying, “Go on…”

“Sure there was stability under the Uncle Nephew Party regime for 8 years, but only because… only because we had raw materials aplenty… tea, rubber and coconut… But you know what, if we had no one starving, and had our rice, education and health looked after for free, our ex-colonial masters were the real beneficiaries. True I still can’t stand the Marxists, but I’m now beginning to see that, after all, they hit the nail on the head.”

“What?”

“Think of it. We export our rubber sap dirt cheap, and pay an arm and a leg for a tire made of our own rubber. Sure, we have a good cup of tea, but again they buy our tealeaves for practically nothing, and charge us for every cup. Sure, our tea estates provided employment, but only for imported labour. People living around the estates starved as the imported labour kept sending money back to Bharata.”

Tangamma looked on.

“I can’t live with my conscience any more, Tangie. In my blindness to monkey English, I forgot what my fa-
ther stood for. Equality of the languages. I pushed back from my memory that he earned unequal pay for equal work only because he did not speak the colonial language. I thought that was the price to pay for progress. Like many of my class, I scoffed at, nay, ridiculed the likes of Mr. Friendliness who sought an ear, speaking from the rooftops, about Catholic Action. We called them ultra nationalists, extremists. We turned a blind eye to the plight of our Buddhist majority… over 75%… by laughing off the Buddhist Commission Report… how only those who converted to Christianity were given jobs and land and titles and… and how the sword and the cross marched arm in arm…

“Oh, Tangie, oh, help me…” He began sobbing. Tangamma moved closer to him and putting an arm around him, moved him closer to her. Speaking through his sobbing, Milton began to speak again. “You know, I can’t live with my conscience. Worse, I feel like Dutugaemunu. Cramped on all sides…”

“Dutugaemunu. Now that’s a thought!” she said as if mockingly, seeking to calm him down.

He got up from his chair, and looked in the direction of the western sky, watching his anger swell within him. He felt his body shaking. Vigorously, he thought, as he held on to a pillar and leaned against the wall. He ran out to the backyard, and picking a twig off a tree broke it into two. Throwing the pieces, he stepped on it again and again.

Never having seen Milton so aggravated, or aggrieved, Tangamma walked over and held his hand. He pressed it against hers as she led him to a chair. Placing his hand on his chest, he closed his eyes, as he rested his head on Tangamma’s lap.

*It was the smile again he saw first. Then the face…. Two pairs of eyes were now talking to his eyes. First a wink with the left eye, and then raised eyebrows, as the smile ever widened. Soon, a glance of*
the eyes, and a movement. “Yes, Mother Pearl o.t.e. Yes....”

“Want to have some tea?” asked Tangamma, as she walked towards him, tray in hand. “Your favourite cutlets,” she said, picking one up and placing it in his mouth as he opened it ever so slightly.

He now opened his eyes again, watching a bird bring a twig in its beak and lay it on a branch. He remembered the nest there that had been blown off by a severe wind preceding the monsoon rain. He watched in awe as the bird returned, twig in beak and laid it. He watched with animation, as he sipped the tea, with some delicious cake Tangamma had bought at Elephant House, the bird building the nest, slowly but surely, slowly but surely....

Walking to the bus was not too easy for Milton. It was as if every step had to be unglued. Getting off at Lotus Road, he started walking towards his office as he had done for the last ten or more years. However, all of a sudden, he found his eyes glued on to the name board. Lotus. A new meaning began to bloom as he slowed down. Yes, the lotus.... Though mired in the mud, how it stands up in its full splendour...above it all, unpolluted. If only I had that strength of character, he said to himself, as he continued walking towards his office. “Good morning, Sir,” the Peon in a tunic said. Milton nodded, with a subdued smile. The oak-paneled circular stairwell was today just that – an oak paneled stairwell, its luxury shaved off. He found it painful to lift his legs up the stairwell.

At the office, he attended to the correspondence of the day, as he looked around at the paneled walls from time to time. Suddenly, it was blobs of blood all over! A patch appearing, only to reappear elsewhere, in a different shape.
He turned off the lights to reduce its glare. Now the scenes in the Snooper Reporter’s story all paraded in front of his eyes. He put the Report back into the SITE cabinet. As he returned to his seat, he found himself with clasped palms in front of the dead body. He closed his eyes. Then, opening them, he took pen in hand.

He walked into the publisher’s room adjacent to him. “The Editorial? But why in an envelope?” Milton stood in silence. “Sit down, sit down,” he said, as he opened the flap. He could not believe his eyes as he read Milton’s letter of resignation.

“What’s this?” he asked, with question marks all over his face.

“I can’t live with my conscience any more.”

“You can’t live with what any more?” he asked.

“Why, what has happened?”

“I killed Mr. Bandleader.”

The publisher chuckled. “So you killed him … Except that you were with me yesterday when this happened.”

“There’s more than one way to kill.”

With these words, he briskly pushed the chair back, stood up, looked at the publisher, and left the room. He walked down the stairwell as a surprised Peon looked on, and out of the Right House.

It was the smile … the tear-shape alright… Yes, Mother Pearl o.t.e!
Twenty Three

Days to Remember

The new Buddhist University of Shining Knowledge was the perfect fit for her. Newly minted, by the late Mr. Band-leader, it was charting new territory. To be developmentally relevant, he had declared on the opening day. Having just passed her advanced Level through study at the Ohday Temple, Tangamma was charting new territory, too. Would she be allowed to complete her courses through field work? “Absolutely”, the new Dean of Women had assured her.

The history class at the Ohday Temple had piqued her interest in everything archeological. She had, therefore, chosen archeology as a first subject, but also because of her interest in the design of the Dagaeba at the temple. It was like an upside down bell sitting on a raised square, 200 x 200 yards. A smaller square sat at the top of the bell, a spire tapering upwards. On many a full moon day, she had spent hours sitting by it, dwarfed but awe-inspired.

She had asked her Dean-professor’s advice as to where best to do her fieldwork. “You can’t find a better place than Anuradhapura,” she had said. “Besides, it takes you right into the history of the country, way back to the fourth century BCE.” Yes, of course, she said to herself, lips pushed forward and eyebrows raised, as the head tilted. Mr. Rajaratna’s history lessons came dancing to her mind.

She was fascinated by the description given in the very first university class. “It got its name initially from Anuradha, a Minister of the third King after Vijaya,” the professor explained. “Vijaya…?” Tangamma wondered, putting up her hand, asking innocently, “Who’s Vijaya?” Fifteen pairs of eyes were staring at her, she noted as she stared in hot embarrassment into the sudden silence. The half-smile in some of them told her what they were thinking. “Where have you come from, lady?” She sighed a sigh of relief when the Professor intervened. “Not everybody
here is De-Leonese, you know,” she said panning the class. She was glad the eyes turned back to the front even as she suddenly realized that she was the only non-De-Leonese in the class. When a woman sitting not far from her smiled at her, she returned it. “Vijaya, of course, is the progenitor of the De-Leonese people,” added the Professor.

The embarrassment was enough to make Tangamma want to know all about Vijaya, but more importantly Anuradhapura. She was determined to be the best in the class. Fieldwork, she was confident, would be her best asset.

With time on his hand, Milton joined his wife on her study tour. It was a wonderful opportunity for him, too. Although he had read about Anuradhapura and other places of historical interest, he had actually never been to any of them. In a sense, as he joined his wife, he felt a sense of shame… He could spit out the dimensions of the Thames in London, but not of the Mahaweli Great Sands River, just as he could spew out Shakespearean lines at will but would draw a blank at the mention of the name Gurulugomi or Waetteve, medieval De-Leonese authors. He was almost an authority on the pyramids of Egypt, but not, as his wife had pointed out, how the largest Dagaeba in the country easily rivaled them, size to size. My colonial education …, he mumbled to himself, shaking his head.

Their first visit was to the Thuparama. “The first Dagaeba reliquary to be built in the island…, in the second century BCE…..,” Milton read out loud from the Booklet in his hand, “it was the model for every other Dagaeba.”

“Imposing alright,” Tangamma said, as she arched her head, way back, to get a good look at the top.

“Well, here’s some more architectural detail.” Milton said as they continued to walk around the colossal
mound of brown debris. “Can you see those pillars there, with sort of a design at the top?” he said, pointing to them, standing in the four corners. “This suggests”, he continued to read, “that there must’ve been a ‘Circular House’ around it.” Stopping, he read the next word slowly. “Wata-daa-gay.”

“Oh, is that what it’s called?”
“Yes. Circular Relic House.”

They now walked towards one of them, and looked to the top, way up high. After taking it in, Tangamma moved closer, and touched it. “Touching a piece of history...” She paused. And then... “We’re experiencing history, Mil, we’re experiencing history!” She was surprised at herself. It was as if all of a sudden she had come to be his intellectual peer. Milton watched a tear drop. Tangamma stood still.

“What about the spiral? What does that stand for?” Tangamma enquired, gazing at the design at the top, walking hand in hand...

“From what I can gather, originally all it had was a long shaft planted at the top, with an umbrella-like structure.”

“So perhaps it was as a sign of respect, you think, like a Parasol ... held over a king?”

“Now there’s a theory, Tangie, yes, a very good possibility.” He could not help being impressed by her insight. She looked at him, with an understanding sort of smile all over her face.

“So how did it get to be a spiral?” she asked, still smiling.

“The one umbrella apparently gradually came to be seven umbrellas ... of diminishing size ... The word, in fact, means ‘umbrella upon umbrella’. And, then it was decided later to plaster over them, giving the spiral.”

“Fascinating”, said Tangamma, straining her neck again to look up against the rising sun “Ah, the silhouette against the rising sun!”
“Ah, the artist in you blossoming, Tangie!” said Milton showing his white teeth. He paused. “I don’t know if it’s of any interest to you... But it says here that the Da-gaeba is supported by a foundation running 26 feet below grade.”

“Wow... All dug by hand! Must have taken years ....And how tall did you say it was?”

“Over 80 riyana, it says here... riyana ... riyana ... oh here it is ... about 18 inches.”

“So that’s about 120 feet tall.”

“Mathematical genius, hanh” said Milton, as she joined him in his laughter.

For the next hour or so, the two of them wandered around in the humungous compound strewn with sand. They had come early before the sun’s rays scorched the sand that would have made it impossible to walk bare feet in the holy precincts. Going past three others facing, Tangamma now walked to an altar-like structure facing the north. She placed her bag on the concrete floor and walked towards the end of the compound, as Milton stood buried in the Booklet. Walking to a vendor at the entrance to the compound, she bought two small baskets of flowers, raising one of them to eye level as if to take a good look at it. Made of dried tal leaf, it was woven into a design, with colour added. She noted the water sprinkled on the flowers glittering in the sunshine as she walked back. “I bought one for you, too.”

“No, it’s alright...You can offer it on my behalf, too,” he said looking away. Tangamma walked to the altar, and keeping one basket on a side, took the other in both hands and raised it over her head. Then bending forward, she brought it down to her chest, and closed her eyes. Then she took the flowers one by one, and placed them, clearing room among other flowers. Milton, who was now standing beside her, stretched his hand towards her as she looked to place the basket on the floor. He moved to a side as Tangamma offered the flowers in the other basket.
Now she moved back a few feet and fell on her knees, the sari providing a carpet over the concrete. Then, bringing her palms together, she raised them over her head, and bringing it to her forehead, bent forward, her palms between forehead and ground….

“Did you say six shapes?” asked Tangamma as they walked out of the Thuparama compound.

“Yes”, said Milton. “Bell, pot, water-bubble, heap of grain, lotus and…. twirl.”

Hoping to see with their own eyes these shapes in their ancient grandeur, they began walking south. The paved road was getting a little hotter, and the shrubbery lining it providing little shelter. Gradually, a huge bubble began to come into view in the distance. “So that’s the Ruwanweliseya… the one built by Dutugaemunu”, cried out Tangamma.

Milton looked in the direction of the bubble. All of a sudden, he felt a strange feeling... Like an electric current running through him. He felt as if his feet were shuffling faster. He looked at Tangamma who seemed to be frantically trying to catch up with him. As they got closer, Milton’s eyes fell on the famous Elephant Rampart around the compound. He took a look at the series of heads, with raised trunks and wide ears. He scanned to the end of the wall facing him, and then to the other end. Then, looking at Tangamma, he said, almost reflectively, “You know what, Tangie, I get a real sense that I’ve seen this before.”

“Well, I’m sure … any number of times…,” Tangamma said. “In books.”

“No, I don’t mean that…. I mean with my own eyes.”

“You’ve never been here before, Mil.”

“I know…I know…. That’s the strange thing.”
He walked along the wall to one end, and then to the other, touching the white concrete heads and tusks. Coming back, he stood at the gate, staring into the closest figure. He thought he saw the trunk move, as if inviting to come closer… He moved closer, and touched the trunk. “Can I have a picture taken here?” Tangamma looked into the bag, and took out a Kodak camera. As she raised it eye-level, she said, “Smile” and clicked.

“Do you know the sensation I get when I see that bubble? Something symbolic, I don’t know what, but it’s bubbling in my mind!”

“Hm.”

Milton kept moving his eyes around and up the bubble, past the square sitting at the top of the bubble. He looked at the spiral for a quite a long time, and walked around halfway around, gazing at it. Then coming back, “You know what... The strange thing is that I feel I know the bubble, too, but not the square at the top or the spiral.”

“Imagination run riot?” said Tangamma, with a mischievous smile.

Walking closer to Tangamma, he asked, “Do you have any more flowers?” Putting down her bag on the ground, she dipped her hand into the bag and took out a basket. As she followed him, Milton walked to the altar and placed the flowers one by one carefully. Then, clasping his palms together, he bent forward. Then taking a few steps back, he knelt and put his forehead on the ground. “These flowers, I offer you…,” he began to say. He was amazed how well he remembered the words. He was so back at the home altar, as a kid, beside mom. Dad was in front. Now dad’s announcement… about him going to the city for studies. Feeling a wetness on his hand as he looked down, he raised his head, and reaching out to his pocket, wiped his eyes as Tangamma looked at him, as if in disbelief. She was happy to see a tear in his eyes. Finally, religion beginning to mean something to the great Shakespearean scholar? She wondered silently.
As they continued on their way, another Dagaeba came to their view in the west. “That must be the Mirisavetiya”, said Tangamma, figuring it out from the map she had got from Milton. “Also built by Dutugaemunu… “

“Hm! Strange… That seems familiar, too…This is getting to be ridiculous…” Milton responded, as he kept his gaze on the distant spiral.

The open terrain extended as far as the eye could reach. Looking around, they were marveled at the remnants of the old civilization... “Ruins ruins everywhere! And so much more to see,” the words came to Tangamma’s mouth.

“How poetic!” said Milton.

“Imagine… We’ve lived in this country all our lives… and yet, never been anywhere near these… Am I so glad I enrolled in this course,” she paused

“I’m glad, too,” joined in Milton.

She moved closer to Milton to join him as he moved his finger over the map of the city. “Here’s the Thuparama … and, oh, here’s where we are.”

“I don’t know how to thank you, Tangie… You have no idea what this tour has come to mean to me,” he said, looking straight into her eyes.

Even though it was still early in the morning, they felt the 90-degree temperature. The earth was crusty, and the land populated by a sparse shrubbery, with an odd tree rising up as if in protest. Birds were rare, except for an odd flock of crows.

“So did the Dagaeba always have this design”, Tangamma wondered out loud, as they continued walking south.

“No,” he said, looking through the booklet, “it originally had the shape of a paddy heap ....” Tangamma jumped to catch the symbolism. “Well, that seems to elevate our staple food to.....a spiritual level.” She paused. “Doesn’t it?” she asked turning to Milton, who was looking at her with raised eyebrows and tilted head. His was the
university education, but now he stood amazed, looking at her, impressed by her sophistication.

“Anything else in the brochure about the design?” she asked, as Milton thumbed through the pages.

“Yes, it got its present bell shape in a later reconstruction….,”

“Later,” she repeated.

“Yes, after it was leveled to the ground.”

“Leveled?” she raised her eyebrows.

“Yes, by invaders.”

“From where?”

“Apparently, from South Bharata.”

She thought for a moment. “So they did a number on us, didn’t they?” said Tangamma. “And when was this?”

“Oh… let me see here… In …”

She looked on for a while, and began to move her head left and right as if in disbelief. “My own people, huh…” she now said, looking at Milton, and wiping off the sweat on her forehead with the edge of her sari’s shoulder fall.

“But,” he said as if to console her, “don’t be troubled by it too much … A De-Leonese King seems to have outdone them all….King Mahasen in the 3rd Century. He brazenly leveled the Brazen Palace and 364 other Learning Centres!”

“Three hundred and sixty four Learning Centres! Why on earth did he have to do that?” she said again.

“Well, he was apparently won over by a School of Buddhism opposed to the Orthodox one…”

“What a shame… And he called himself a Buddhist, too, ha!”

He nodded. “But, what’s in a label, anyways…”

“Brazen Palace… Sounds interesting,” she said after a silence, as they continued walking.

“Let me see here... oh yes, here it is.” Milton began reading. “Built in the 2nd century BCE, it had 1000 rooms on 9 levels. It had a roof of beaten copper….”
“Oh, that’s perhaps where it got its name...”
“Indeed.”
“Nine floors? In the 2nd century BCE? Wow! Must be some architectural wizardry.” She paused. “I can’t wait to see it?”
“But I’m afraid all what’s left of it now are, it says here, 1600 monolithic granite pillars.”
“Still I want to go.”
Continuing to walk south, they stood in front of a name board mounted on a cement slab standing on a single post. Brazen Palace. “So here we are,” said Tangamma. Walking past the post, she panned the granite pillars all around her, at different angles, some almost kissing the ground, some close to upright, but none straight. “Reminds me of the Prince Siddhartha story,” she said.
“How do you mean?”
“Remember how the nautch girls were at the end of day’s entertainment when they’d gone to sleep, making a bed of wherever they were, and the Prince waking up in the night, seeing them in their … never mind?”
“Very imaginative, Tangie, very imaginative!” After a pause, he added, “But there’s one difference, isn’t there? Only some were exposing their bodies… But these pillars, they’re all in the nude.”
“Very funny, Mil… But it’s their very bareness that renders my heart barren.”
“Your poetry again,” said Milton.
“Built over two thousand years ago, imagine,” she said to herself again. Now aloud, turning to Milton, she continued, “So this was a palace...a palace...”
“An architectural wonder,” Milton read in the Booklet... “Nine floors, with a 100 rooms each.”
“Nine floors with 100 rooms each,” she repeated. “Wow!”
Milton looked at Tangamma and then at the bare pillars. They began to walk closer to take a look. Putting his hands around one of them as if to circle it, Milton said,
“Boy, it’s wide alright. I can’t get my hands around it….”
Tangamma went past Milton to the next pillar. “Wide is not the word. Humungous is what I would say.” Milton looked at Tangamma as if in amazement at her vocabulary. A smile adorned his face. “Solid rock.”
“Solid history, too,” said Tangamma.
Milton nodded as Tangamma continued to move from pillar to pillar, covering a square area.
Sitting on a horizontal concrete slab beside an upright one, Milton continued to read.
“So how did it get the name Loha Paasaada Brazen Palace again?”
“Oh the roof was in bronze … Isn’t that what it said?”
“In bronze…Imported, or found in the land?”
“I wish I knew.”
“And who used it?”
“Here, why don’t you read it yourself,” Milton said, handing over the Booklet to Tangamma who had now sat beside him.
“The most spiritually evolved, Arahants,” Tangamma read aloud, “had their rooms at the top, with the just-ordained at the bottom.”
“What a pity only one level has survived…”
“Perhaps the upper levels were made of wood…”
“Perhaps…”
“But perhaps, too, because it was deliberately torn down.”
“Oh yes, by…who was it? Mahasen, wasn’t it?”
“These De-Leonese …He must’ve been one crazy king…. He must’ve been …,” said Milton. Tangamma was somewhat surprised how animated he was. “A traitor it looks to me… Why on earth didn’t the people rebel …?”
“You expect a people to rebel… against a King?” asked Tangamma.
“I guess not… I sure would’ve… had I lived at that time.”
“Who knows…? Perhaps you did…But you might’ve been a patsy, too…,” said Tangamma with a mischievous laugh. “Just like now…”

Just as Milton tried to pull her towards him, she got up and ran away. “Not in a holy place,” she teased, as she continued to read.

“According to this,” Tangamma continued, “it had to do with a split within royal ranks…. Mahasen favouring the heretical Abhayagiriya, and destroying everything belonging to the orthodox Mahavihara…”

“So it was probably never re-built to its original grandeur and level…”

“Yes, at the rate these women are working out there,” Milton said, looking at some women squatting around talking, but seem to be doing something archeological, “it will be a million years before anything gets done. More like they’re more busy moving their eyes around looking out for tourists than keeping them on their job!”

“I must come here again… to spend some more time here…,” said Tangamma, as she joined Milton walking away. “This place is where Arhants lived, Mil…”

Just then, a kid in a bicycle romped towards them. “Viewcards, Sir…Cheap.”

Milton continued to walk, as he moved his head side to side. The dry air slapped his face as if with a hot balloon. “Even the birds can’t take the heat, it looks”, he said to Tangamma, as it nearly stepped on a small rattle-snake across the path. The road showed signs of cracking, as if opening a canal for the water that will never come. The trees languished as in pain, scorched by the ember hot rays of the sun. Undisturbed by it all, the ruins sat around, “like a rock in the wind”, Tangamma now voiced a saying she had read in the Dhammapada.

Coming out of the Archaeological Museum, they came to a mound of darkened soil. Tangamma stood staring at it. Soon she felt a tiredness grabbing her legs, but the pull was irresistable. She walked towards it and stopped dead on
at the centre. She looked at the ground where she stopped. It looked powdery. Ash-like she thought. As she looked around, she saw a similar type of dark soil scattered around where Milton stood, he himself feeling a strong pull. She looked at him as he looked at her. Surprise taking hold of both sets of eyes, they stared at each other, Milton thinking, “I’ve never looked at her like this ever before.” As if in silent communication, Tangamma, too, had a similar thought, as she later said. “I’ve never looked at him like this ever before.” They continued to look at each other even as they stood separated from each other, each of them thinking, “Those eyes… where have I seen them before? Hm!”

As if to avoid the piercing stare, she moved away, and walked towards another patch. Indeed, she felt her feet rush towards it. Reaching it, she closed her eyes, taking in a breath of fresh air, as if to energize her lungs. Then she put her palms over her ears, wrinkling her closed eyes. As if in pain. Or, perhaps to avoid pain. Soon she felt a trembling inside. Even more surprising, she felt a strange sense of ‘been here’, … a feeling of nostalgia as it were. This is where I want to be … kind of sensation overcame her. Her palms began to sweat. Blood rushing, a palpitation of her heart spoke out loud. She put her right hand over her chest, seeking to keep it in check. Soon, she found herself scratching scratching scratching. At the chest. Feeling a wetness in her fingers, she looked at them. Red. She saw them red. And then, all of a sudden, she gave out a loud cry. .and collapsed, felled like a full-grown tree.

Rushing to her, and seeing a red patch on her jacket, Milton shoved his handkerchief under it. Then he slapped each of the cheeks lightly, calling our Tangie, Tangie… Open your eyes. Open. He briskly took off his shirt and fanned her. Seeing her still limp, he put his right hand under her neck and the other under her knees. Even though she was smaller than he himself was, she felt heavy in his hands. But… what was this strange familiarity? A familiarity of... seeing the hurt, feeling the hurt...
He kept talking to her. “Tangie. Tangie… Open your eyes… just once, Tangie, just once. Oh please please please…”

Seeing her open her eyes, Milton sighed a sigh of relief. For a second, she wondered where she was. Then realizing she was in Milton’s arms, she looked at him, as if to say ‘How glad I’m in your arms.’ Then out came some mumbled sound, “Where am I?” Milton looked directly into her eyes.

“What am I in your arms?”

“Are you alright?” asked Milton.

“Yes… I must’ve passed out…”

“May be the heat.”

He lowered her back on her feet. They were now yards away from the blackened soil. “May be… no … may be not… It’s… it’s something else… I’m sure…” She looked at him as he looked at her. “But I don’t know what.”

“It’s alright… You’re OK now.”

Later that evening, she said, “You know, just before I passed out, I thought I was on a high ground… Like I was riding some animal… May be… may be an elephant.” She laughed at her own silly imagination.

“Hm!” Milton said.

“You know what…. This eeze weird…. Remember, we were looking at each other? I can vouch I saw a pair of eyes, just like yours, but not quite… I can see them even as I talk…. looking at you.”

“Well, of course… I’m right in front of you…”

“No I mean what I saw as I was fainting… I thought you were at some height, too… Because I saw some tree tops behind you.”

“It’s the heat, I’m sure… You were hallucinating….. Why don’t we go into the museum… to get away from the heat?”

They started walking. “I thought I even heard a trumpeting of elephants…”

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Milton’s eyes shot open. “No, don’t tell me... Really... I heard something like that, too.”

“You, too?”

This is getting to be weird.”

“It is weird all right,” she replied. “You know what else. I felt … I felt it was a *déjà vu* - I’d been there and been part of something… But I can’t put my finger on it.”

Milton looked on.

“Maybe you didn’t hear a thing. Nor did I… Perhaps just our imagination…”

“But where we were standing,” he paused, “is said to be a historical place. That’s what the guide said.”

“Sure would like to know that history! What if somebody could take you back to your past lives!”

“Now there’s a thought…. I know that you’ll leave no stone unturned until you find one who could .”

“So that’s what you think, ha?” she said, tweaking his arm.

Next morning, watching the sunrise over the ancient Kalawa-wewa Tank from the porch of the Anuradhapura Rest House, Milton felt the jostle in his head. Happy that at that early hour, he had the entire place all to himself, except for the kitchen staff, in their sarong and shirt, getting the morning breakfast ready. Tangamma was still in bed, tired from a long day. As he sat on a chaise-lounge, it was Churchiana who first appeared. Then it was the hora gana monk pretenders. Then it was the smell of the people in the train…. Now, Dhatusena. King Dhatusena.

He surveyed the marvel that was the Kalaa-wewa Tank the King had built, now right before his eyes. The size of an ocean, he said to himself. He panned the vast expanse, east to west, north to south. Oh! So this is the reservoir out of which flowed the Jaya Ganga Victory Canal,
built by his engineers of over fifteen hundred years ago and about which Tangamma had studied in her history class. He now felt in his bones the enthusiasm she said she had felt when she’d first heard of the amazing engineering feat of ‘the canal’s gradient of 6 inches to a mile.’ Wow! He now surveyed the high embankment – wasn’t it 40 ft., he tried to recall, running as far as his eye could go… O yes, each of the four embankments runs for over three miles, he recollected from the pillar description they had stopped by yesterday. He looked at the blocks of dressed granite ‘mortised together to enable a very close fitting’.

Seeing something like a square enclosure along one of the embankments a few hundred yards away, he said to himself, oh this must be the *biso kotuwa* Parker had described in 1909 - ‘…. to facilitate the control of the pressure and the quantity of the outflow of water … into the Jaya Ganga’. Hm! He was in the midst of history, his goosebumps told him, an electric running through his whole mindbody.

He did not know how far and wide he had been wandering, when a waiter’s voice brought him back. “Coffee, or tea, Sir?” He smiled…. Coffee or tea… hm... He thought about it for a moment. The waiter stood around showing his teeth. Milton watched the sun, now a little over the horizon of the vast water expanse. The sky was rich with a panorama of colours dancing around the sun. Ah…, a new day, he said to himself. And turning to the waiter he asked, “Any *taembili* coconut water?”

“Coconut water?” a surprised waiter asked. Milton looked at him smiling. “With, you know, that stuff inside… the white I mean.”

“Oh, you mean the *loñday*?” he said, trying to contain a chuckle, as if saying, ‘These city gentlemen!’

“That’s it.”

Tray in hand, the waiter counted his steps back, turning now and again. Leaning against the railing, Milton watched the waters lapping against the stone wall holding
up the Rest House deck built over the water. Walking to the edge, he sat on the wooden floor, and, lifting his sarong knee high, allowed his feet to dangle over the ledge. Oh, how soothing, he said to himself, as the foot touched the water. A tingling sensation ran through his mindbody. The sky showed hues of bright orange, competing with each other. A new day. He closed his eyes as if to take it all in.

Suddenly, he heard a rustle and a shuffling of feet, then a palm going over his eyes. “You’ll never in a million years know who it is” the voice said, sitting beside him. “In your sarong?” she exclaimed, as she looked at his feet touching the water. Milton looked coyly at her. He had indeed felt somewhat uncomfortable to be seen in public in sarong. In the bedroom, yes, but never even as he went about in the house. However, today, he had convinced himself, it was a new dawn. He looked at the rising sun again. Yes, living proof it was a new day. “See that beautiful morning sun, Tangie”, he said, putting his arms around her. Then he appeared lost in thought.

Watching him for some time, Tangamma asked, “Something’s the matter?”
“No no, but I was just thinking…”
“Isn’t that dangerous for your health?” she teased.
“No, really... I’ve been thinking.”
“About?”
“About my name.”
“What about it.”
“Mil... ton.... Something doesn’t sound right,” he said looking into Tangamma eyes. “Something isn’t right.”
“About your name!”
“Yes.”

The waiter returned with a glass of taembili water, with loðday in it.
“Taembili? Early morning? No tea?” she said, as the waiter looked away as if not to hear.
“Yeah, didn’t feel like having anything hot.... Thought I’d wanted to cool down... “
“Oh, that’s why you have your feet in the water.” Milton smiled. “Yes… So my name… I’ve been thinking… Perhaps I need a new name,” he said, looking behind to make sure the waiter was no longer around.

Tangamma leaned towards the water to look into his face.

“Careful,” Milton said.

“Why, don’t you like it?” she asked, ignoring the caution.

“I don’t know…. I don’t really know. Perhaps I’m confused.”

“Confused? You? That’s a laugh! I’ve never known you confused. You were always sure of what you did. What’s happening?”

“You know, I was thinking as we were visiting the holy city.” Surprised at his using the words ‘holy city,’ Tangamma listened. “I was thinking how I seemed a misfit, in the context of our history.”

“C’mon Milton, there’s your rational mind again.”

“Perhaps… But you know what I think I should do?”

“No, tell me.”

“Change my name!”

“Change your name?”

Milton nodded. Hm… change the name, Tangamma repeated to herself, as she took his hand in her palm, stroking it. Both fell silent, as eyes gazed at the wavelets dancing in the morning sun. Two ducks came along gliding over the water. “Lovely, aren’t they?” He closed his eyes, and took in a breath of fresh air, as she followed suit.

Minutes passed before Tangamma broke the silence.

“So…. have you… sort of thought of a name?”

Silence……

“I have it”, she said suddenly, opening her eyes. “I have it!”

“What?”

“A name for you!”
“A name for me?” he said looking into her eyes.
“You do?”
Tangamma nodded with a mischievous smile. “Milton!”
Milton made a curve of his pressed lips, smiling and raising his eyebrows. ‘This Tangie,’ he said to himself.
“No, really… I do…”
“It’s a name I read in a book… Name of a king.”
“I’m no king.”
“You’re MY king…”
“Oh Tangie,” he said, trying to splash some water at her with his dangling feet.
“You want to hear?”
Milton nodded.
“Ready?”
“Yes.”
“Sure?”
“I’m sure!”
“Good… Close your eyes.”
Milton closed his eyes.
“Here it is then…. Ready?”
He waited with abated breath.
“Milinda,” she blurted out.
Milton felt his mouth drop. With eyebrows still raised, he opened his eyes, and looked up at the sky, and then at the clear water, as he repeated the name again and again, out loud. Mi..lin…da…. Mi..lin…da…. Mi..lin…da…. Mi..lin…da…. Mi..lin…da…. “Per…fect. Just perfect. Sounds not too different from my name… so my past is not completely cut off, but gives a new ring to it. It’s well-rooted, too.”
“That’s what I thought.”
“Don’t have to change my initial, or any documents. Perfect… Really, I like it,” he said as he continued to gaze at the morning sun, now higher in the sky.
“It does? Oh, Tangie!” He pulled her towards him.
“So you’re my Lord God King.”
“Oh, Tangie.”
“But can I still call you Mil.”
He pressed her hands, as they continued to play with the cool water. History at work, he said to himself, splashing some water with his toes.
“Mil,” she said…
“-ton or -inda.”
“Inda…” She said beaming a smile.
Suddenly, he opened his mouth real wide, and crooned his name out real loud, into the open expanse. Meeeeeeeee …leeeeeeeeeee …nda. Then turning the South, he announced it again. Meeeeeeeee…leeeeeeeeeee …nda. Now turning West, he did it for the third time. Meeeeeeeee… leeeeeeeeeee …nda. Facing finally the North, came out the name again. Meeeeeeeee … leeeeeeerreeeee …nda. “Across the span of history of the Ka-laawewa waters,” as he would say later. Meeeeeeeee … leeeeeeerreeeee …nda.
A flock of birds, as if taken aback by the sound, flew in formation. Etching my new day, he thought, looking at them against the rays of the sun coming right into his eyes.
Tangamma laughed as never before as several waiters stood watching from a distance. After the laughter subsided, they got up and looked for a table.
“Another taembili glass please, if you don’t mind,” Tangamma said, as he summoned a waiter.
After sharing the taembili water, they went to the buffet table. It was kiributh milk rice, spicy lumumiris chili-onion and fish. “To auspiciousize the advent,” said Tangamma, serving a diamond-shaped piece of milk rice to her husband.
“No such word, Tangie.”
“There is now!”
Both had a good laughter, as she was served a piece of fish.

“My first service as King Milinda! Now isn’t it auspicious that right after the new name, I get to serve my wife first!”

Tangamma looked fondly at him.

A fresh wind blew from Kalaa-wewa as the two of them walked to the deck. The flock of birds were still flying, and the sky now clear, with the sun warming up on the horizon.

Minutes passed.

“You know what, Tangie,” he said holding her hand. She looked on. “You know… You gave me a new name…. So I was thinking …. maybe I should change my last name, too. Abhiman… sounds … sort of…haughty … and arrogant… So I’m going to change it to … to…”

“To what?”

“Nihatamaana.”

“Nihatamaana…. hm…. Milinda Nihatamaana… sounds nice…. But does it mean anything?”

“Oh, yes … yes … yes…. Means ‘humble’.”

“Oh so it’s Milinda the Humble….Has a rhythmic tone to it…”

“Oh, there you go again…. the poet inside… Yeah…. Milinda the Humble…. I’ve been arrogant enough all these years, don’t you think, to feel superior to all others…”

“I don’t think so. But go ahead anyways.”

“I know I want to be with the people… With my people, with your people…”

“Great! Splendid, MiLord the Humble.”

Milinda smiled.

“You know, come to think of it, the ending –n, in Milton and Abhiman, does sound like… like… a challenging, as if you’re saying, ‘C’me on, I’m ready to take you on’.”

Milinda kept looking straight at her.
“The –a ending, in Milinda and Nihatamaana, on the other hand, is sort of inviting, as if to say, “I want to work with you.””

Milinda listened in stunned silence, amazed at Tangamma’s acumen. She pressed his hand tight as she pulled him towards her, as the water flowed under, giving a cool touch to their feet, dangling off the deck.

As they watched the water go past their feet, Milinda heard Tangamma humming a tune. As he turned his head, she began to sing:

\[
dowta puraa paen aragena beepallaa
kalaa vevata pin deelaa palayalla.
\]


Tangamma looked on, with a smile in her face, continuing to hum, turning her head from side to side, in obvious enjoyment. Eyes still gazed on her, Milinda asked, “Where’d you learn it anyways?”

“Oh, I still remember it from when our teacher, Mr. Rajaratna sang the words one day in class. The mellifluous voice is still in my mind. And he was kind enough to write down the words for me when I asked for it.”

“But you didn’t know the De-Leonese script.”

“He wrote it in English,” she said, giggling, as if to say, “If your Star of the Silver Screen Rukmani Devi could sing words written in English, why not me?”

“Oh, Tangie.” So saying, Milinda pulled her towards him as he put his hand around her, as she closed her eyes. Moving with her from side to side, seated on the deck, he sang the words in translation:
Taking in both hands, drink, to you heart's content, this blessed water.
But, won't you kindly, before you leave,
the merit, transfer!
Twenty Four

Facing the Chopper

“This YMBA Hall, ladies and gentlemen, is a very special place for me. This is where I gave my first public talk … in De-Leonese!” Milinda watched heads turning towards each other. And some eyebrows raising, too. “It was nearly 15 years ago. As some of you may know, I was Milton Abhiman then… Proud… even arrogant you would’ve said. However, that was then. Today I’m humbled to stand before you in my new name, Milinda Nihatamaana.” He ran his eyes all the way back down the long hall, as Tangamma met his eyes with hers. “Yes, it is in fact my wife I have to thank for coming up with this name.” Noting the audience turning their eyes back, she lowered her eyes. “I’ll confess that I’m not very good at what I’m doing - speaking in public. As you heard from the Chair, all my life, I worked behind a desk. So I am new to all this. Even as I talk to you, I’m shaking all over. I’m still not even used to my National. I had to look in the mirror several times before stepping out today. But I hope you’ll lend me your ear… to hear me out. And I hope you’ll invite me to leave if what I say makes no sense.”

He looked at the Chair, a man in his mid-fifties, also in the National. He splashed his teeth. Milinda smiled back thankfully, adjusting his National. Then he looked at the audience, made up of mostly invited guests. A media representative held his pen tight in hand and a notebook on his lap. The Christian Minister was holding a cross in his hands, while Buddhist monks in saffron robes looked on as a Muslim Imam sitting next to him made himself a bit more comfortable. Some university Dons sat beside Principals and teachers of leading boys and girls Colleges, while some selected students sat to the left of the isle along with trade unionists, farmers, fishermen, and even a beggar and a
prostitute. Physicians in tie and coat sat beside Ayurvedic vedas Mahatteyas in the National.

“Let me begin by taking your mind back to seventy one, a mere two years ago, when 60,000 young lives were consumed by the fires of violence. Sixty thousand, my friends, sixty thousand.” He panned the audience. “Sixty thousand chasing a dream…. And scuttled.” Milinda looked at the Chair, as if to hide the wetness in his eyes. He now took a white handkerchief to his eyes.

“These were our children, friends, our children. Children of the generation that brought about the Bandleader revolution. Nearly a quarter of a century ago. In 1956.” He raised himself up on his toes. “Remember the Five Pillars – our respected Sangha…” He brought his palms together, and holding them chest high, bowed in the direction of the saffron-robed. Then he did the same towards the Imam and the Minister. “Yes, our five pillars.. Our respected Sangha, Ayurvedic physicians..” Now he looked at the row of them seated up front. Then he continued. “Heritage-language teachers – the De-Leonese and De-Andhrese, farmers of the south and the north... and the east and the west, workers – in the Harbour, Government, Banks, businesses ... led by Mendis, Shanmuganathan, Tampoe… These were not leaders speaking for any particular language…. They were, respected ladies and gentlemen, Trade Union leaders.... Fighting in all three languages.”

Several members in the audience nodded in strong assent.

“Most in this room, I presume, like me, may not have taken to the streets, or been at that historical gigantic Rally of a hundred thousand people at the Galle Face Green. Or toppled buses, stoned my very own workplace, the Right House, or gone on strike.” He looked at the audience. “But how many of us..., how many of us concurred in silence…? Fast-forwarding 15 years, how many of us concurred in silence with the youthful rebels when they sought social justice. Do you know that song of the Youth ‘R Us Group? Remember the lines –
"Our wealth, 'tis true, the Colonizers ransacked.
'Twas our freedom, yes, it was, that our leaders hijacked!"

“But, then, in the name of freedom, they took up arms. They terrorized us 24/7. Twenty four hours a day seven days a week. Week after week. We were ordered to shut down our businesses. We did, under fear of reprisals. They daringly took on the police, raiding them, bombing them. They shut down the economy. They killed any and everyone who even smelled capitalist. Revenge killings took no back seat. One only had to call one a traitor, and the next day, a body would be seen floating in some river. Angulimala the Finger-necklaced, my friends, proved his prowess by stringing a chain of fingers of his killed victims. He was trying to prove to his jealous guru that he was ready to graduate. To show off their disgusting power, our young men and women, to our horror and disgust, had the cruel audacity, the vicious verve, to make a chain of heads of decapitated victims, around the entrance to the university. Like a gruesome wreath.”

Milinda pursed his lips, surprised at the speed of his own delivery. He cupped his mouth with his left hand, and looked down, as if he had pushed something unpalatable down their gullet. As the audience looked in somber silence, he looked up, and continued, “These were the Scions of the De-Leonese …and Scions of the Buddha…”

After pausing again, he continued. “But when they nearly toppled the government, they paid with their necks. Sixty thousand necks.”

“We can, as we must, condemn these misguided youth, these Marxist dreamers. However, what were they looking for, friends? What indeed were they looking for?” he asked, raising himself on his toes, right index finger panning, left to right and back again. Piercing the deafening silence, he answered his own question. “They were looking
for a better world, my friends, a better world.” He ran his pointed index finger again across the audience. “If the truth be told, because they saw no future…, for themselves, for the country, under the leadership they had seen for a full fifteen years …following the Bandleader Revolution. The gap between the rich and the poor widened, more Benz cars appeared, the children of the ruling class, that is us, my friends, if we must remind ourselves of the ugly truth again, went overseas for their education… However, the rural kids … they had no hope. It is these children, who didn’t go abroad, who saw through this all, that finally took up arms. They knew that the rural masses were helpless.”

Embracing the rapt attention of the audience, he continued. “These young people may have been Marxist. But, where did they really learn their violence, my friends? Where? Who provided the model? He panned audience. They learned it from the very respected amongst us. Remember Dr. Legalwin? “We will demolish the capitalists. …,” he vowed. Not capitalism, my friends, but capitalists. People…. Real people”

“Today, to speak the obvious, we’re still in a mess….If there is anyone here that was the hated establishment, it was me. As Editor of the leading English daily, I was the opinion maker …for the elite. I wrote Editorial after Editorial condemning the Bandleader revolution.” He paused as he took in a mea culpa. “But I could not go on. That’s why, ladies and gentlemen, that’s why I quit. I could not write those Editorials anymore. I could not go to bed in peace with myself any more, both the Right House and the ‘Rong Times talking in a forked tongue. Tell the De-Leonese one thing, the De-Andhrese another, and the English-reader yet another.”

“I have now had quite a bit of time to reflect on all this. I’ve come here first as a mea culpa – to ask your forgiveness for my failures. I may sound like John McNamara, the Secretary of State who bombed Vietnam into the Dark Ages and then went on to seek redress for the world’s fi-
financial woes as Head of the World Bank. Secondly, my fellow compatriots, I come to share my re-birth with you… Y’see, I’ve never even worn this Aariya Sinhala before. I ridiculed it… scoffed it off as the vavul suit – an owl suit, worn by prowlers, for fame and name…”

He watched the audience murmur, some in the National looking at their clothes.

He interrupted. “I want to share my reflections with you.” He moved his flattened palm across, bringing a smile to his face. “I want to hear from you, ladies and gentlemen, what you have to say of what has appeared on my mind’s screen… I want your wisdom… No, I need your cooperation, to see … to see if we could … if we just could… together, put this country back to work.”

Milinda could not help a sense of buoyancy and bounce as the hall went crazy with the clapping of hands. Painting a smile ear to ear, he panned the audience as he acknowledged the applause. “I have tried to capture my reflections in four lectures. They are brief. Just enough to kick-start your thinking, so we can see if we can, together, turn things around for this blessed country, a country with a history of 2500 years. What I’m looking for is a Citizenry scrum, if I could use that term, expecting that it will multiply manifold, bringing our leadership, in an ongoing communication with the citizenry, where each of us members of the citizenry will be accountable to every other member of the citizenry… As in the Jewelled Net of Indra, where each jewel reflects all other jewels that make up the infinite Net.” He pursed his lips again in his usual manner, sensing the emerging energy of the audience.

“I hope that at the end of our four lectures, we’ll be able to form ourselves into groups, with as much wide representation as possible, to explore some of these ideas.”

Now, taking a deep breath, he panned the audience again, first looking across and then from front to back as he watched the many nodding heads. Then he said, “Thank you, thank you, thank you” as he brought his palms to-
gether chest high, and bent down, first to the left, then to
the right, and lastly to the centre.

A thunderous applause reverberated through the hall
as he took his seat, the audience now on their feet. As the
applause subsided, the Chair went up to Milinda and shook
his hands, as several members of the audience worked their
way up the steps on each side of the platform.

Some others began walking towards Tangamma,
now behind a table covered with white cloth, and sign-up
sheets on it.

The first in the line up were the members of the
Clergy. “We entirely agree with your husband that the way
out of this morass must be based on spiritual values”, she
heard a chorus, coming from the clergy who had lined up
first, everyone giving way to let them through first. “That’s
exactly what this Swamy and I have been talking about for
some time now,” said a Sangha member in yellow robes, to
The Lebbe walked to the table with the words, “I couldn’t
agree more.” The sign sheet on Consensus towards Spiritual
Upliftment was getting filled up when Tangamma
noted someone looking at her.

“Recognize me?” asked one in his National as he
approached her. “Oh, Mr. Rajaratna, how wonderful to see
you, Sir, after all these many years.”

“Wonderful to see you, Tangamma ... I remember
you well.”

“You don’t know how much of a hand you had in
my education… and how much of a hand you have in all of
what my husband is doing.”

“Aw! But I didn’t teach your husband.”

“But, need I talk about the proverbial woman be-
hind every successful man? Thanking me for his name
change may have sounded like a platitude, a husband giv-
ing public recognition. But believe you me, there were a lot
of you that got to him through me...”
“I’m happy to hear that,” said with Mr. Rajaratna, looking for the sign-up sheet for Communal Harmony. “I’ve been following him for quite some time now. I’m impressed by what he said: Sure, the minorities should by all means get their due dessert. But the majority equally must be assured their just dessert. The Buddha’s words are, “May all beings be well.” The majority has suffered for a thousand years.”

Tangamma smiled.

“Remember me, Sir?” he heard somebody talk to him just as he kept the pen on the table. Looking back, he smiled at the man right behind him. He looked intently, as the man behind also glanced at Tangamma.

“My my my…. Could this be Sepala himself…. Remember Sepala from our class?”

“Oh, Sepala, yes, yes, of course. I remember you …”

As the two men moved away, another in the line up moved to the table.

“Oh, the Youth for Change through Personal Development and Social Responsibility sheet… Here it is.” As she handed over a pencil, she thought this was another familiar face. He smiled. She returned the smile.

“I’m sure you don’t recognize me.”

“I know I know you, but I’m sorry, I need a hint.” He touched his fez cap. Tangamma thought for a while.

“Aboobakr, right?”

“Right. And this is my son, and his friends.”

“How wonderful!”

Milinda was beside him to note that, with more than half the hall full with women, the list for Women for Peace and Development was soon filled up.

Within the hour, the sheets were all full.

As he walked out of the YMBA building, the song blared off the speaker in a shop window.
Over the next few months, Tangamma could not find a minute to be with Milinda. He was all over the country, as group after group invited him to flesh out his thoughts. Consensus politics, efficient administration, civility in the government and the public, and efficient communication excited the city folks. However, the involvement of mothers, land distribution, clean water, rural health, science education and growing food locally had all struck a chord with the rural masses. But what caught everyone off-guard was the response to his call for the cultivation of the spiritual life, as he fondly visualized Tangamma’s face. Now men, women and children, clutching a bead-string, sitting cross-legged in meditation…. Tangamma was pleased she could provide the leadership.

Milinda watched how the media that had first ignored his talk at the YMBA, was now a beehive. The Daily Misnews came out with a scathing personal attack, quoting his former associates, how they hated him for being a turncoat. An ‘insider’ wrote of uncovering a De-Andhrese plot behind it all, to divide the De-Leonese again. They gave as evidence Tangamma leading the meditation. The ‘Rong Times published to no end interviews with political figures, of the left and the right, condemning him as a dangerous Buddhist fanatic. “The fork-tongued journalism again alright,” said Tangamma, reading a De-Andhrese report of the meeting - different things for their different audiences. “That’ll all subside in time, I’m sure,” said Milinda.

“Sir, Sir,” he panted, “anay please Po... Po...Podi Mahatteya, don’t, .. don’t go”, Dasa said trying to catch his
breath. He was holding the hem of this waittiya above his knee, as if to let him run faster. He was sweating all over. And still panting. Milinda was on his way out, with Tangamma not far behind.

“Why, what’s the matter?”
“They’re planning to kill you, Sir!”
“Kill-me?”
“Yes, Po…Podi Mahatteya.”
“Who told you?”
“Somebody overheard…”
“What?”
“That Choppe Ayya has been hired to get you…. at the public meeting.”

Milinda sat down in the porch as Tangamma stood staring at the man. “You’re sure of your source.”
“Absolutely, Ma’am, I’m very sure…..”

Milinda started pacing up and down, looking at Dasa, again and again. My trusted servant of years, and confidante. Many scenes began to replay in his mind. The spies that had been following them, the interrogations by the CID, the virulent personal attacks in the media, particularly the interview with Tilan who had funded the Encyclopaedia project, describing him as being lethargic, unreliable and given to fits and starts, and stories digging into Tangamma’s past history, with banner headlines like, ‘Daughter of latrine-cleaner wants to clean up politics’, the government commission to look into bribery and corruption, and foreign funding …. However, this was different, he thought.

Tangamma kept closely behind him into the room, shutting the door behind them. He sat on their bed, and looked at Tangamma sitting beside him. She put her head on his shoulder and started sobbing. “I knew it… I knew it … that something like this was going to happen.” Sniffle sniffle. “They can see the writing on the wall. You’re a threat to their banal politics…Consensus politics is not what they want. Blood-letting is what they want, learned at
the feet of the western masters.” She clenched her teeth as she went scratch scratch scratch at her chest.

“Isn’t that why we must continue, taking a different kind of message to the people?” Milinda said turning his head. Raising her head, Tangamma set her eyes on him, face wet and warm.

“Oh, I don’t know, darling… I just don’t know.” She kept looking at him.

“But surely you don’t think I can stop, do you? He paused. “They can kill the messenger, but the message?”

“But, dear, you think they’ll let you get it across…. You know how the fork-tongued media has been behaving. Here we’re trying to talk in one tongue.”

“Yes, we must keep going over their heads, directly to the people”

“I know…but...”

“Tell you what,” he looked at Tangamma, taking her chin in his hands. “I want you to stay home today….I.....”

“Stay home?” she looked at him startled. “If they want to kill you, I want to be killed, too.”

“No angel, it’s not you they’re after... Besides, if we both were to go, then who’s going to do the long hard work?”

As Tangamma wound her arms around him, Milinda could feel the wetness all over his face and shoulders. She pulled him down on the bed, buried her face in his, crying loudly. Milinda tried to put his palm over her mouth. “Oh Mil… Please don’t go for the meeting… Please don’t …” Milinda stroked her hair as she continued to sob, weep, cry, sniffle.
The afternoon heat scorched as the Maradana tramcar screeched to a halt. Tangamma got off and crossed the street. Noting the road cutting into Maradana road at a 45 degree angle, she said to herself, “Oh, so this is the Mariakaday Junction!” She had never ventured this far when she was a student at the Ohday temple in Maradana. She read the name board. Deans Road. As she entered the intersection, she felt a hot rod running through her. A flock of crows flew past her and scattered in different directions. Where is this all going to end? How soon?

As she went past the row of small shops, a dog quickly snapped out of its slumber and took to its heels right across her path. Soon it was chasing a cat across the street, nearly being run over by a car. She put her hand to her chest, and scratching, continued walking. A shop window displayed some knives. She slowed down to look. She moved her eyes from a pocketknife to kitchen knives to daggers. She felt an ouch in her pouch …

Walking past a few more stores, Tangamma arrived at a tea kiosk. A man up at the front raised a metal can about a foot high, and poured a muddy coloured tea into four cups. As the waiter took them to a table, Tangamma followed him with her eyes. She noted four men in sarong sitting around a table. Bare-bodied above the waist, they each wore a sash across one shoulder. A knife-handle was jutting out of the waist of one of them. She heard the music from a speaker perched up, and blurtting out the words...

_In this Choppe Ayya’s neck of the wood waadiya,  
Everyone, yar betta believe,  
of the same pulse naadiya,  
None unequal to another,  
we’re all one, brother to blood brother!_

As Tangamma, in her sari, and pottu red mark between her eyebrows, continued standing in front of the kiosk, she noticed the tea-maker looking at her. “Lookin’
for someone, Tangacchi?” he asked... “Don’t mind them....
Just neighbourhood boys...” She smiled. “Brothers of the
blood...pretty harmless I’d say... In for a game of cards.
No big gambling here...Just small change...”
“And the police?”
“Nah, not aroun’ here. The cops leave them pretty
much alone .....”
“Ahem!” Tangamma said to herself.
With heart pounding, Tangamma stepped inside, as
she continued to scratch scratch scratch. Smoking beedi,
they were laughing aloud. Suddenly, she was taken aback
by whistlings and catcalls. “Yeah, honey, come in....
Lookin’ for me...?” said one standing up, dagger hanging
on his side. Must be in his thirties, Tangamma determined.
She continued walking. The men fell silent. “Nah, not one
of the girls working the stretch,” she heard one whisper. As
Tangamma walked towards them, the man stood gazing at
her. Tangamma looked straight into his eyes.
“I’m told Choppe Ayya lives around here?
The men looked at each other. “You’re looking for
Brother Choppe?” asked the man, looking at Tangamma,
head to foot, as if sizing her up.
Tangamma nodded. Leaving the table, the man
walked out to the sidewalk as others watched. Tangamma
followed him. Going past a few more storefronts, they
came to a lane. With his knife, the man pointed in the direc-
tion of some shacks hidden behind the shops. Putting his
knife back in his sheath, the man gave a smile, and left.
Tangamma started walking along the lane between
the two walls, no wider than three feet. She felt a galloping
in her heart, and a cold sweat all over, as her fingers went
scratch scratch scratch at her chest. All of a sudden, she
was at the Rented Grove of her childhood. She remembered
the desolate stretch of land, walking through the hot sun.
And the dead snakes and the odd crow. Her hand went up
to her chest again, scratch scratch scratch. She was relieved
when a couple of crows appeared from nowhere. A dog
chased after them. She looked back to see if the anyone was following her. Suddenly, her mom appeared to her. She heard her sobbing. She touched her face as if feeling a warm wetness. Pursing her lips and clenching her teeth, Tangamma continued to walk.

As she came to the end of the walls, she saw a woman come out of a shack with mug in hand. A man in a beard was sitting, sharpening a dagger on a leather strap hung from a post supporting the roof. He gave Tangamma a stern look as the woman went in after handing over a mug and a piece of jaggery.

The man took a bite off the jaggery and took a sip of the mug, continuing to keep his eyes on the approaching figure. Tangamma worked up a smile.

“I’m looking for someone”, she said sheepishly, as she felt a lump in her throat.

The man looked on.

“I was told he lives here.”

“Oh yeah.”

“I think his name is Choppe Ayya, brother Choppe.”

“Choppe,” the man asked in a croaky voice. “Whad-daya want of him?”

“If you don’t mind please,” Tangamma said in a plaintive voice, “I like to talk to him …..directly, if I can please.”

“Yes, I’m Choppe.”

“Oh, so you’re Choppe Ayya,” Tangamma said taking an incywincy step forward, and bowing, with palms folded. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Yeah… I suspect…I’ve had a few brushes with the law… cops… judges…” He took another sip. “And people,” he added.

Tangamma grinned sheepishly again, wiping off the sweat off her forehead. She looked at the man intently, and took a couple of more steps towards him as the man put aside the mug and continued to sharpen his dagger. As if to
test its sharpness, he sent his thumb along the blade from centre down. Next, he pressed the end of the dagger on to his thumb.

Standing just behind Tangamma, Milinda took a deep breath, as he closed his eyes for a split second. Madduma Bandara galloped fast into his head. The young boy, of a century ago, pushing his older brother to offer his neck to the executioner, to pay the price for his dad’s patriotism of conniving against the Brits. “Let me show you, dear brother, how to die… to die fearless, with honour, with dignity… Executioner, off with my head!”

Nudging Tangamma aside, Milinda moved forward, not looking at the man straight.

Then, looking up, he blurted out. “Heard you were looking to kill me.”

As if catapulted by a spring, the man uncoiled off his crouch, sending his eyes up and down Milinda. “Kill you?” he said, raising his eyebrows with lines on the forehead showing, and pointing a finger at Milinda. “Why would I want to kill you?”

“That’s what I was told.” He paused. “I’m Milinda….”

“Milinda who?”

“Milinda Nihatamaana….” Suddenly, he could not talk. He moved his wet tongue along his dried up lips.

“Oh, so you’re Mr. Milinda Nihatamaana?”

Milinda felt a sense of ease. “The very same!” Continuing to plant his eyes on the diminutive figure in front of him, Choppe Ayya moved his eyes from head to foot again. Then he repeated himself. “So you’re Mr. Milinda Nihatamaana …. Oh yes, I heard you were going to be speaking at the Mariakaday meeting later today.”

“Yes… I thought you might know about it…”

“Yes, I was going to be there…”

“Yes … that’s what I was told…” He looked to see if anyone else was around. Then, looking straight in the eye of the man in front of him, he said, “Why do you have to
wait until then... I’m here now…. You can kill me...right
now....” Milinda looked at the knife now in Choppe
Ayya’s right hand. “Only, let my wife go,” he said, without
looking at the man.

Milinda waited, eyes closed. Suddenly, he felt hot
within himself. He smelled the raw sweat on Choppe
Ayya’s body. Madduma Bandara was now lowering his
neck for the executioner. Milinda found himself bending
his head forward.

“Here,” he said, opening his eyes and unbuttoning
his shirt. He visualized Choppe Ayya gripping the knife in
his clenched right fist, and raising it as Milinda closed his
eyes again, his heart thumping. He felt a tightening of his
muscles, and goose bumps. And the heart, like a fish just
out of water. He took in a deep breath, gasping. An image
of himself in front of a crowd appeared on his mind’s
screen. The four lectures. Then the image of Tangamma,
their daughter, and his mother at the gate.

He gritted his teeth and pressed on his eyelids
tight....Standing against the sun, a pool of red blood ap-
ppeared, with stream-like lines criss-crossing.

He waited... heart thumping... Any minute now...
He felt a gust of wind slapping his face as he heard a swish.
He waited. The longest moment in his life, he thought. The
last? He shuddered as he felt a little wet down below. How
he wished a quick end to it all. When, still waiting, nothing
happened, he sl...ow...ly opened his eyes.... to see the
knife thrust into the wooden post. He vented a deep sigh of
relief.

Choppe Ayya stroked his beard. “Anay Sir, what’re
you saying? I couldn’t as much touch a hair on you.” Mil-
inda looked on. “It’s not the calm person, the gentleman,
standing in front of me that you were made out to be.”
Then he started looking intently into Milinda’s eyes. “How
could I? You hardly look the power-hungry politician, run-
ning death squads, the way they made out you to be...” He
paused. “I dunno ... who was it, oh yes, I remember the
name, Ossie, Mr. Ossie... Yes, I’m sure that was the name... Ossie.” He made the sound as if he was pulling in some saliva, as he took a few steps away from him. “Yeah, that’s the one who’s after you.”

Milinda was taken aback. Ossie! He stared into Choppe Ayya’s eyes as if in disbelief. “Ossie?” repeated Milinda, as his body spiraled up, his lips barely moving. A series of images appeared in his mind. He was standing chest forward and spring-saluting on the Parade ground at the Boossa Cadet Camp… Then the very last night... He started sweating all over. Ossie… Ossie… he muttered to himself. Then he remembered. The cricket field. Running him out just short of a century. The attempted Coup-de-da.

“You know ‘im…”

Milinda stared into the great void in silence.

“Have you heard what people say of you...?” Choppe Ayya began, moving towards Milinda, “that they’ve never in their entire life heard anyone who makes so much sense … Consensus politics, clean water, efficient administration … Makes so much sense… to bring this country back on its legs... And talking about the mothers running the country.” Tangamma noted the woman in cloth and jacket, leaning against the door, grin as eyes met. “No wonder many power brokers are threatened by you. ....” He paused. Milinda looked at Choppe Ayya in disbelief, tilting his head back as if to say, “My... my... how much you have your ear to the ground.” He was also elated that his message was somehow getting through...”You see, Sir, I was never told the name of the person I was to take care of.”

Choppe Ayya turned to the woman at the door. “Can we have two more teas here? Good cups, ha!” Then he moved closer to Milinda. Now, bringing his palms together chest high, he bowed, bending all the way down. “I have my own code of ethics, Sir.... Sure, I take care of trouble makers...But when you come to know me, you’ll realize I’m more shrewd than crude...”
Suddenly Milinda felt lightness all over him. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead and face. He stood there still shell-shocked. This surely is not the Choppe Ayya, the heartless assassin of folklore.

The woman came out with two cups of tea on a tray. Going past Milinda, he held it to Tangamma who took the cup and saucer in hand with a smile. “My wife, Sushila,” Choppe Ayya said looking at her. Milinda grinned, as she served him the other cup. “Sushila… hm… woman of good morals”, Tangamma said, explaining the meaning of her name. She gave a wide smile, and walked back into the house. Milinda took a sip, and then another, as the two men exchanged looks as if they were members of a mutual appreciation club.

“I’m so glad I came to see you…”

“An honour, Sir.” He paused. “Tell you what, Sir…You go on home now….”

Milinda smiled as Choppe Ayya returned it. A few more moments passed. “I’ll take leave of you, then,” Milinda said, as he brought his palms together, and bent forward slightly.

“I’ll be seeing you…. soon.”

Though a bit puzzled, Milinda said nothing. Choppe Ayya bowed again, this time bending lower. He then walked Milinda and Tangamma up to the alley. Coming up to the street along it between the walls, he stopped. And brought his palms together again. Milinda returned it by bringing his palms chest high.

As Milinda passed the tea-kiosk, he saw the men still at cards. The tea-maker poured another cup of tea as he acknowledged Tangamma with a nod. Milinda reached the end of Deans Road, and looked back. Choppe Ayya brought his palms together and bowed again.
As the sun scorched its way down, Milinda got off the tramcar the next day, Tangamma beside her. Just then, Choppe Ayya appeared, dressed up in his sarong, and a shawl across his hairy chest, surrounded by a few other young men, similarly dressed. She recognized some of the faces. Choppe Ayya made a deep bow, and Milinda returned it. Then positioning himself in front of Milinda, Choppe Ayya began to lead him towards Zahira College where the meeting was to be held. The crowd that had gathered already outside the gate bowed as Milinda acknowledged them and made his way through the crowd, receiving more bows, more smiles and more chatter.

Soon, a speaker in white pants and a shirt, and wearing a fez cap, walked up to the stage of two tea boxes, and welcomed the thousand or more people assembled there. Just then, Choppe Ayya jumped up to the stage, bowed to Milinda, and addressed the crowd. “It is my great privilege and honor, you everybody out there, to introduce the respected Mr. Milinda Nihatamaana…. Here to help us with what we all want….“ The man in the cap stood nonplussed, but then started clapping. Turning to Milinda, Choppe Ayya bowed again, to allow another applause. Milinda looked stunned, as he watched Choppe Ayya getting off the stage, turning back to greet him with a final bow. Dasa looked with mouth open as the man made a bow at Tangamma who returned a bow, and a smile.
“Let’s get away for a couple of days,” Tangamma had said, “to get a perspective on all this,” as she watched Milinda sitting gazing into the sky. She had noticed how he had come to be troubled by the events of the past few days. Even as he talked about getting the message across, she could not help sensing a melancholia trying to make a home in him. He had said how he was increasingly beginning to fail to understand the human condition, how people could carry on their childhood grudges into their adult life. It was disgusting, he had said. “Yeah, why don’t we go to Anuradhapura, the one place that can bring some solace?”

On this second visit, they were more familiar with the territory. The dry land could use some rain, Tangamma thought.

“I think we’re now walking towards the Mahameghavanna Garden of King Devanampiyatissa….” Milinda continued, looking at the map in hand.

“Any deer?” asked Tangamma.

“Deer?”

“Wasn’t the King on a hunt when Arhant Mahinda called out his name?” Milton looked at Tangamma with raised eyes impressed how she knows the history of the DeLeones people. “Remember how he was tested … to see how intelligent the King was to receive the Teachings?”

As they walked towards the Bodhi Tree, Tangamma felt a soothing breeze swing past her. She took in the freshness of the air and stopping for moment, closed her eyes. As she opened them, she saw the tender leaves begin to dance in the light breeze. Up, and down, some rolled around in a twirl. As the wind became stronger, the branches began to sway. “Look how they’re inviting us with their dance,” she said, looking at Milinda. He smiled. Soon, the wind turned into a breeze, as she felt a hiss in her
ear, as if someone was confiding a secret in her. “Sanghamitta,” she repeated in her mind, as she kept walking towards the tree, gluing her eyes on it. Friend of the Ordained. “Mil, history again, Mil…..” As they approached the towering tree, the words came out again. “So this is the south branch of the tree under which the Buddha attained Enlightenment?”

Milinda nodded. “Yes, the oldest tree in the country … No, in the world. Over 2000 years.”

“You know, this is one place I want to be at…. You don’t know how long I would sit under the Bodhi Tree at the Ohday Temple. But this is the real thing, isn’t it. The real thing. Brought and planted by Arhant Sanghamitta herself.”

“Well you know your history alright. Yes, Arhant Mahinda’s sister.”

“Yes, you want me to tell you? The Venerable Mahinda brought the Dhamma teachings, and the Venerable Sanghamitta this great living symbol of the Dhamma…. What a holy place… You know, some day, if I were to ever become a nun….”

She walked towards the metal arborium adorning the entrance. She shuffled her feet left to right looking at the clay oil lamps placed at different heights. Finding an empty one, she took out a small bottle, and filled it with oil. Then, she slipped her hand into the bag and walked her fingers through it. As she visualized a tender flame lighting up the dark, her left hand went up to her chest to scratch scratch scratch. Fingers stopping at a soft touch, she placed her index finger and thumb into position, and took out a soft cloth wick as if she were a brain surgeon working delicately on neurons. She looked at it with respect as if she had discovered a valuable treasure. Then, glancing at Milinda as if to invite him to join, she dipped one end of the wick in the oil. “Won’t you join me,” she asked Milinda who now stood beside her. As he touched her hand, joining her in her act of piety, she held the wick to a flame of a
lamp until it began to glow. She glanced at Milinda again holding it upright now, and then slowly placed it flat in the oil. As the flame gradually got wider and brighter, it began to dance in the breeze. With a smile still in her face, she stepped back, and watched it as it began to cut through the darkness around. Surprisingly, she suddenly saw Milinda where the flame was! Trying to dispel the darkness in the country, she concluded. She was pleasantly surprised to see Milinda closing his eyes, as if visualizing the flame himself. As he opened his eyes, Tangamma took his hand in hers, and pressed against it.

Now bending forward with clasped palms, she walked towards the Bodhi Tree, the immediate vicinity surrounded by a golden fence. She bent again, and with Milinda following, walked around it three times, with her right shoulder to the tree. Ending at the gate opposite the entrance, she sat on the white sand, cross-legged, and closed her eyes. The breeze blew again, and she enjoyed the moment, as Milinda stood at a distance.

Now on their way back, she repeated the words. “Yes, the Venerable Mahinda brought the Dhamma teachings, and the Venerable Sanghamitta this great living symbol of that Dhamma…. What a holy place…” She looked back at the tree. Then, looking intently at Milinda, she said, “You know, someday, if I were to ever become a nun….”

Milinda looked at her with eyebrows closing in on each other. And a touch of a smile on his lips. “Ordained?”

Tangamma smiled back. “Well, the first woman, Queen Anula, was ordained here, wasn’t she? So wouldn’t that be the place for anyone?”

Milinda smiled, shaking his head as if to say, “You, Tangie …, never know what to expect from you.”

It was their last stop, Isurumuniya Lovers, that glued on to her heart. Oh, Saliya, son of Emperor Dutugamunu, giving up the throne for his love, Asokamala, the untouchable woman!
“Stay right where you are”, Tangamma said as Milinda came out of the shower, with towel wrapped around his waist. “I want to take a good look at you…” Making a square with the thumb and index finger of each hand touching each other at a 90-degree angle, she raised it to her eye level like a cameraman doing a close up. After looking at him through it for a few seconds, she moved to the left, keeping the fingers in the same position, as Milinda played docile, trying to figure out what mischief she was up to now. Then she moved to the right to look at him from another angle.

“What’s wrong”, Milinda asked grinning.

“Oh, nothing…Just wanted to take a good look at you…”

“You mean you haven’t in all these years? Tangamma merely looked at him askance - with mischievous eyes. “Yes, every inch”, she said to herself.

“Every inch what?” asked Milinda.

“Every inch Dutugaemunu.”

“Dutugaemunu? ….What’re you talking about?”

“Go to the Ohday temple… and see for yourself…Look at the figure of Dutugaemunu there.” Milinda grinned again…

“Except that you aren’t dutu …wicked…”

“So what if I am like Dutugaemunu.”

“Oh Nothing…,” she said walking out of the room.

Pulling a brief up his legs, Milinda threw the towel on the bed. Then he took a pair of long pants and pulled it up, and buttoning it up at the waist, sent his fingers down the fly, buttoning up the others.

“Nah…,” Tangamma said returning to the room.

“You know what… You really look like maybe Vijaya… like in a painting I saw of him…”

“
“What’s wrong with you, Tangie, today? Dutugamunu, Vijaya… Who’s next? Do you want me to take you to Angoda loonie House?” He laughed, pulling her towards him. She looked at him with a tenderness written all over her face.

“I’m just trying to imagine what your face would’ve looked liked when you were, say, sixteen… I bet you looked exactly like Vijaya….” She sent her palm up his hand and tried to circle it with her fingers at his biceps. “Strong, aren’t they, like that of a lion.”

“Only a cub”, Milinda said laughing, feeling the biceps of one hand with the other. She laughed as she ran out of the door. Milinda moved his head side to side…Oh this Tangamma!

“But you know what?” she said coming back in. “… I know you’ll laugh… But, you know, I’ve known you from way back when…”

“This Tangie!” he said moving his head side to side.

“You think I’m joking, don’t you?” After a pause she added, “You wait and see… … I’m just waiting for that last chance doctor …. from Canada, to get here.”

“You and your imagination!” said Milton, giving a pat on her back.
In a splash, she entered her room and stood in front of the full-height mirror in front of her. With Milinda out of the house, this was the opportunity -- to enjoy her hair, one last time. Closing her eyes, she brought to her mind Milinda lying beside her. He was stroking her hair. “What beautiful hair, you have, Tangie.” “All the more to entice you with, my dear”, she remembered saying coquettishly, bringing an ooh from Milinda for drawing on the line from his favourite Cinderella and the Big Bad Wolf story. Her memory now toyed around wrapping his face with her hair, and Milinda caressing it.

Sending her hands to the back, she wafted the locks, as if displaying it for the mirror. As she took a full view of it, she thought she heard the mirror whisper in her ear. “Gosh, yes, it is beautiful!” And look at the lustre, the thickness. Stretching her hair sideways pulling at the tips, she pulled it up slowly against the side of her face, caressing it and caressing the life in it.

Letting go of her hair, she now turned around, and looked herself in the dresser mirror on the opposite wall. In the mirror at the back, she now saw the image of her draping hair down to her waist. She let her eyes travel along it, top to bottom. Then, holding her hair in her two hands, she lifted it high, spreading it as wings and let go of it finger by finger, watching in the mirror the silhouette of her hair glide back into place, hair by thin hair, reminding her of a folding Japanese fan given by Milinda. She lifted the hair up repeatedly several times, and listened to a music flowing out of her hair accordion as its keys opened and closed.

Still standing in front of the mirror, she now wrapped her hair over her right eye. Next, narrowing her left eye as she turned her face slightly to the right, she splashed a coquettish glance. “Come, deer-eyed miyulaesi-
“yaa”, she heard the ancient poet call out to her. She gave out a loud laugh, and did a full turn of her body, watching the hair go into a wavy swirl.

Facing the full height mirror, she sent her left hand to the back of her hair. Puckering a lock of her hair in her hand, she turned right as if to get a full view of it. She gazed at it for a moment, and then, bringing it to her mouth, parted her lips, and kissed it. Now closing her eyes, she drew a deep breath, taking in every fragrance that enveloped her nostrils. Letting go of it, she now took the other tuft of hair in her right hand and turning left, gazed at it. Then she held it to her mouth, and nose, kissing, smelling its aroma. Now lifting up the two tufts of hair in each hand as she faced the mirror full frontal, she lifted them so that each of them was in line with her ears, spreading the tuft with her fingers. Looking at her face flanked by the hair on either side, she moved from side to side raising each heel in turn. “A Durga Pooja dance to my hair goddess,” she murmured. The thought of the goddess brought her thoughts of a peahen dancing for the peacock, and made her nipples come alive, a sensation she had experienced on occasion, as the fine teeth of the comb found their way between the strands of her hair.

Sending her thumbs between the upper ear and the sides of her head, she cupped her fingers under her hair from each side. Next, grabbing hold of it tight with her cupped left hand, she pulled it down so the hair came together at the back of her head. Raising it a couple of inches above the lowest hairline at the back of her head, she clipped a hairpin from under so the tuft of hair stood up firm. Then, still looking in the mirror, she parted the hair into three shags, with her three middle fingers, and began to weave them into a single plait. Now, taking her favourite green strip of cloth from a drawer, she tied the last few strands of her hair into a bushy tail. Holding the clip at the top with one hand and the tip of the plait in the other, she
gave it a tug so as to make it as firm and straight as possible.

Next visualizing the plait as the tail of a stallion, she tiptoed out of the room putting her hands forward and pulling them back as if holding the reins. Now she stretched her right foot forward, keeping it about four feet away from her left, and strutted forward, imagining herself to be a mare and her hair the tail. She went round and round the living room, strutting, keenly sensing her tail moving up and down. Tired after a few rounds in the living room, almost feeling giddy, she now strutted back into the bedroom, and collapsed into her bed.

Allowing her heart beat to settle down, she sat up, and pulled off the ribbon off the tip and loosened up the three tufts. Now, taking off the pin at the back of the head, she walked to the dresser. She opened the top drawer, and took out two wider hairpins. Dividing her hair into two, she took one of them in one hand and put a clip right across the hair to show an inversion above the ear. Then, sending three fingers through the single tuft, she parted the hair into three and plaited it tight, putting a green band at the end, with the frazzled like tips still showing.

Sending the three fingers through the other tuft, she now walked out of the room, and gave herself a twirl. She felt the two plaits tugging at the base of her head, and felt great. Standing firm on her feet, she now moved her head round and round, as she continued to enjoy the tug at the base. Stopping for a brief moment, she now started laughing her way round and round in her living room, as she felt the plait tugging at the base of her head with more frequency as they whipped away. She continued her twirling and loud laughter, until she began to feel a little dizzy again. She stopped and collapsed into a chair. Closing her eyes, she breathed heavily, as she visualized the two plaits still swinging around her.

Resting for a while again, she now walked across the room in a wiggle, watching the two plaits swing from
side to side. She imagined herself to be a young maiden carrying a pot of water on her head swaying her hips in a coquettish walk, dazzling young men at the well into a swoon.

Watching herself in the mirror again, she knotted her hair into a cruller at the top of her head. Holding the bun tight with her left hand, she pushed clips on all four sides with the other hand. Now using both hands, she adjusted the clips so that they were right centre. She walked up to mirror in her bedroom, and looked herself up, this time imagining herself to be a heavenly nymph Apsara on the Sigiriya Rock with their lascivious bosoms and sensuous lips. Walking forward and back between the mirrors, and sideways with shoulder once to the right and next to the left, she took in a full view of herself, hair twirl-bun and all.

Still standing in front of the mirror, she reflected how her hair had been her constant companion from as long as she could remember. She visualized how after a dip in the nearby ocean, in the dark of the night, or after a shower in the cloistered shower room of the city, she would send her fingers at the nape of her neck and fling her hair up, letting it drop. In times of loneliness, in times of loss, she would take her cupped palms along it all the way down to the waist as if ridding herself of a bad something hanging on to her. Then, she would fluff it into her face, and be wrapped in its great warmth. But soon…
Karuna knelt in front of Master Hsing Yun who was sitting cross-legged on a mat specially woven for the occasion and laid out on the bare grass and shrubbery. She was looking down at her own mat on to a side, with eyes half closed, and palms held together chest high. In their white clothes, the renunciates-in-training sīkkhamānas, six De-Leonese and herself, who had completed their two years of training, stood out among the yellow robes of the seven monks. The Bodhi Tree, spreading its branches, a canopy of history, gave them shelter from the afternoon sun. She contemplated again that this was the very branch of the tree at Buddh Gaya under which the Buddha had attained Enlightenment. Yes, she said to herself, it was a woman, Sanghamitta, who had brought the sapling to the country. She closed her eyes and took in the moment for a second as the music of the rustling leaves soothed her ears.

She recalled the preparation for this day beginning two years ago, at the Brazen Palace compound as the hungry scissors devoured lock after lock of her flowing hair. Her life dance with her hair came rushing in, with the power of gushing water past a sluice just opened. It was barging through every nook and crevice of her mind and body. Soon, visualizing Prince Siddhartha cutting off his long hair at the bank of Neranja River, she managed to force back the logs of contemplation into the sluice, putting the waters of attachment and of pain of separation in check.

She also remembered trying to shake herself off another pang of separation that had come, time to time, to torment her since her decision. The loss of her name. She recalled how when she walked into the presence of the women Bhikkunis and men Bhikkhus that morning to allow herself to let go of her hair, the thought crossed her mind, bringing not a little discomfort, that this would also
be her last walk as Tangamma. When she returned, dressed in the fresh white cloth of the Sikkhamana renunciate-in-training, shawl draped over her short-sleeved hatte jacket, all offered to her by the Bhikkhunis, she would be Ven. Karuna. But she remembered contemplating on the Buddha’s words brought to her attention by her preceptor Bhikkhuni Kusuma, that a name is nothing but a label for yet another changing phenomenon, and that what is called a bucket once could well be called a pail without ever changing its essence. It had reminded her of a line that her once-upon-a-time husband was oft heard to quote: a rose by any other name is just as beautiful. Bringing even more peace was another of Buddha’s teachings – that attachment was the root cause of suffering. So she developed a cooling comfort within herself as she let go of her name.

Then, there was her poor once-upon-a-time. Was she selfish in leaving home? Again, he thought of Prince Siddhartha who had left Yasodhara. In search of a higher goal, she comforted herself.

Reflecting on all this sitting in front of the Venerable master, she laughed at herself in silence. How could she have been so attached to something so trivial – hair, name? Even a husband.

She recalled how the day had started for her that morning, supported by the huge pillars of history. As she approached the Brazen Palace, she had taken the time to reflect in wonder again at the architecture of the nine stories, silhouetted against the rising sun. She recalled walking among the roofless pillars, touching and feeling them. Now she was trying to make the place part of her own life, like that of the Arhants who lived there. She had walked towards the centre hall, envisioning the movement of the scissors and the pain of separation. However, her pain, she knew, was her happiness. She had prepared for this day for quite some time, completely unknown to her husband. And when he came to know, he had asked, “Are you going mad?”
The voice of Ven. Vipulasara, the Head Monk at Buddh Gaya where the Buddha attained Enlightenment, now sitting to the right of Master Yun, snatched her back from her sprint down the memory lane, as he invited the woman in line before her, Bhadra, to repeat after him. *Pab-bajjam yaacaami* I beseech Ordination. Caught by a microphone hanging from an overhead wire, the words reverberated through and beyond the compound of the Bodhi Tree, as the barren and dry landmass vibrated to the sounds of saadhu saadhu saadhu of the sea of white sitting around the Bodhi Tree.

Next, it was her turn. A tinge of serenity meandered through her every nerve and fibre, giving a massaging touch, as she realized this was the final step.

She repeated the words *pabbajjam yaacaami*. She had said it to herself any number of times, she recalled. The sounds of *saadhu saadhu saadhu* again reverberated through the air. She held her hands forwards, palms up, as Master Hsin-Yun placed a folded yellow robe and a bowl on them. As they touched her open palms, a flutter of excitement knocked on the doors of her senses. A steady hand of equanimity she had been cultivating for over two years now shut them, bringing in a composure. Taking in a deep breath mindfully and letting it out gently mindfully, she bowed to the Master. Then to Ven. Vipulasara and the other four Venerable monks who had flown in from Los Angeles specifically to provide a quorum for the historical event. The seven Sikkhamanas turned towards the seven Bhikkunis making up the female quorum as Ven. Ku-suma’s eyes caught Karuna’s. Ven. Miao from China looked so serene, she thought, as did Ven. Hong Keun from Korea.

Standing up as if pulled by an invisible thread, she, along with others, turned around and started walking away, flanked by her Preceptor. She looked at the bowl she was carrying on her outstretched forearms, and then at the saffron robe. The simple possessions of her new life, she told
herself, as she sought to contain her sniffles. The thousands of devotees who had come to witness history in the making could hardly contain their emotions. Even as Karuna maintained her 45-degree eye position, she noticed some of them wiping off a tear in their eyes.

Her Preceptor, Ven. Kusuma, though of the soil, had been ordained in India, making the breakthrough for the revival of the women’s ordination in Tambapanni. So the last time the words “I beseech ordination” had escaped the lips of a woman on the soil, the assembled had heard, was some 1000 years ago. That was before the Cola King Raja Raja had arrived in full force from South Bharata. The Hindu king had decreed it punishable by death to support anyone, man or woman, in saffron robe, or offer alms to them. Soon not only were nobody presenting themselves to be ordained, but those ordained were fast dwindling in numbers as they were either disrobed by force or by themselves or began seeking shelter in the bush, caves or under a canopy of a thick tree. Some fled to Bharata. Women Bhikkhunis in particular found it the harshest as they came to be molested by the invading soldiers. It had not taken long for the colour saffron to pale out of the panorama of colours.

The forced solitude of those who had sought refuge in the bush had initially brought comfort. The sounds of the rustling leaves and the trumpeting of the elephants and the hiss of the serpents and the singing of the birds now became their treasured companion. Fewer and fewer devotees venturing into the bush with alms, fruits, nuts and roots became their main source of sustenance.

Soon, this dried up, too, as the devastating Baemini-tivyaa drought hit the country. Rains imprisoned in the wombs of the gods, the lakes dried up, giving up their fish to the hungry four-leggeds, but also robbing the pietic ones of their water. Soon many would come by the inevitable end - death from starvation, in their own caves and shelters,
providing a feast for the hungry animals roaming for morsels of food.

Within half a century, saffron robes completely disappeared from the canvas of the village landscape. In its place was a dark brown, draping the lower body of men in long beard. A shawl of like colour draped their bare upper bodies, with a thick poona noola thread from under the other shoulder going across the chest in the opposite direction. Aum replaced saadhu as the gods and the goddesses, shining in their lustre, came to dwell in the former temple premises. Crows began to sit on the Buddha head, shoulders and laps, and dust mites found a veritable garden on these figures.

“When in a revivalist effort several centuries later, Ven. Weliwita Saranankara had gone to Burma and Siam, pinvatuni Meritorious Ones, they had brought back only the male ordination. There had never been a female ordination in those countries.”

As the devotees walked through the memory lane paved with the slabs of these words of Ven Vipulasara, they gave another tumultuous saadhu saadhu saadhu, their eyes welling up in tears. The Sikkhamanas continued her serene walk towards the Brazen Palace.

“President of Daughters of the Buddha International, Professor Nenawanti,” came the announcement, “has come all the way from Thailand to be with us today on this historic occasion.” Saadhu saadhu saadhu went the crowd. As the slender woman in a light blue bathrobe-type coat, one flap draping over the other at the centre, and a white shawl across a flowing upper shirt, walked to the microphone, another wave of saadhu saadhu saadhu electrified the air. She felt a great energy as she began to speak. “Have you heard, friends, of Bhikkhuni Devasara”, she started in a tender tone. “Or of her perilous journey across the ocean, along with her retinue of five other Bhikkunis?” The audience looked at each other with surprised eyes, raised eyebrows questioning looks, turning
their head from side to side. “Devasara was your own De-
Leonese Bhikkhuni, who took the women’s ordination from
your country to China. The year was………” As she then
went on to give a lesson in history, the devotees, in an
ocean of white, clasped their palms in rapt attention as they
listened to the translation. Some rested their hands on their
laps as they sat with their legs to a side.

“The male ordination, of course, had arrived in Chi-
na earlier. However, by that time, the Bhikkhuni Order the
Buddha had established in his own time had disappeared
from Bharata. Happily”, Dr. Nenawanti continued, “Arhant
Sanghamitta had introduced the ordination to your country.
And it flourished here until about the 11th century when
you came under Cola invasion.” Many a head turned to
each other as if to say, “We’ve never heard of anything like
that.”

“Bhikkhuni Devasara ordained the first Chinese
woman, Chien Chi. So how come you’ve never heard of
it?” asked the professor. “Because it was never recorded in
your chronicles”, she said, answering her own question.
“We know this from the Chinese sources”, she said looking
at and clasping her hands in a bow. The Master and Vener-
able Miao smiled back, recognizing the gesture with a
slight bow of their own. “So today, we have our Chinese
sisters, with the help of Master Hsing-Yung,” she looked at
them again with clasped hands, “bringing it back, to restore
your lost tradition.” Another tumultuous saadhu saadhu
saadhu reverberated through the air as people in the audi-
ence moved about changing their positions.

As the saadhu sounds subsided, the slow movement
of yellow robes caught the eye of the congregation as they
turned their heads in that direction. Continuing her serene
walk, Ven. Karuna, so named for her abiding compassion,
just behind Bhadra, and accompanied by the four other
women in saffron, appeared in the compound. Walking
with their shaven heads and eyes cast down, and holding
their bowls in their hands in the newly minted robes, they
walked up to Master Hsin-Yun and Ven. Vipulasara, and prostrating, knelt before them.

“Please repeat after me”, said Ven. Vipulasara, as each of the six renunciates knelt before him. Upon hearing her name, an electric of excitement ran through Tangamma now become Ven. Karuna. She took in a deep breath in, and then breathed out just as slowly. Ven. Vipulasara pronounced the words, and the renunciates repeated. He pronounced some more words, and the women repeated, until all the higher precepts had been administered.

The officiating Bhikkunis moved to where the renunciates were kneeling. Ven. Miao said some words, and translated, the renunciates repeated after her, again until all the higher precepts had been administered, completing the dual ordination.

As the new Bhikkunis sat with palms together and kneeling, Ven Vipulasara’s voice boomed: “The Bhikkuni Order has now been re-established on the soil of Tambapanni, through a dual-ordination, in the presence of Bhikkhus and Bhikkunis as tradition requires, in the land thrice blessed by the Buddha”! The freshly minted Venerables continued to look down in great composure as the saadhu saadhu saadhu cry rose to the heavens, reverberating in the air for a minute or more. Just then, a light drizzle fell as everyone turned their faces up to get their share of the auspicious omen.

Then began the chanting by the Bhikkhus and Bhikkuni assembled, joined by the historic six. Suddenly, the skies opened up again. The congregation bent their head back, turning the faces up to the sky, enjoying the sprinkles caressing the face, and allowing it to travel along the crevices and the openings. Some thwacked their lips. Just as suddenly they had appeared, the clouds moved away, as if satisfied the event had been blessed. The devotees ran their bare palms over their faces, wet-massaging, then rubbing their hands over the hair. Some rubbed their palms over
their bare arms. The smile on their lips danced with the contentment in their eyes.

As the chanting continued, Ven. Karuna focused on the words, “compassion, friendliness to all…”

As night fell, only a few of the devotees were left. Ven. Karuna began to enjoy the calm pervading through the rustling of the Bodhi leaves. An occasional monkey would suddenly appear, and hang from a bough, give a shrill sound and disappear into another part of the open landscape. A disturbed mynah bird would then take flight, and perch close to the ground as if to take a closer look at the newcomers. A roaming snake would go by Ven. Karuna, as a lizard, avoiding its path, would dart in the direction of the thicket. The night brought other challenges when hungry animals, roaming for food, began to smell flesh. Upon reaching the periphery of the Bodhi precincts, they would go round, but never getting closer to the seven women sleeping under the Bodhi Tree. It was as if they were subdued by some invisible spell, perhaps falling within the purview of the inner calm of the new Bhikkunis.

“Bhikkhuni Order revived after a 1000 years”, headlined the Tambapannideepa, the De-Leonese daily, subtitling it “De-Andhrese woman becomes Bhikkhuni.”

“Daughters of the Buddha on the rise in Tambapanni”, wrote the Daily Misnews of the Right House, subtitling it, “History repeats itself.” The reference, of course, was to the Chinese returning the Bhikkhuni ordination back to the country that gave it to them.

“Buddhists oppose De-Andhrese woman’s ordination,” headlined the De-Andhrese Daily of the ‘Rong Times, quoting the Chair of the Buddhist Dispensation Council that “only the Buddha can revive the women’s or-
dination.” It also editorialized how Ven. Karuna had betrayed her religion and a proud culture.

“But,” said Ven. Kusuma when contacted, “all of South Bharata was Buddhist up to the tenth century at least. In fact, Ven Kassapa, the author of the very last Exposition on the Book on Metaphysics was of the De-Andhrese community.”

Next morning, Ven. Karuna, went to the village nearby, on her very first round of begging for food, in the company of Ven. Kusuma, and the other newly minted Bhikkhunis. She walked in measured step, mindful of her heel touching the ground, toes, lifting the leg, moving forward, heeeeeeel, tooooooooe … heeeeeeel, tooooooooe …. heeeeeeel, tooooooooe repeating the sequence, legs alternating. Returning to the Brazen Palace after three hours of begging in the scattered homesteads, the Bhikkhunis sat around a pillar, cross-legged, waiting to partake of their only meal for the day, that to be completed before the turn of the midday sun. Two women, dressed in white, one carrying a pail of water, and the other a round wooden spoon, approached Ven. Kusuma, who stretched her right hand to the side. The woman poured water over the hand as the Bhikkuni washed her fingers. When everyone had washed theirs, they all, in one hushed voice recited the line, “I take this meal, not to gain weight, nor to beautify my body, but merely for the purpose of nourishment.” As the devotees looked on, each of the Bhikkhunis took a fingerful of food from the bowl, and placing the food in the mouth mindfully, chewed it in slow motion, mouth closed, never once looking up, or speaking. Finishing off the last morsel in the bowl, they waited for the last to finish, as two men with bucket and spoon went to each of them as the Bhikkhunis stretched their fingers to be washed.
Meal over, the servers washed up the bowls and placed them on a side. Now with the devotees gone, the Bhikkunis began their walking meditation. Heel toe heel toe. After an hour, they each sat beside a granite pillar to rest.

Spreading out a white piece of cloth, Ven Karuna lay on it, hot sun over her. She remembered the posture of the Buddha. Sleeping on a side, with right palm under the head, and the left foot a bit shorter than the right. Making herself comfortable, she began to enjoy the moment... Suddenly her mind went to the Rented Grove. Her mother was praying to her Goddess Kali Amma as the father pushed his green cart towards the village. Then it was herself outside the Kovil in Wellawatta, intently looking at the figure of Lord Ganesha, and watching the devotees go in and out, and simply wishing to be one of them. With a smile, she recollected the story of Saliya, the Prince foregoing the Throne for Asokamala, the untouchable Chandala woman. The Ven. Bhikkhuni felt happy that she did not have to declare herself to anybody, as Asokamala had done, when asked for some water by the Prince. Or, be outside the Kovil gate...She closed her eyes and enjoyed the freedom.... Next she was at the Ohday Temple, gazing in wonderment at the Dagaeba reaching up to the sky against the full moon, the dim oil wicks valiantly competing in their glow. She recalled how she felt faintish on this very ground of this holy city, not far from where she was.

Trying to shut off all such thought, she fell into a meditation, sitting cross-legged. This body is not me. I am not this body. This body is not me. This body is impermanent, and subject to decay and death... I am not this body. This body is not me. I am not this body. I am not...

As the sun moved to the west horizon, the six Bhikkunis walked in the direction of the Bodhi Tree, now empty of yesterday’s excitement. Stopping at the lamp arborium, Ven. Karuna began to empty some oil from a bottle into a quarter-filled clay lamp. Ven. Bhadra placed a fresh-
ly-minted wick in it. Removing the lamp from its place in the arborium and taking it in both hands, a third Bhikkhuni went to another lamp and held the wick until a flame bubbled into life. As the wick flickered, all the Bhikkhunis started chanting *namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa*. Homage to Him, the Blessed One, the Worthy One, the Perfectly Enlightened One. With the flame fully alive, she returned the lamp back into its place. As the other three Bhikkhunis participated in lighting a new lamp, a Homage to the Buddha filled the air.

*Pahan pooja* lamp offering over, now, with lotuses in hand, they all walked up to the Golden Fence around the Bodhi Tree. As each of them went their own way to pay homage to the Bodhi Tree, Ven. Karuna went to the eastern altar, and stood gazing at the Buddha housed in it. As she focused on his serene eyes, she was sure they were welcoming her into his Sasana dispensation. She took a step forward, and placed the flowers in her hand at the altar as the Buddha, she thought, watched her every movement. Next, taking her clasped palms up to the forehead, she bent forward at the waist. Then she went down on her knees, and paid homage with a five-point touch - the forehead resting on her clasped palms and the elbows and knees supporting her body. Getting up, she walked to the south altar, and then to the western altar, ending up at the north. Soon, in measured step, she was now doing a *pradakshinā* perambulation – walking around the Tree with her right shoulder towards it.

Completing her 108th perambulation with a bow, she walked to where the other five were. Seating herself cross-legged next to Ven. Bhadra in the space left for her by order of seniority, she looked up to see the tender leaves dancing in the breeze in their golden sheen. Soon, in a coconut shell held in both hands, she began to sip a tea offered by a devotee, mindful of each gulp meandering down the throat. Mindful that that would be the only food until
the next morning, she recited in her mind, “This tea I take not to…. but…..”

Then as the devotees took leave of them and left the Bodhi compound, the night began to envelope her in its cool dark cloak. She recalled how the Buddha had spent a whole week following his Enlightenment gazing at the Mother Tree at Gaya, in gratitude for providing him shelter at that critical hour of His Great Experience. Now, closing her eyes, she chanted in her mind the ‘nine virtues of the Buddha’ nava arahaadi guna incantation, as she touched a bead on her ‘nine-virtue’ bean-counter chain, 108 times. Oh, that special feeling once again, she said to herself, as she had felt the first time when she had visited Anuradhapura. Hearing the siri-siri rustling sound of the leaves in the night breeze, a certain amount of inner excitement competed with her calm, as a serene smile came over her face as she said to herself, “Now I can die in peace.”

As the crows began to make their last call before settling down, one of them flew over her, anointing her with its droppings. Moving her thumb up to her head mindfully, she wiped it off, and cleaned her finger on her wrap-around skirtting her heels. But, all of a sudden, a monkey went whipping past her. Then she thought she heard the howling of a hyena. Hm, she said to herself. Then the wailing of more hyenas. She tried to dispel from her mind the association of hyena howlings with disaster. But now the rustling of leaves. Animal feet treading on fallen leaves? She wondered. A strong wind slapped her face as the hyenas continued its howling and wailing.

She began to watch her in-breath and out-breath. With her mind now calm, she closed her eyes as she lay down on the mat spread on the sand.

But again, she felt some tender feet of small animals rushing toward her, as if scared of something. Suddenly, she heard heavy feet... more than a few, biting into the sand. She kept her eyes open, as she sat up. She now felt the feet very close to her. Then she thought she recognized
someone calling out in her language. The sounds skirted around her ears, as she valiantly maintained her concentration. Then she suddenly felt something hard hit the side of her mouth, and then someone yelling, “Open … open your damned holy mouth, you betraying bitch!” As she opened her eyes in bewilderment, she saw legs in heavy boots in front of them. More voices thundered. “Open, open.” The voices boomeranged in her ears. She felt her blood rush through her mindbody, and felt as if her ears had caught fire and her head about to split apart. “Open … open,” the voices thundered again, as she watched more feet getting closer to other Bhikkhunis. Closing her eyes, she took in a deep breath, and fell into a lovingkindness meditation directing her thoughts to whomever it was standing in front of her. “May you be well and happy,” she repeated to herself. And then, “May all beings be well and happy!” Next, she fell into another meditation. This is not my body. I’m not this body. This body is impermanent, and goes to decay and death…This is not my body. I’m not this body. This is not my body. I’m not this body. This is not my body. I’m not this body. This is not my body. I’m not this body. This is not… Before she could finish, she felt a cold heavy metal enter her mouth, breaking her teeth, and then a sudden explosion ……. and a wetness in her underclothes…. as she felt herself breaking into pieces…

Boomed out of their sleep, the startled crows took to flight, bumping into each other, not knowing where the gunfire had come from. The sounds of feet of startled hyenas running helter-skelter cut through the wind as the night went into a dormant sleep….

As the military men in their boots walked towards the holy compound the next morning, their eyes were met in the distance by blobs of white, as if the birds were, even in heir
frenzy, laying out a carpet of mourning. The white interspersed with red, scattered here, there and everywhere. Walking with their guns at the ready as others kept cover, throwing a circle of security around the Bodhi Tree, they began to scour the compound, inch by inch, in search of what was left of the six bodies. Several of them walked gingerly towards a part of the compound bathed in blood. Seeing a shoulder, in a saffron piece of cloth hanging from a branch, with hand missing, a soldier closed his eyes for a moment and fell into tears. Quickly regaining his composure and opening his eyes, he saw the hand sitting a few yards away, with some bowels lying around like some swollen worms. Another soldier, standing beside brain parts oozing out of a skull, took off his helmet, and covering his face with it, broke into a silent sob, even as he held on to his gun with his free hand. Yellow robes splattered in blood lay around in shreds alongside a leg or other body part. As a soldier shooed away a crow nibbling at some red blood flesh, it took off, a piece dangling in its beak. Soldiers walked gingerly between patches of blood strewn over the sandy ground. A soldier fell into tears as his eyes fell on some bowels trying to slither out of a body cavity. Another soldier went past a hand hanging in its skin form a lamp post. Soldiers walked over the pieces of clay and wicks from the oil lamps scattered on one side of the compound. Noticing some crows falling over each other, cawing and pecking, and moving around in a circle, one of them walked over as the birds took off, laying bare something shining in the early morning sun. As he came closer, he closed his eyes, revulsed at an eye-ball hanging off a piece of skin, sitting on the Golden Fence. "Butchers," he screamed aloud, "heartless brutes!"

An American Bhikkhuni, who had interviewed Bhikkhuni Ven. Karuna prior to the ordination, wrote an obituary in a local newspaper, under the title, ‘Death of a non-soul...’ ‘Neither De-Andhrese, nor De-Leonese, but a mere sentient being, Ven. Karuna’s last words may have
been, ‘This body is not me, I’m not this body,’ extending also loving compassion to all beings.”

BOOK THE FIFTH:

_Grown_

Whosoever, by a skillful act,
obliterates an evil done,
like the moon freed from the clouds,
illuminates this world, oh such a one!

- _Dhammapada_, 173
“Turn around... turn around... this very minute,” shrieked Swadesh, into the driver’s ear, who nearly lost control of the car taking an elbow turn up the hilly Kandy road, as he closed the manuscript in hand. “What’s the matter, Sir...?” asked the driver as he screeched to a halt, moving the van to the side of the road just avoiding an oncoming bus.

“I must see him... Right away”

“What? Sir?” asked the driver, as he sat at the wheel, looking at Swadesh who seemed lost in the clouds as he looked up. A thick black cloud gobbled up the sun, throwing a dark towel under the sky. Swadesh felt a chill, and goose-bumps all over him, as a gush of wind from the tea estates began to slap him. An orderly hollered out some instructions to the tea-pickers...

“Yes, him. My friend... in this book”

“Friend? In a book?” Swadesh did not hear the words of the driver who was now making a U-turn.

“Now you know the story of my life”, Milinda said, without looking at Swadesh sitting in the chair in front of his bed. The lines of the song came to Milinda’s mind: ‘Do you see what I see?’

“Well, sort of... but I can’t say I know it enough”

“I’m only sorry”, he said looking away, “that I wasn’t with her on her spiritual journey... and that, in my stubbornness, I didn’t give in to her attempts to make me return to my own roots.”

Milinda recalled the time when she had first mentioned the idea to him casually of her possible interest in ordination.
“Are you going mad?” he had blurted out, walking away. To his surprise, he found her following him, with a defiant come-back. “So you’re this nominal Buddhist – born to it but never paid much attention to it. Like most of your so-called friends. Have you ever considered”, she continued, “that you’re all still suffering from the after-effects of colonial rule?”

“Africa-effects of colonial rule?” he smiled.

“Yes, colonialitis. The British civil servants who ran the show here may have been born Christian, or even Anglican.”

“Anglicans are Christians,” corrected Milinda.

“There you go … your rational mind....,” she said. “I know that, my dear Mr. Smart husband. But let me continue....”

Milinda sat down in a nearby chair, turning his face towards her. “Those colonial civil servants,” she continued, “they didn’t care a tuppence for religion, did they now, even as they attended church for show and tell.” He could not help but be impressed how far she’d come in English, as she added, “Conversions, to fill their civil service vacancies, that they left it to their church-fathers.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Not probably. I know I am right, even though you might want to forget. Remember, they had come from a society where religion was being kicked in its very guts by the advancing Enlightenment craze. Christianity was, to them, the very epitome of what was wrong with religion. Christianity was the anti-Christ of the so-called Enlightenment.”

Milinda remembered how he listened with his mouth open. He had never seen his wife so animated. He was impressed by the connection she had
made. She continued. “Now that was the mind-set you and your fellow-Buddhists of the middle class have internalized... As if Enlightenment was one, Buddhism another.”

Milinda had stood up and started pacing up and down in slow motion. “But remember Buddhism is Enlightenment.”

He remembers being startled by the assertion, and even thinking of the ramifications of it. Yet he had got no closer to returning to what his parents had tried to inculcate in him. A religiosity that would govern his everyday living. His mind ran to his paying homage at the home altar, as a lad, every evening. And learning at the feet of the local monk. Since leaving for the city, however, religion had never had much meaning to him, as far as he knew, none of his Buddhist teachers either. Of course, he thought of himself as a Buddhist, but he had thought of himself more as a secular humanist, too. After all, the two were not, in his understanding, different. But now he began to reflect on what Tangamma had said, how true Tangamma might be.

On another occasion, he remembered, how she had talked jokingly about turning the tables on Prince Siddhartha’s story of leaving a wife behind. To add a chapter of herstory, she had said.

He well remembered the day she actually told him of her decision to seek the spiritual path of ordination. “I still love you,” she had said in her quiet way, looking into his eyes, and coming closer, planting a kiss on his cheek. “I’ve had a very rich life with you, and I wouldn’t be where I am, had it not been for you, and your patience with my bumbling blunderings around as I groped in the dark trying to make life for both of us more meaningful.” At this point, she went down on her knees, over my protest, and bowed her head, reminding me of our
honeymoon night. Then, getting back on her feet, she continued, “I’m not leaving you, or the world, because I am unhappy. Quite the opposite. I am happy where I am, happier, in fact, than my parents could ever have imagined. But I know that’s a happiness of this world. Increasingly, I’ve been convinced of the fleeting nature of this happiness... What I’m looking for is spiritual happiness.”

“I’m only sorry I wasn’t with her in the spiritual journey,” he repeated himself.

“Well, your interest lay elsewhere”, said Swadesh, trying to console his friend. “But why are you crouched up... like ... like.” He was looking for words... “Yes, like Dutugaemunu?”

“Funny you should say that...,” he said, looking at Swadesh who thought he heard some weird authentic tone. ‘Dutugaemunu’.

“Oh, no, you, too?” He remembered how Tangamma once sized him up, and declaring he looked like Dutugaemunu.

“That’s exactly how I feel,” he said, recalling the legend, when ordered by dad king not to wage war against the South Indian invader, Dutugaemunu had felt oppressed on all sides, and lay crouched. “Yes, like him, I feel oppressed from all sides...From the north, from the south, from the west, from the east.”

“Come now, Milinda, this is surely melodramatic...” he said, looking him in the eye. For several minutes, he watched a spider struggle in a net. The more it tried to get out, the more it got entangled. A knot within, a knot without, he remembered a famous line. Hours passed. Unable to extract a single word from Milinda, Swadesh finally thought it best to leave him to his thoughts.
“Oppressed”, repeated Swadesh, as he pulled up a chair close to Milinda’s sagging bed the next day. “Oppressed by what?” he peered into Milinda’s eyes, crouching down to be level with the bed. He muttered something.

“English... what ... did you say.”

Milinda repeated himself as Swadesh moved closer to him. Did he catch the word? “Englishitis?” did you say, as a question mark appeared on his forehead. He wrinkled up his nose. “Englishitis! Never heard of it.” He looked at Milinda as if looking for confirmation.

Milinda said nothing. Assenting in silence, Swadesh concluded. He got up from his crouching position and started pacing up and down. He recalled Milinda telling him how he had self-taught Russian, just to read its literature. ‘When there’s such a rich De-Leonese literature!’ Swadesh had thought to himself. ‘Why had he not made an attempt to learn enough of his own language, enough to read the classical literature?’ He was bemused to hear Milinda say that he had even translated Russian plays. But, into English. Why not to De-Leonese? ‘That’s Milinda alright!’ Looking around, Swadesh suddenly felt an emptiness on the walls. Staring at it, he noticed that all his books were gone!

“What’s the point of having them when they oppress me?” Swadesh said, noticing him. He was encouraged that Milinda was aware of what was happening around. That gave him hope. He had not completely cut off the world around him.

Swadesh took another look at Milinda – head to toe in his fetal position. He could not help being surprised. A grin overcame his lips. He shook his head as if in disbelief. A Shakespearean scholar would say something he had had in mind all along. He walked absent-mindedly towards the window, standing there gazing into the sky. Clouds were gathering in the direction of each other.

His mind went back to the sixties when he lived in the country.
It was after 1956 when De-Leonese was made the official language, ‘in 24 hours’ as Mr. Bandleader had roared. How hilarious it was when several years later, the public still received correspondence in English, with the explanation, “Original to follow”! He recollected how the hilarious turned counter-revolutionary when anyone who had even a smattering of English invariably sought to fill out government forms, printed in De-Leonese, De-Andhrese and English, always in English, sometimes even paying somebody do it for them. How slavish our people were, he had complained. And, as if to do something about it, he recalled he had stopped the habit of interpolating English in speaking De-Leonese.

Swadesh’s mind went back even further. To his university days... when De-Leonese itself was taught in English! Now he envisaged himself in one of the rooms at any one of the Residences – Arunachalam, Ramanathan, on any given night. He brought to mind how whenever they got together for an after-dinner hee-haa-haa, the butt of jokes always ended up being the professor of De-Leonese. Either it was the clothes he wore, the National, or his mannerisms, or his latest RG - ‘rong grammar’ goof, or how he had, at a dinner party where the main menu was fish, ‘pilled his plate with piss’!

Meeting some old buddies during this current visit, this had been a topic of conversation, when he realized that, after a quarter century of change, some things had never changed. His friends and family still spoke in the same mixed variety. “Even in De-Andhrese territory, I’m told,” offered a friend, “every young honcho tries to break into English, however broken, so as not to be the village fool.”
However, it was his nephew who had homed in the issue for him.

“Well, uncle, I can tell you how it affected me”, Romesh had volunteered, getting up and coming towards him. “Do you know how embarrassed I felt in the army with my poor English? Do you know how my promotions were affected?”

“Tell me.”

“I had been promoted colonel. So I go to our first mess party. A cold shiver ran through me when I heard all the English spoken around me. …” He looked down as if in shame. “These other guys were from St. this, St. that, Churchill... Sure, we at Happiness College were right up there in cadetting, beating them in competitions. Several of the top military brass were Happinessians .... But I had been educated in the De-Leonese medium, so my English was not very good. So every time I spoke, they all laughed! There were days I would go to a corner and cry.”

Returning from his memory lane to Milinda’s bed, Swadesh found that he had fallen asleep. He tiptoed his way out.

Receiving a call from Dasa, Swadesh rushed the next day to find a contortion coming over the face as Milinda crouched even further.

“Terroritis.”

Swadesh’s mind went back to the ‘60,000 lessons’ Milinda had appraised him of, meaning the 60,000 De-Leonese youth terrorists who had been killed in an insurgency. As if reading his mind, Milinda said, “It’s not what you think ... What took place in the seventies was child’s play, when you think of the terrorism of the eighties. From
a better armed and doubly strengthened, and more deter-
minded, People’s Liberation Front… Nothing short of Mao’s
Cultural Revolution …”
“Well, of course, Marxism had been introduced to
the land in the 1930’s, wasn’t it?”
“Exactly… Marxism wasn’t the bogey that it had
come to be in the west…”
“Yeah. I can see that.”
“And so, as I probably said before, the PLF had
more than a few sympathizers…. However, before long, …. it
became a license for vendetta killing…. Neighbour kill-
ing neighbour, friend spying on friend, children chopping
off parents’ heads…. And chopped heads on display on
campus. All in the name of a Marxist Revolution.”
“Hm… it must’ve been terrible.”
“Terrible? Doesn’t even come close…. to put into
words what we went through when they …. No, I can’t talk
about it… no, I can’t.” Swadesh heard the sobbing. “How I
can’t get rid of it from my head! It plays over and over
again, like a never-ending tape…”
“What?”
Milton looked away… Then he began slowly, al-
most inaudibly. “One morning, the sun was bright. Birds
were chirping and flowers were blooming in the garden… All
planted by her own hands… When we opened the door, what
do we see? Her body, sprawled on the car porch, na-
ked, torso placed beside the head…”
“Whose?”
A long pause…. and a breaking down. And amidst
tears came the painful word. “Our daughter’s.”
“Oh no!” Swadesh rushed to Milinda… “Oh, I’m
sorry… I’m so sorry to hear that.” Swadesh put his arms
around his friend even as he lay crouched. “Oh I’m so ter-
ribly sorry… But why? Why why why?”
“Just for refusing to stay out of medical school.”
“What?”
“Medical students immediately came to be labeled bourgeois and were threatened by death if they dared attend classes. So medical school shut down for three years. But, then, our daughter tried to rally the students to return to school.” Tears poured down his face wetting the pillow. Swadesh moved closer and placed his hand on Milinda’s head, and started stroking.

“So you had a real Pol Pot! Anyone with learning was an enemy of the people.”

A long pause….

“During that time, on many a day, I didn’t want to get up in the morning… I couldn’t…. I just could not.”

“Oh, I can well understand…”

A long pause…. “Then came the De-Andhrese terrorism...” He paused again. Swadesh knew how painfully the killing of his wife and the newly minted Bhikkhunis must be playing in Milinda’s mind. He tried to change the direction of discussion.

“Hm... I certainly wouldn’t have wanted to be here in such a time.”

“You don’t know how lucky you are… You just don’t know…You will never understand …what terrorism does to you, how it eats into you…”

“Hm!” Swadesh was sad that that was all he could say. Or do.

“Terroritis is killing me every waking moment…” Again Swadesh put his hand and brought Milinda close to himself. Then he began stroking his head staring into the empty sky. It was heavy, he thought, with dark clouds hovering over. He covered his face with his left hand, as he heard the tears falling from the sky. Soon it came down like sharp-shooters hurling their arrows…. The wind howled...

“But you know why I’ve really lost interest in living?”

Swadesh turned his head from side to side as if to say, No, you want to tell me?
“Because I’m the lead architect …of this House of Terror…… in a long Reign of Error.”

Swadesh let the moments go by. When the sobbing subsided, he began to speak. “But you…”

“You know Swadesh, I lost a wife to De-Andhrese terrorism, and a daughter to De-Leonese terrorism… But who birthed the terrorism? Me… Me …me… the Churchil- lian in me…. the self-proclaimed Super-mind!”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Y’see, think of it. Who were the De-Leonese terrorists? These young men and women earned their degrees, but found that there was no hope, and no growth in the country. When they started explaining that a European model did not allow for local initiative or a tapping into local resources, we simply ignored both the messengers and the message, calling it foolish babble, misplaced Marxist gabble even… We turned a deaf ear to their voices that while the rich and the cities were getting richer, the poor and the villages were getting poorer, and that the rural values, and traditional culture, were eroding under their very eyes.”…. Swadesh watched Milinda bury his face in his hands.

“Y’see, these children of Mother Pearl o.t.e., all came from the village, thanks to free education… So when the articulate Mr. Victory-Hero, himself from the village, called for armed rebellion, it didn’t take much for the young lads and lasses to swarm around the mother bee! It was a matter of chicken coming home to roost.”

“But still, how do you come into the picture?”

“Because… at every turn, I led the attack on their dreams. I even spied on them, through our snooper reporter plants. …

‘Ah, now I get it,’ thought Swadesh, as he recollected the Snooper Report of the rebellion scene in the novel. ‘Oh so this is the democracy, the freedom of expression, they pay so much lip service to…’ Swadesh felt a sense of anger rising in him. Containing it, however, “Oh sorry,” he
said, remembering that Milinda was still talking. “My mind went elsewhere for a second.”

“Every little change of the status quo, I wrote against…. Little did I realize how much Churchill was keeping a stern eye from behind… Even when my wife replaced the Chrysanthemums and the Magnolias in the garden with the local saman picca flowers and batala manyokka yams, I still did not get the hint. The guns they held, you see, may have been Marxist, but what fed them – the fodder of frustration of a stolen future, was supplied by me… and my class, sitting in the comfortable digs of Cinnamon Gardens, behind bricked-in compounds.

“Oh, Milinda, surely you’re going too far….in any case, that’s all in the past….”

“Maybe, but when I think that I killed my daughter…”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Milinda. She was killed by terrorists…”

“But who birthed them…. Me … and my wacko class… blindfolded in our colonialitis… and Englishitis.”

Swadesh moved closer, not knowing what else to do.

“And, if that’s not enough, who birthed the De-Andhrese terrorists? Again me… me me me! Oh Swadesh…”

Not that, mind you, they were not oppressed, but certainly not by the De-Leonese… It was the same system that oppressed the average De-Leonese! Again as with the De-Leonese, the De-Andhrese youth, too, saw no future …. But here’s the twist. It was easy for the youth to be convinced that it was somehow the De-Leonese that was the enemy… Not the De-Andhrese upper castes, not the Kovil, not the Church, not the Marxists, not the English, not History…”

“I see….Very enlightening, indeed very enlightening!”

He paused as he looked down. Another long pause.
“I have blood in my hands;” he sobbed and sighed, sobbed and sighed…

“You?” asked Swadesh, bewildered. “How did you get into that picture?”

“I was the frothing national mouthpiece for the International Human Rights cry… It was this that allowed the killing with impunity. Oh, Swadesh….” He broke down again….

“Aren’t you being a bit too harsh on yourself?”

“Just as,” he sobbed, “just as the continued enthroning of English triggered De-Leones terrorism in its wake, the enthroning of Human Rights hosted De-Andhrese terrorism …” He paused.

He began to miff his head against the pillow violently.

“Oh, Milinda,” Swadesh said, as Dasa, watching from a distance rushed to the bedside, slamming the door shut behind him, and held his head in both his palms. “Oh, Podi Mahatteya….”

Minutes went by, as the spider continued to struggle. Glancing, he noticed Milinda open his eyes, turning his head towards him. The sharp shooting of the sky continued as Milinda continued amidst sobbing.

Swadesh watched Milinda crouch even more, as his animated words became fainter and fainter, his knees now almost touching his chin.

“But I still don’t understand why you alone should take the blame…. It’s a whole society…”

“But society is nothing but people…. like myself…. Oh, Swadesh, I can’t live with myself any more … I just can’t….I betrayed a whole culture, a whole people, a whole religion….Oh, Swadesh.”

Was it a sobbing he heard, Swadesh wondered. “I… I… I… be.. be.. betrayed … betrayed my… mo… mo… Mother…, Swadesh. I betrayed my Mother.” The sobbing was now competing with the thunder that suddenly eroded.
The wailing sound of a rushing ambulance zipped by as the spider struggled. Dasa stood behind at a respectful distance.

“You did what you thought was the best for the country…”

Suddenly, he watched Milinda, stretching out of his crouch as if he had gotten something out of his system, began to turn in his bed, now to one side, now to another. Soon he was moving so virulently that Swadesh thought he had been possessed by some kind of demon. He held him by his shoulders, signaling Dasa to hold his legs.

Calmed down, Dasa went to fetch a basin of water. Swadesh walked towards the window, looking at the enveloping darkness. Then suddenly, he heard a thumping sound. It was Milinda banging his forehead against the narrow slit of wood that served as the bed head. “No, Milinda, no,” he said as he rushed back. As he got closer, he noted the blood dripping. Putting his hand under the head, he called out to Dasa, who was returning past the door drape, basin in hand. “Good. Warm water.” Taking the towelette from Dasa, he dipped it in the basin, and pressed it against the cut in the forehead as Milinda closed his eyes. Dasa and Swadesh now helped him on to the pillow, and stood aside keeping a watchful eye.

As if sensing that Swadesh’s eyes kept wandering over his own closed eyes, Milinda suddenly began to talk again. “Now you know why I’ve lost interest in living, and want to die?”

“Well…”

“But not because I want to atone for my sins, but because I want to be reborn … to work off my karma…There’s unfinished business…”

“My my my!” thought Swadesh, ‘Mr. Shakespeare talking of dredging karma,’ as he continued to assure him with the words, “But you were just doing your job.”

“Doing my job… DOING MY JOB,” he raised his voice. “That was the problem… just regurgitating a
Churchillian mantra…. Aum namo Churchill!!” He pounded his chest with both his fists as Dasa rushed towards the bed and held his hands.

Again, minutes passed by…. Minutes, Swadesh thought were hours… Then, he thought, he heard his faint voice again…

“Oh Mother Pearl o-t-e!” Milinda began to sob, as a tear flowed down his cheeks.. He ran his hands to his chest as if to hold on to a cascading wave of his heart. Which is how, Swadesh remembered, Milinda had characterized the feeling every time he turned his thoughts to his motherland. Each time, he could feel, he had said, the salty wetness of the tears of Mother Pearl o.t.e., soothing his heart, and the whole mindbody.

Just then the scintillating voice of the lead singer of the Deathless Group, as Dasa cranked a notch on the radio-cassettecorder that Milinda had kept beside his bed….

“Sometimes my only companion,” he had said, “especially after losing my wife.” Swadesh listened to the words. They had been banned as racist, he had been told. He listened carefully:

This Mother Pearl o.t.e.- Mother Pearl of the East,
Over two millennia, oh, what a sump…tuous
feeeea……st!

The taanpura strings droned a mono-tone background to the meandering sitar and flute, as the tabla kept the rhythm… The voice continued…

Through life’s Samsara
’til Nibbana come,
May I be blessed ...
to be reborn...
to be reeeeborn....
to be reeeeeee…boooooooorn…
Swadesh and Dasa were relieved when, tired out, Milinda soon fell into a deep sleep. He noted the spider still trying to disentangle.

Suddenly, Swadesh thought he heard his name being called. Yes, Milinda was awake.

“There’s some…some…thing I want you to take with you.”, Milinda said, voice breaking up. Swadesh was glad the subject had changed. “S..s..s..ee those bu..bu..books there?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, all my.. my.. my.. wife’s.”

“I see.”

“Just next to the Dha..dha..mma..pa..da, there’ll be a pa..pa..package, in a large en..en..en..envelope. I want you to take it…. It’s the l..l..l..last treasure I have… I know I c..c..c..can trust you to look af..af..after it… Take it wi..wi..with you, and do what you wa..wa..want.”

Swadesh could do no more than smile in surprise.

Swadesh went for an early morning dip in the ocean beside Mt. Lihiniiya Hotel. He watched the Lihiniya sea gulls flying in groups, and making a quick glide to the blue waters, and fly right back up, some with fish in their beaks. He watched the billows break. Getting deeper into the sea, he enjoyed getting himself on to the crest of a billow and stretching his arms and legs with head dug in, and allow it to carry him towards the beach. Carried by a big wave, he would sometimes be washed ashore, getting sand all over him. Then he would allow the returning current to carry him deeper into the ocean where he would meet a billow head on, caving into it like a fish.
Some early revelers were playing a round of beach ball, trying to keep the ball up. A few beach kiosks were coming to life. A European woman in a bikini ran past him with a man with a bulging belly behind her. She looked back at him with a smile, and Swadesh nodded.

Changing to a pair of short pants and a shirt with a batik design, he walked in his slippers to the restaurant. Serving himself some string hoppers at the buffet breakfast table, he moved towards a heavy thick stone slab sitting on a wooden table at the end of which sat a heavy rolling pin also made of stone. He took a spoon sitting flat on a plate and served himself some hot hot lunu-miris chili preparation off the stone. Now he served himself a deep spoonful of shrimps and spread some gravy prepared in coconut milk over the string hoppers. As he sat at a table and dug his fingers into it, the crisscross string hoppers made him think of Milinda. He wondered how he was doing since last evening.

“Telephone call, Sir.”

It was a call from Dasa. Soon he was on his way out in a taxi. As he walked into the porch, Dasa said, “He asked for you.”

Milinda walked past the door curtain, and noticed a few others in the room, who moved aside to let him through. He approached Milinda, still resting on his right side… oh, what’s this? Banana leaves? His eyebrows raised in question. Swadesh looked at Dasa as if to ask, Why’s he on banana leaves? As if understanding the question in his mind, Dasa said in a low voice, “The shingles was getting worse, and the skin was beginning to hug on to the mat… So the vedā Mahatteya native physician suggested banana leaves.” Swadesh noticed that Milinda was in much more pain than in the last few days he had been with him. There was white oozing here and there, dripping on to the leaf.

Swadesh squatted beside him, eye level, and peeked into his face. Milinda’s eyes continued to stay shut. “Milinda”, he paused. “Swadesh here.”
He thought he noted Milinda’s eyelids twitch, and a tightening of lip muscles. Swadesh removed his sandals, and sat on the floor cross-legged. After watching him for a while, he placed his hand on his face, and moved it up to his head as others looked on. Then he began to chant the Metta Sutta Discourse of Friendliness. Gradually, one by one, several in the room joined in. Swadesh began to send his left hand over Milinda’s hair as he chanted for about fifteen minutes, as he continued stroking his hair. Soon a peaceful silence, as everyone watched.

Placing his hand on Milinda’s, Swadesh began to talk, haltingly. “Milinda, it’s Swadesh… I’m going to say something. You can repeat the words after me… in your mind.” Swadesh waited for a moment, and then began.

May I be free from enmity … He paused. May I be free from... anger, ........ May I be happy! Swadesh kept his eyes on Milinda. Allowing time, he spoke again.

“Now take your mind back … and think of your mother…

And say the words, *Wherever you are, may you be free from enmity, and anger. And may you be happy!* Swadesh watched him again. Now think of your father, and say …

Continuing to keep his eyes on Milinda’s chest as it barely moved, he said, “Now think of your wife, and say…”

Keeping his eyes on him, Swadesh thought he noted the little finger of his left hand, now resting on his side, sort of twitch. That’s good, he thought to himself. Continuing to watch, Swadesh spoke again. “Now think of your daughter, and say …”

“Now a dear friend…”

Swadesh watched. He noted Milinda’s relaxed fingers gradually opening up, as he looked at Dasa who nodded with a smile. “Now anyone who has brought you pain” Swadesh took him through the sequence two more times, as Milinda’s left arm began to slide off to a side, and his left
leg began to come out of the crouch of a long time. “Yes”, Swadesh encouraged, looking around the room with a smile. He noted the nods from the sad faces, and turned his attention again to Milinda.

“Now think of someone neutral, not family, not friend, but say, a postie that delivers mail to you…, and say…”

Pause.

“Now think of one not too friendly … if not an enemy…, and say…”

A longer pause, as Swadesh watched some movement in Milinda’s eyelids.

“Now think of the whole universe, thinking of all sentient beings ….”

In a few minutes, Swadesh watched Milinda’s body turn all too slowly, right leg stretching, exposing his chest. Swadesh looked at Dasa and the crowd that had by now closed in around the bed.

He was talking to Milinda in his ear again. “Now go through in your mind whatever happy events, any successes in your life … and be happy at them.”

Swadesh continued to stroke his head, from forehead backwards, as he spoke. From time to time, he placed his hand on Milinda’s. Now he spoke again as Milinda continued to keep his eyes closed. “Now bring to your mind the Triple Gem…Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha.”

Swadesh now noted a slight movement in Milinda’s head, slowly turning towards the ceiling. “Good,” he said to himself, as he carefully straightened Milinda’s right leg still bent. Dasa moved forward as if to help. The face looked serene.

Hearing a hushed sob, he looked over his shoulder at Dasa, and touched him, who now buried his face in his palms. Turning again to Milinda, he said, in a lowered voice, “We won’t say good-bye to you, Milinda … … Whenever you’re ready….”
Taking his hand away, and squatting beside his bed, Swadesh kept a close watch over him, as those in the room took to sighing and sobbing. Noting Swadesh’s look of disapproval, some quietly left the room. An eerie silence fell. A mosquito was making its barely audible monotone as it went past Swadesh several times.

As a shadow from a nearby tree began to fall into the room, an hour or so later, Swadesh caught Milinda’s eyes in his eyes, as he opened them ever so slightly, and close it again, just as fast as it opened. Then a calm, and a deep…deep…. slow … slowing breath. ……

Swadesh touched the pulse, and held it for a minute or more, choking a surging outpour. He looked at Dasa, who broke down, falling flat on the floor, the waters dammed in all the while gushing out. It turned out to be in gallons as others around broke down, too.

Swadesh explained later that his dear friend Milton would have died without excitement, in a true Nihatamaana humble spirit. “He has already been conceived, in a human mother’s womb. … somewhere in the island, no doubt, as he always wanted.” Everyone around looked pleased.

Said someone, looking aside, and wiping a tear, “Such a patriot.”

“A smiling patriot…..,” Swadesh added.
STORY PAST

Let go of the past, let go the future. 
Let go the present, too, crossing 
to the further shore of existence. 
With mind released, from everything, 
undergo not again birth and decay.

- Dhammapada, 348
Thirty

Last-chance Doctor

Returning to the hotel, Swadesh said to himself, “But surely this can’t be the end of it. Where’s the Sinhabaahu Lion-arm story? ‘Relax’, the voice said. ‘Desserts in due course! Patience earns double dessert!’” Swadesh thought he heard the waiter’s voice again!

He took in hand the package picked off the shelf at Milton’s request. Turning the first page, he could not believe his eyes. ‘Herstory, by Tangamma’, it read. Wow! She’s a writer, too. Could never have guessed. So this is Tangamma’s… own handwriting, he told himself. “What a treasure…!”

He stopped at a page and started reading. ‘Meeting with a Last-chance Doctor’. It started with her understanding of why this Canadian doctor was so called. Because it was the chronic patients, when all others had failed, that came to him for his now famous ‘past life therapy’, when they would be regressed to their past lives, almost all ending up being healed at the end of the series of sessions. “Past life therapy… Hm… So he must believe in rebirth”, she had written down. “That’s who I’d want to see.” She had waited for months for him to arrive. “If only I could get rid of my itch,” she wrote, referring to “the itching at its worst at Anuradhapura when I collapsed.”

“Itch… itch…,” Swadesh repeated to himself. Keeping the diary on his lap, he looked away into empty nothing… as if to recover a lost memory. ‘The itch…, the itch,’ he repeated to himself, ‘why does it ring a bell?… Just why does this ring a bell?’ He kept the diary on the bed, and started pacing back and forth. He suddenly stopped. “Oh yes… that first day when I was introduced to Milton… Gosh… some twenty five years ago…” The image continued. He remembered how he noticed her scratching her
chest. Left thumb, right brain, he now toyed with the idea. Something to do with emotions? He wondered.

He returned to the chaise-lounge, and turned to the next page. A transcript...Oh, this should be interesting. It was a verbatim record kept by the doctor, of several sessions of hypnosis with her. Wow! Then it occurred to him. Oh, my gosh... the Story Past ...the bridge, in the Jataka story structure. So this is going to be the ending of the novel. How interesting! A novel of joint authorship – His-Story first, and now Herstory. Intriguing. Clever!

The Transcript

I

“Are you ready?” I asked her, lying on a couch with eyes closed. I was sitting in my chair-on-coasters at the back of her head. She smiled. “In a few moments, you’re going to go back in time... to your most recent memory...”

[A readiness in the face.]
“Where’re you?”
“I’m in ...in ......yes, in the South country of Bha...bha...bha...rata ... Bharata.”
“Can you see the year?”
“Yes, Manimaykhalai Ap...Apsarai, Manimaykhalai Apsarai they call me.
“Do you know why?”
“Because...’cause I’m very ... very ... beautiful...
like the Apsaraa frescoes at Ajanta caves…”

“What’re you doing…?”

“I’m in a garden.”

“Doing what?”

“Picking flowers…”

“Picking flowers.”

“Yes.. for a garland… I want to string together a
garland of flowers.”

“A garland.”

“Yes… to give my mother…. Maathavi… She’s a
street dancer.”

“Any special reason?”

[Sadness in face.]

“Today is the anniversary of … [pause]… her lover
being executed, by Royal Decree … for a theft he didn’t
commit.”

“Oooh…!”

“I’m waiting to console her. It was the flowers
that… that… helped her understand impermanence. That
flowers pass away; so does life…. It’s flowers that helped
her discover the Buddha’s way…..”

“So you’re gathering flowers.”

“Yes, oh, they feel so soft…

[A smile… but then a sudden sense of fear on face.]

“Oh, no … It’s him again…”

“Who”

“Prince Uthayakumaran… He’s following me…

Again… Oh, [in higher tone]…I’m running…”

“To avoid him.”

[Short, fast breaths, then silence.]

“Yes, yes…”

[Pause, as facial muscles begin to relax.]

“Phew, that was close… But now, he can’t come
in… I’m in a glass pavilion… I’ve locked myself up.”

[Again in a voice of of fear.]

“Oh, he’s trying to break the glass.”

“So is he?”
“I don’t know… I’m closing my eyes…”
“Closing your eyes…”

[Lip movement, and a lightness on face].
“Yes… ahhh… feels good… I feel light… ohhhhh…. I’m in the air….”
“In the air?”
“Yes, I’ve used a Mantra charm given to me by a goddess.”
“A Mantra.”
“Yes..I can see him looking up… and he’s getting … smaller and smaller… Oh, now he’s a mere dot, way down there!”
“So you’re still in the air.”
“Yes… I’m being taken … by the goddess… to my mother… to keep him away from me.”

[A sense of surprise appears on her face.]
“Oh, the wind is taking me away from Bharata…”
“Away from Bharata… Where?”
“Oh, it is to an island.”
“An island.”
“Yes, an island…. Just across the Palk Straight.”
“So it’s near.”
“Yes…… It’s a beautiful island…. …. The vegetation is luscious…”

[Long silence… And suddenly, as if in a sense of surprise.]
“Oh, what’s this? [pause.] A Tharuma Peetikaai…”
“A what?”
“Tharuma Peetikaai….”
“What is it?”
“Oh… A Dharma Seat… Oh, I know, I know… I remember now…. This is the seat… the seat…” [A great big smile on her face] on which the Lord Buddha sat, after settling a war between two brothers… “
“Oh, a seat… Are you sitting on it?”
“Nooooh! I’m doing my circumambulations… honouring it… I feel so serene…”
“Serene…”
“Yes…as I continue to go round the Dharma Seat…”
“Going round the Dharma Seat…”
[A smile on her face.]
“Oh, this is familiar territory…palm trees… shrubbery… yes yes, I know those ruins… Dagaeba… Pillars… Bodhi Tree… Oh, I know them on the back of my palm…”
[Long pause. Then, movement of lips.]
“You’re chanting again…”
“Yes… I’m still looking for my mother. [A Happy face. Long pause.] Ah, here we go… I’m flying through the air again [Even a happier face.] Oh… I’m now …, ….with my mother …”
“Where?”
“In the same island.”
“But where in the same island?”
“In the Royal Prison House… I’ve convinced the King to make the Prison House a Daana Saala Alms Hall, a place where the needy can receive food… Oh, I’m so happy. People are lining up…
[Another tender smile on her face…]
“I’m in the sky again… flying back to Bharata…
…[Lip movements.….] “Oh, here we go… I’ve transformed myself … He won’t recognize me now… Great…! I’m back in Bharata… safe… Different woman….”
[But suddenly, a sense of fear on her face. Scratch. Scratch. Scratch at her chest.]
“Oh please, not him again… Please… Prince Utha-yakumaran… Oh… [Continuing fear on her face.] Oh no, the Prince is recognizing me… Now he’s coming close… [Contortions] …. Oh, he’s saying some… something…”
“What?”
[Pain in the face.]
“… I hear a curse… a curse being thrown at me…”
“A curse?”
“Yes, a curse… that… that I be re-born, for rejecting him…, [pause] that I be re-born … to the lowliest of
the lowly…. as the daughter of a … of a latrine cleaner ……Oh, please.. oh, please help me….!”

[Just then she awakes, sweating all over.]

II

[ANOTHER SESSION, IN WHICH I REGRESS HER FURTHER BACK.]

“Where’re you?”
“I… I… am in…Sing…. Sing ….halad… Sing … halad…deepa…” [I HAD TO READ UP ON THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY TO UNDERSTAND THIS.]
“Sing..halad…deepa? Where in Sing…halad …deepa?”
“At the edge of an open field.”
“Do you see anything?”
“Lots of tree-tops.”
“Tree tops? Are you on a tree?”
“No.”
“Are you sitting or standing?”
“Sitting… Yes, I’m sitting…”
“Where?”
“On …an ele.. ele… phant… daha… daha.”
“An elephant…”
“Yes, an elephant…”
“What’re you doing on the elephant?”
“I’m goading it … daha … daha… with a … with a long something … in my hand.”
“You see tree tops… What else do you see around You?”
“Shrubbery.”
“Much?”
“It’s bushy all around …”
“Any houses?”
*She shakes her head.*
“Anything else you see?”
“Deer… A herd of deer… Yes, they seem to be in a stampede… May be they sense some sort of… some sort of… danger.”
“Danger? Anything else you sense or see … or…?”
“Yes, the sun… It’s…it’s sort of blinding me.”
“Hot?”
“Very hot……I’m sweating all over.”
“Are your clothes wet?”
“No, because I’m barebodied …”
“Barebodied?”
“Yes, barebodied … above the waist… Except the golden chain … around my neck.”
“Golden chain…”
“Yes… and golden amulets.”
“Golden amulets…?”
“Yes…”
“Feel your hair. Is it long or short?”
“Well, sort of down to my shoulders.”
“So are you’re a man or woman?”
“A man.”
“A man… So why are you wearing these ornaments?”
“I have to…”
“You have to…”
“Yes, I have to… It is part of what people want to …. see me in.”
“What people?”
“People.”
“People… Are they with you?”
“Some…”
“Who are these people?”
“Some of them are on elephants… Others on … horseback …. Others… on foot…”
“Why’re they there?”
“It’s my army.”
“So are you a King?”
“Yes, I am a King. I’m in Royal Uniform.”
“How old are you?”
“May be 60.”
“How long have you been King now?”
“…May be 40 years.”
“Do you have a name?”
[Long pause.]
“Yes… My name is Elara… Elara… Ela… Elara… Yes, I’m Elara…”

“Are you King Elara himself, or are you the medium?”
“Elara himself…”
“Why are you there?”
“Waiting for someone to arrive.”
“You’re happy to meet this person…”
“Happy? No… No… Oh no no no…” [I note a distinct higher pitch in her voice.] But, may be … yes… yes… I do want to meet him.”

“Him… So you’re waiting to meet another man.”
“A Prince.”
“A Prince.”
“A Disobedient Son.”
“A Disobedient Son. So, is he there?”
“No… but I can hear the drums… and the music… the battle drum music… I see the deer taking off at break-neck speed.”

“Who is this Disobedient Son?”
“… Disobedient Gaem…”
“Gaem?”
“I mean to say Gaemu … Oh yes, Gaemunu… Disobedient Gaemunu … is what he’s called.”
“Disobedient Gaemunu.”
“Yes. They actually call him… these people are funny, Dutu-gaemaunu … Gaemunu the Wicked.”
“Gaemunu the Wicked.”
“Wicked?”
“Yes, because he was disobedient.”
“Disobedient to whom?”
“To his father…King Kaavan… Kaavantissa.”
“Why is he called disobedient, and wicked?”
“He dispatched some women’s clothing… to his father.”
“Why?”
“Because the father-King wouldn’t …fight … wouldn’t fight … me…”
“Wouldn’t fight… Why would anyone want to fight you?”
“I came from another land.”
“Came from another land.”
“Yes… I brought over my own men…”
“Do you mean an army?”
“Yes… … my army is strong.”
“So that’s why the King doesn’t want to fight you.”
“I don’t know… But in my army, I also have several De-Leonese Generals and men.”
“De-Leonese?”
“Yes..That’s whose land I conquered … part of it.”
[I notice a sigh here.]
“But the father didn’t want to fight you.”
“Yes… may be because my army was… my army was strong… Or may be he didn’t want to see his people killed in battle.”
“But the Prince wouldn’t listen…”
“Yes, I’ve watched him building an army, disobeying the King.”
“So the Prince wants to take you on.”
“Yes.” [I see a sadness overcome her.] “I can see his generals … from where I am… eight, nine ….yes, ten of them… A column behind each one ….”
“So you want to go to war with him.”
“No, I don’t want to go to war with him…”
“You don’t want to go to war?”
“I don’t want to go to war?”
“Is your army is my people, too … The local De-
Andhrese-speaking people …, alongside the De-Leonese. They, too, see me as an invader…”
“So were you…?”
“Yes, I was… But … But … [I notice her eyelids
twitching as in pain.] I can’t tell you … It hurts me too much…”
“But you’re waiting for the Prince’s army.”
“Yes… and now they are very close … But.. [I see
wrinkles on her forehead.] … Wait a minute… No, they’ve stopped advancing…”
“Stopped advancing…”
“Yes… they’ve stopped at the opposite edge of the
open field …”
“Stopped.”
“Oh, the music has stopped, too… Oh yes, I hear a
giddy-up giddy-up giddy-up.”
“A giddy-up giddy-up giddy-up…”
“Yes, I see someone on horseback… charging towards me… He’s stopping… He’s saluting my Com-
mander… Oh, he’s handing over … handing over some-
thing… Oh, may be, may be a … scroll…”
“A scroll…”
“Yes, a scroll… Now, here’s my Commander riding
towards me… [Pause.] The scroll is … in my hands now…”
“Can you see what’s in it?”
“…. An invitation …”
“An invitation?”
“Yes… to advance forward …. to meet him…”
“Meet him.”
“Yes, Prince Dutugaemunu is inviting me … invi-
ting me … to single combat…”
“Single combat….”
“Yes... single combat... Says here, ‘Under the rules of chivalry ..., to save the lives of both your men and my men, De-Andhrese and ... De-Leonese’.”

“So are you accepting the challenge?”

“I’m telling my Commander to carry back a message..., agreeing to single combat..., that I’m ready for single combat with him.” [Eyes twitching.]

“See anything?”

“[Long pause.] I see Dutugaemunu advancing towards me...”

“Is he close to you now...?”

 “[Pause.] Yes, very close... Oh, he’s a handsome young man... Young enough to be ... to be my son... [Smile on her face.] He looks very special... [Still smiling.] I already like him...”

[SURPRISED TO HEAR THE WORDS, I PURSUE.]

“You like him?”

“Yes, I like him...”

[Smile disappearing.]

“Can you see anything?”

“The elephant he is riding on has stopped ... stopped ... right in front of my elephant. Oh... what’s this? ... Oh, his elephant is raising its trunk ... and now... lowering it ... in salutation to me...!”

“In salutation?”

“Daha ... daha...”

[Slight movement of her foot.]

“Daha... daha... Yes, I’m getting mine to return the salute...”

“To return the salute...”

“Yes... Now the Prince is bowing to me. [Pause.] Oh, here he’s ... he’s addressing me...”

“What’s he saying?”

“‘Hail to the King, Mighty Elara...’ He’s saluting me again...
‘I have not come here, to challenge you… lightly …or wantonly, ....or out of youthful recklessness … or callousness …or for the sake of power... I have come, Oh Mighty King, against the wishes of my beloved father, out of duty……. out of duty.’ He’s saluting me again. ‘You’ve been a just king. So people tell me … But they also remind me, Oh, Mighty King, that you’re an invader nevertheless …an invader… You’ve taken away the sovereignty… of the country…. The sovereignty of the people of the land ….. De-Leonese and De-Andhrese… who have lived together now for over 300 years…. in peace and harmony.”

[Facial contortions.]

‘It is the hand of tradition, oh King, it is the hand of tradition… that compels me to challenge you….’

“He’s looking at me… eye to eye….as he bows.”

[Pause.] ‘Centuries ago, my history tells me, a son had to challenge his own father, out of duty …, so the citizens could live in freedom… It is this call of freedom, this call of sovereignty, oh Mighty King, that calls me… that places… that places this lance in my hand…. to unite the country… for the benefit of the many, for the good of the many… for the benefit of both your people and my people… [Pause] You rule over the north, but there is no effective government in the rest of the land… It is my hope, and prayer…. and I want your Blessing on this, to unify the country under one ruler, as has never happened in history..’

[The voice lowering.] ‘I know, I well know, that I will pay for this… in some future time, the inevitable hand of Karma… never too far from me …. like the wheels following the yoked animal, like the shadow that never abandons you…. But, I will gladly bear the consequences, I will, I will, I will, Oh, Mighty King, for the benenfit of the many… It pains to raise my arm against you…, against the advice of my Ven-erable teachers… who remind me, taking life is a violation … a violation of the First Precept… They remind me of the
sanctity of life... And I fully respect that, Oh King... ...I know that what I'm trying to do... is a violation... of the Precept... But, Oh Mighty King, please grant me the favour... the favour of your understanding... that bear these arms I must.”

[Pause.]
‘With my humble apologies, then, Oh Mighty King, I challenge you... I challenge you... to single combat... One on one... Let there be no unnecessary bloodshed.”

[Pain in the face.]
“See anything?”
“[Pause.] I hear a cry... a roaring war cry...” And he’s bowing to me again. And I return it... Here he’s talking again...”

“What’s he saying...?”
‘You know that in your army are some of my people... waiting over there with weapons at the ready... to take on my army... I have in my army, as you know, De-Andhrese-speaking people. So if our armies were to engage in battle, there’s going to be bloodshed..., unwanted bloodshed... Many lives would be lost... That’s why, that’s why, Oh Mighty King, I have invited you to single combat...’

[Pause.]
‘If you win, you continue to be King...as you’re now..., mostly in parts of the North..., with ongoing threats of rebellion in the larger area of the land...’

“He’s bowing me now.”
‘But if you lose, oh Mighty King, I shall rule all of Tamba-panni, north to south, east to west, uniting the people speaking De-Leonese, speaking De-Andhrese...’

[I LISTEN, UNINTERRUPTING HER.]
“I have a sense that I’m not disagreeing with him...”

“Not disagreeing?”
“Yes... but here, I hear some more words from him... ‘One more reason, Oh King, for inviting you to single combat. You are, after all, a King, and I want to respect
that… If you die, I want that to be … at the hand of royalty!

“Now, he’s bowing, and I’m returning the bow.”
[Pause.]
“Can you see the year when this is all happening?”
“Year… year… Yes, it’s… . 101 BCE may be.”

Swadesh continued reading. “Fascinating stuff,” he said to himself.

“What’s happening now?”
“My eyes…, ohh…my eyes’re catching his eyes… Yes, his pupils are … like… like… dilating… expanding… as if to take in my eyes…” [Silence.]
“And he’s saying, ‘I’ll never forget those eyes of yours… in a million years…yes, those eyes…”’
[Suddenly, eye lids are pressed against the eyes, cheek bones raised, and a palpitation of the heart. The hand grabs the chest, and a sudden movement of body as if it’s at unrest.]
“Oh, what’s this? My elephant is beginning to be… restless.”
“Elephant beginning to be restless.”
“Yes, very… I feel … I feel as if … as if… I am … I am …tum…tum…bling, yes, tumbling.”
“Tumbling?”
[Pause. Thwack, and a sudden jerk of the head.]
“Yes, Tumbling off my elephant… Oh, I’m on the ground….. Oh, my head hurts…It has hit on something hard.”
“You mean, like a rock?”
“Yes… Oh… oh no!”
[A painful look on her face.]
“I feel as if… as if a heavy foot is over my face …ooooyi….
[A greater contortion on her face.]

“Aren’t you alright?”

“Nooo... Something is trampling me... Aaaay aayai oooyi.. Gosh...... It’s a heavy foot... Oh no! Oh no...! It’s the foot of my own elephant.”

“Are you still alive?”

“Yes ... Gaemunu’s elephant is shoving off my elephant...”

“So you’re OK...”

“Yes...I mean....Noo.....oo..oooo... I’m... I’m dying.... I can now see an elephant lowering itself on its fore legs, with trunk raised...”

“Is anyone on it?”

“Yes, it’s Gaemunu.. He’s dismounting and ....oooh. aay aay yoh... He’s pulling the spear off me... and summoning the Royal Physician.”

“Is he there now?”

“Yes...He’s... ooooyi... aayyaayy... pull...ing... pulling out the spear.... He’s trying to stop the bleeding... But it’s oozing... like from a fountain ...”

[Pause. A paleness blanketing her face.]

“Are you dead now?”

“Yes.. I’m dead... But someone is holding my head in his hands...”

“Can you see who that is?”

“Oh yes ... I can see his face...It’s Gaemunu.. He looks sad!”

“He looks sad...”

[Long Pause.]

“Now I’m on a Royal Palanquin...carried by some men.”

“Palanquin?”

“Gaemunu is walking behind... And... I hear him getting a reprimand...”

“A reprimand?”

“Yes, from a monk...he’s being chastised...”

“Chastised... Can you hear the words?”
“Yes…I can hear the words… ‘You, Prince Gaemunu, you have violated the First Precept… to not kill.’

“Is Gaemunu saying anything?”

“I can see him stopping, and falling prostrate at the monk’s feet… I can hear his words: ‘Oh, I’m aware, Ven-erable Sir, I’m only too painfully aware… that I’ll be pay-ing for this … dearly, during my life cycle of Samsara…… But, I ..I…’

“He’s sobbing now…”

‘But I had no choice… I had to protect the Sasana … from the invaders…. I know I’ll pay a price… But if the Sasana dispensation is protected…then…’

[Pause.]

“Now what’s happening?”

“He’s continuing….”

‘Already, in his country of Bharata itself…. the Master’s teachings are in danger…….’ [Pause. ] ‘I’ve been watch-ing carefully, Venerable One, how since the time of the in-vasion, those like you, in robes, have had a difficult time going on your begging rounds… Fewer and fewer people were supporting the temples. You have been finding it in-creasingly difficult to walk the Dhamma….. The Master’s Dhamma, in this blessed land, is still an infant, only a mere century and half years old… It’s taking its baby steps. Every King, since King Deva… devanam…piya….tissa when Our Blessed Buddha’s Dhamma was introduced, has nurtured the Sasana dispensation.

[Pause.]

‘Under the Mighty King Elara, all it faced was hostile forces… Recovering Royal patronage, Venerable Sir, is the only way to help the Dhamma reach our farms, our house-holds, our workplaces, our fishing grounds… Without the protective arm of the King, the country is going to go back to cult worship, belief in God, incivility… killing each oth-er . Soon, at this rate, as you well know, Venerable Sir, there will be none of you Teachers around to guide us in the Dhamma. You’ll be forced to give up your robes …No
community to support you. Only harassment… King Elara’s soldiers will only look the other way…’

[Pause.]
“What’s the monk doing?”
“He’s not saying anything… Oh, yes, here he is… ‘I agree with every word you say, Prince Gaemunu…, but I still want to remind you that killing a human being goes against the Teachings of our Great Teacher…”

“Is the Prince saying anything?”
“He’s bowing to the monk… who is now leaving.”
[Long pause. Contortions re-appear on the face.]
“Is something happening?”
“I’m on the funeral pyre … flames are … consuming my body … from all sides… I can hear the Hindu Swamis praying… for my soul… And monks in saffron robes are going around the pyre, chanting, and wishing me liberation from Samsara.”

“Wishing you liberation from Samsara.”
[JUST THEN, SHE AWOKE, WITH A BIG SMILE ON HER FACE.]

III

Swadesh turned to the next page, and began to read the transcript of another session.

“Now go back further …..”
[Her eyeballs move under the eyelids.]
Who are you?”
“Elara.”
“King Elara?”
“No Elara, a petty overlord.”
“Where?”
“Somewhere in the South Country of Bharata….”
“Are you doing anything now?”
“Yes, yes, I’m putting an army together.”
“Yes, an army?”
“Yes, an army… to invade.”
“Invade?”
“Can you see an actual date…?”
“Date… date… Yes, ….145 BCE.”
“Whereabout in South Country of Bharata are you?
Can you see anything more specific?”
[Silence.]
“Yes, it’s coming … It’s coming…Pa… Paan…
Pandya. I want to get my revenge on …my husband …”
“Husband?”
“Yes, my husband …of a past life.”
“Husband …of a past life.”
“Oh, yes sirree.. The time has come… He is now
reborn… as King…, in an island”
“King in an island?”
“Yes…King… ….A….As….Asela. King Asela….
Vijaya become Asela…”
“Vijaya…”
“Yes, Vijaya reborn as Asela…. It’s time for me
to invade.”
[Pause… Then, an excitement in the face.]
“Oh… my men have come across… the channel …
only 22 miles… of shallow water… And I’ve arrived by
boat… with weapons…”
“So where’re you now?”
“In Tambapannii … the…. Island of the De-Leonese… Oh yes, it’s called Singh…hala..deepa, yes, Sin-
haladdeepa… …”
[Pause.]
“And now what’s happening?”
“My men are encircling …”
“The king?”
“Yes… Oh, here my Commander is making an
opening …, an opening for me to get close to the king.”
“So are you close to him now?”
“Yes, very….”
“And?”
“Oh…nooo. I’m raising my lance and oh noo.. I’m thrusting it into him”

[Pause. Contortions.]
“You don’t want to kill him…”
“Nooo.. Oh please… I don’t want to kill him.”
“You don’t want to kill him…”
“Yes…Nooo ….. I mean… I don’t want to kill him.”

[Contortions in her face.]
“But gosh… I killed him…. I killed him… Oh, I killed him! Oh no…”

[More contortions.]
“I can see his bulging eyes .. Oh I can’t watch this… He’s gasping for his last breath… Oh …please …please pardon me, King… I’m sorry I had to kill you…”
“You had to kill him… Why?”
“Yes .. I mean no… No … I mean yes… But I had to … had to take my revenge …”

[Silence. A sadness is appearing on her face.]
“So this was your husband. And why did you want to avenge him?”
“Oh, it’s a long story…..”
“Can you tell me?”
“For betraying me …Oh, how I looked after him… the Prince… New in the country… I loved him so much… It was a chance for me to recover my lost love, my lost compassion…. But he betrayed me … again…”
“Again..”
“Yes, again…, when he betrothed this Princess … from the Pandya country…”
“You want to tell me about it.”
“It’s a whole other story.”

[Silence. Soon, eyes open, with pain still in them.]
[IN THE NEXT SESSION, I REGRESSED HER FURTHER BACK.]

“Where’re are you?”
“I’m in Tambapanni… the shores of Tambapanni”
“Why are you in Tambapanni?”
“I came to recover my lost compassion.”
“Lost compassion?”
“Yes, oh, how I loved him.”
“Him.”
“Yes, my son… Sinha-baahu… Lion-Arm.”
“Sinha-baahu. Lion-Arm.”

Oh, finally the connection, thought Swadesh, raising his eyebrows, and turning the pages back, to the Interlude!

“Yes, I lost my love … for him …”
“You lost your love..”
“Yes, I lost my love … my armour of love…”
“Your armour of love.”
“Yes, twice it protected me... Twice his arrow wasn’t able to pierce through …, protected by my love… But, then .. then… ooooh ..”

[She reaches out to her chest. Scratch. Scratch. Scratch

“Then…, when I realized he was out to get me, I just lost my composure… my compassion..”
“Lost your compassion.”
“Lost my compassion…, when his arrow pierced me …”
“So he killed you.”
“Yes… No, I mean… I brought death upon myself, when my love left me… as I hurtled towards him … overcome …, overwhelmed… by… by …by… anger, as he pulled his string..”
“Hurtled?”
“Yes… I was Sinha, a lion...... Roaring lion...... roaring Sinha.”
“Roaring Sinha.”
“So why are you in Tambapanni?”
“Because that’s where my son...., yes, Sinhabaahu, that’s where he ended up ..., leaving the Bharata ... after killing me.”
“So you’re now in Tambapanni....”
“Yes, I want to recover my lost compassion.”
[Eyes remain unmoving.]
“Anything happening?”
“I see waves..., big waves..”
“Are you near an ocean?”
“Yes.... I see a ship...”
“A ship...”
“Yes, a ship...”
“Who’s on the ship?”
“People.”
“People.”
“Yes..., people... A lot of them...”
[Blinking of eyes even as they remained closed.]
“What’re they doing?”
“They’re ... they’re coming off the ship....on to a boat....”
“On to a boat?”
“Yes... I can hear the counting – six hundred and ninety five..., ninety six..., ninety seven..., ninety eight..., ninety nine... seven hundred...”
“Seven hundred! Men and women?”
“No, only men... Seven hundred men.”
[Pause.]
“Where’re they now?”
“On land .. at the sandy beach.”
“Can they see you?”
“Nooo. They can’t”
“Are you behind a tree?”
“Nooh! I’m invisible.”
“Invisible?”
“Yes… I’ve made myself invisible…, with the Mantra I was given.”
“Who are you?”
“I’m … I’m a mind … a mind without a body.”
“A mind without a body!”
“Mind without a body… Yes, mind without a body… But I can create a body at will.”
“You can create a body at will? Do you have a name?”
“Yes… K… Ku...ve… Ku...ve... ni... yes, Kuveni.”
“Kuveni.”
“Yes, Kuveni.”
“Are you male or female?”
“I can feel my bare breasts dangling…”
“Is there anybody else with you?”
“Yes… my retinue…”
“Are they male or female?”
“All of them female … yakkhinis … Yes. All yakkhinis.”
[Pause.]
“Can you see anything happening?”
“Oh, here he’s facing the ocean …”
“Who?”
“Looks like he’s the leader… He’s flexing his muscles… and looking at them…”
[A smile on her face.]
“And now, he’s raising his hands …towards the rising sun… Yes, I can hear his voice…Yes...yes… He’s singing … Sounds like a paean of joy …”
“Paean of joy.”
“Yes…
[Lips begin to move.]
Cut off have I, my Lion-ly Singh past,  
Moving up the ladder, in one final blast,  
Lion-ly-no-more am I.

Delinking the chain, the chain of evolution,  
Lion-no more, indeed I’m human!  
‘De-Leonized, Singh-hala am I.,  
hala, hala, hala  
de-linked, de-linked, de-linked,  
shorn-off, de-linked for ever.

De-Leon, De-Leonese, Singh-hala am I…  
Sing-de-linked, Sing-hala am I.”

“No more lion.”  
“No more lion… oh, now he’s addressing his men?”  
‘Thank you, my loyal men, thank you. The trick worked…,  
the trick worked. Back in Bharata, as we all know, I  
couldn’t have… ever, shed my Lion-ly past…,  
though born human, to a human mother… I will always have  
been…. Lion-arm Sinha-baahu. Lion-arm Sinha-baahu.  
Lion-arm Sinha-baahu. Tradition, a chain of tradition,  
too weighty to be cut off…,  too raw to be forgotten…  
So I had  
no choice, my men, no choice but to get out…  
Fast and furious though it couldn’t be…  
Slow and smooth it had to be…  
to build up, to orchestrate, a notoriety… of rebellious-  
ness… Trouble enough for the citizens to demand, demand  
that I be expelled…’  

“The men are listening in rapt attention. Now I hear  
a roaring voice. ‘Hail, Prince…’”  
‘Hail, my men…From now on, I call myself Vijaya,  
the Victorious One.’  
“‘To Prince Vijaya’!, the men are saying, stabbing  
the air with their clenched fists, up and front.”
‘Now we begin a new life… in this new land... Look at the sandy beaches …The rich and luscious... copper coloured sand…’

“He’s taking some in his hand.”

‘Yes, copper sand…Tambapanni, I call it… Yes, Tambapanni… And I plant this flag…’

“Oh here’re the men each picking a handful of sand, and repeating, ‘Tambapanni.’”

‘Are you ready, my men?’

‘All the way,’ they seem to be saying, pushing their fists to the sky. Oh, what a powerful chorus..”

“Powerful.”

“Yes, so powerful I can hardly hear the billows breaking off the reef.”

“Seven hundred voices.”

“Yes, they’re now singing…”

He:    We’re now...
Men:   We’re now...
He:    ...the Sin--hala people!
Men:   ...the Sin--hala people!
He:    We call this land.
Men:   We call this land.
He:    Sin-hala-d-deepa.
Men:   Sin-hala-d-deepa.
He:    Island of the Sing-hala,
Men:   Island of the Sing-hala,
He:    ...the Golden Beach’
Men:   ...the Golden Beach’
He:    Tambapanni.
Men:   Tambapanni.
He:    Rah rah rah...
Men:   Rah rah rah...

[A smile overcomes her face, and a slight jerk of her shoulders, as if keeping to the tune.]
[I’M REMINDED OF … THE TV COMMERCIAL TUNE, BACK IN CANADA.]

“Are they doing anything now…?”
“Yes.. they’re… They’re embracing each other… and now lining up…”
“Lining up…”
“Yes… Oh here, the first one drops to the ground, touching the Prince’s feet…”
“Touching his feet…”
“Yes, one after another…”
[Pause.]
“Anything happening now?”
“They’re climbing…They’re climbing coconut trees…”
“Coconut trees…”
“Oh, it’s a competition… And, I had better get out of the way… ‘Here’s the first fruit,’ the first one to reach the top says, picking a coconut, ‘in the new land … of the new land.’
“First fruits of the new land.”
“Everyone, up in the trees, down on the ground, is now again raising their fists… ‘Hail to the Prince’. Yes, the first up the tree is climbing down…, and dashing to the Prince… He’s taking the fruit in both hands…. And raising them … to the sun…, holding the fruit firmly in his hands.”
“Holding the fruit…”
“For guiding us here…’, he says.”
[Pause.]
“The Prince is charming, I must say…”
“Charming…”
“Yes, charming… Oh, what’s this…? Looks like another competition… Oh, they’re chipping away at the husk… I can see the sweat on their back…”
“Ah, with the husk whiffed off at the top, the men are all holding a coconut each…Here they’re raising them… to the sun…”
Men: Hail, Prince Vijaya, to you, the Victorious One.
Prince: Hail, my men, to you, the Victorious Ones.
Men: For long life, in our new found land...
Prince: For long life, in our new found land...
Men: May you, Prince Vijaya Victorious, go from prosperity to prosperity!
Prince: May you, my Men, victorious, go from prosperity to prosperity!
May we all, victorious, go from prosperity to prosperity!

[I COULDN’T HELP THINKING OF OUR OWN NEWFOUNDLAND IN CANADA.]

[Pause. Movement of the eyelids, as if closing them.]
“What do you see?”
“The morning sun…”
“Where’re you?”
“I’m under a shade…, thinking of how to get Prince Vijaya … to come to me.”
“Can you see him?”
“He’s talking to his men… He’s instructing them … to explore the island…”
“To explore the island…”
“Oh, and he’s instructing his men to treat any women they meet …to treat them with respect… ‘It’s your responsibility, my men, to treat them well… to look after them well. Our ideal should be…. ‘An unchaperoned beautiful maiden, with a golden pot on her head, traveling across the land, unharmed.’”

“An unchaperoned beautiful maiden, with a golden pot on her head, traveling across the land, unharmed.”

[WHAT A WONDERFUL IDEAL!]
“Yes… …but I’m thinking how to draw his attention…”

“So are you finding a way?”

[Pause.]

“Yes… yes … “

“Within the wombs of my pond…”

“Your pond…?”

“Yes…I’m the Water-Lordess of this pond… No one who enters this pond leaves without my permission.”

[Movement of eyebrows…, as if in pleasant surprise.]

“Ah yes… It’s working…

[Eyes moving.]

“The men are headed this way …My charm is working…”

“Are they close to you?”

“Yes, very …”

[Pause.]

“Anything happening?”

“Yes, my retinue is working all the men into the womb of the pond, one by one.”

[Pause.]

“Just as I thought.”

“Thought what?”

“The Prince is coming in search of his men. …And I’ve made myself visible!”

“Visible.”

“Yes… And, I’m cotton-yarning… kapu katinawa …, waiting for him…

[Fast batting of eyelids even as they are closed.]

“I can feel my heart swelling…, with vengeance.”

[Silence. Pause.]

“Yes. He’s looking at me… He’s nodding as if to say, ‘Oh, I know when I see one’”

“One what?”

“A yakkhini…. Ogress.”
“A demoness.”
“I know you’, he’s saying.. ‘I know who you are… You’re not batting your eye lids…You’re a yakkhini’”
“He’s recognizing you?”
“Yes, he’s saying, ‘I’m Prince Vijaya… You are keeping my men under your power…. Release them this very second …or else …”
“Or else?”
“Yes, or else you die…”
[Shiver.. Shiver..]
“Oh, now that I see him, my feelings of … of vengeance … it is waning, waning like the moon towards the waning quarter….”
[A smile on her face.]
“And ooooh! I can feel a welling of love for the Prince..., within my bosom…”
[A wider grin on the face.]
“My compassion is returning…Oh, it’s returning… How can it not? How can it not…? My only son… My only son… How could I not love him…? I’m now dismantling the charm… the charm I cast on his men….”
[Pause.]
“‘Well, are you going to release my men or not?’ he is saying menacingly.”
[Pause.]
“Oh… here they come…out …of the water.. They’re all looking at Vijaya…, thanking him for saving their lives …, and then, looking back… at me…”
“So what’s happening now?”
“The men are huddling together…”
[Pause.]
“Oh, here comes Vijaya again….He’s coming towards me… I’m fully visible.... in my charming clothes of a young damsel… He’s looking me over from a distance, I’m returning my gaze….coquettishly.. Oh, what a hunk of a man! What a charming face! Just looking at him, I want to be with him… for ever…”

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[A silver thin smile on her lips, and a long pause.]
“Anything happening?”
“He’s signalling his men.”
“To do what?”
“Oh, they’re breaking into a dance as they sing.”
[Smile on her face.]
“And the Prince?”
“He’s clapping along..., and moving towards me, in a dance step sort of...”
“And you?”
“I’m making eye-contact with him... Oh, how handsome!”

[Pause.]
“Oh, my goodness.. How could I believe this? He’s... he’s proposing to me ... ‘Fair Lady, will you be, will you... be my life-partner..., to enjoy the fruits of this maiden land..., to bear fruits..., to sow our seeds...?’”
“So are you accepting it?”
“Accepting it! Yes. Oh yes ...Yes, Sirree, I’m accepting it... Now I can have him back ... I can have my son back... I can hold him in my bosom... I can show him all my love..., again.”

So this is the story of Prince Vijaya and Kuveni as in the Mahavamsa, said Swadesh to himself. Keeping the papers aside, he got up and did a few paces back and forth. He reminisced upon the story, as he had read, and heard. Then he returned to his seat and started going through the pages again.

[Suddenly, face shows pain.]
“Oh, no, not again...”
“What’s happening?”
“I’m hearing ominous words. The men are singing to a chorus,
Fair Maiden of Royal blood Coronation calls.
To walk down the aisle of Tradition La Belle’s halls.

“So what’s Vijaya saying?”
“I can well hear the dialogue ….”

Vijaya: But, how could I? I just asked for the hand of this local beauty. How could I betray her?
Men: She is beautiful all right... But Fair Prince, what of the future? Will the people accept you as King?
Vijaya: (Taking the chin between the index finger and the thumb, and looking at the sky, he is speaking to his men.) You have a point… But how’re we going to get one? Our kingdom is in the North country of Bharata, way up there.”
Men: But why go that far, Fair Prince, when we can get one from the South country of Bharata?
Vijaya: But they’re not of Royal blood.
Men: Oh no Prince... The women who were put on a separate boat ... meant to be our wives...
Vijaya: What about them?
Men: Just heard they’ve landed in the Pandya Country... a mere twenty two yojanas.
Vijaya: Izzat so? Oh my my my... How lucky ...!
Men: Indeed, Prince, indeed... It’s our luck...
Vijaya: To Pandya country then... Why wait?
Men: To Pandya country then... Why wait?
[Contortions on her face, and a whole body shaking... Long pause...]

“Oh no... I can’t watch him walking arm in arm with a Khatriya Lady … I’m going to let go of my body… again…, and my mind… I want to be re-born…, to take
my revenge on the whole clan of the Lady… She’s not going to get away with this!”

[Contortions in her face.]
“Oh no… I’m going to be born as a man in Pandya country… to take him on…”

[Pain in her face, when she wakes up sweating all over.]

V

Oh, yet another session. Interesting stuff alright, Swadesh said to himself.

“Now I’m going to ask you to move forward in time… to the most recent rebirth… I mean the present birth.”

[A smile on her face, as if to say, “I’m ready!”]
“Where’re you now?”
“I see an ocean.”
“Are you near it?”
“I’m playing about in the water.”
“Are you alone?”
“No, I’m with my mother and father.”
“What’re they doing?”
“They’re bathing.”
“Is there anybody around?”
“No, it’s pitch dark… We come out only when nobody is around… so we don’t pollute others.”
“Pollute?”
“Yes, we’re untouchables. So we come to the ocean when there’s no one around.”
“So is it night time?”
“Yes.”
“How old are you?”
“I’m … I’m …very young…”
“Do you know your age?”
“Nooo …but I’m a young girl… I can feel a water .. may be it’s my blood…..ready, awfully ready …to pollute me…I’m running towards my mother… Oh amma…. I’m in tears…..My mom’s holding me…and leading me out of the water.”
“What’s your father doing…?
“He’s coming out of the water, too… Oh, here is somebody … It’s a young boy, may be my age…”
“Is he close to you now?”
“Mother and I are walking fast … to avoid him… Father is behind us…”
“And the boy?”
“He’s walking with father ..”

Pause
“We’re at our shanty…in the Rented Grove.”
“Is the boy with you?”
“No, father is leading him towards the village.”

Swadesh began to nod as he read the last few lines. He took Milinda’s Manuscript in hand, and browsed through it. Ah, here it is... the chapter titled Mahal. He began to re-read it.

Now the two figures close to each other were leaving the waves towards the shore. As they got closer to him, he noted that one was short - about what he was when he was ten - six years ago. The other was taller, though not by much. As he came closer to the water, he recognized a woman and a girl, who turned direction, as if to avoid a stranger, and began to take hurried steps….
Suddenly he found the other figure not too far from him. It did not take long to recognize the man…. His gait, his lean figure, even in the dark, against the open skies of the ocean. Out of the water, he was picking up a piece of cloth, and drying himself up as he thought he smiled. Then, he started following his wife and daughter walking towards a hut at the other end of the cemetery. Milton followed him, as the man slowed down his pace. Soon, he watched the mother and the daughter go in. The man stopped, and turning around, began walking in the direction of the village, looking back as if to invite Milton to follow him. As they walked, Milton looked the man in the eye. “Mahal?” he used a word he had picked up in school. Daughter? The man smiled.

Clever, connecting His-Story with Her-Story, he said to himself, and continued with the Transcript.

“Can you move forward in time?”
[ I see her eyes moving.]
“Are you with your mother?”
“No, I’m not.”
“Are you with anybody?”
“I can’t believe this… I’m in bed …!”
“In bed?”
“Yes, in bed …with my son, Sinha-baahu….Noo. It’s Vijaya… Noo Noooooooo…, it’s Gaemunu… Oh… it’s Milinda!
[ Silence, and a calm over her face.]
“Where’re you?”
“I’m in Anu…anuradha… Anuradhapura .. with my husband…Right in front of the Mausoleum…”
“Mausoleum..”
“Yes, the one built by him. I mean by Gaemunu, in honour of me….I mean Elara…? I don’t know… It’s confusing…”

“So you’re at the Mausoleum.”

“Oh, here’s something inscribed on it? It reads, ‘This Mausoleum contains the ashes of King Elara who ruled the North, and is built in His honour. It shall be a Royal Decree that everyone passing it dismount, and pay due obeisance. Signed, His Royal Highness, King Gaemunu the Righteous.’”

[A slight movement of her body.]

“Is something happening?”

“Oh… I’m passing out… My husband Milinda is carrying me in his arms… Oh, I love it… I’ve waited for it… for so long!”

“Waited for what?”

“I’ve waited all these millennia for this to happen.”

[A smile brightens her face. She comes out of the hypnosis as I look at her face.]

“You’re all smiles,” the Last-chance doctor told me after the last session. I looked at him, raising my eyebrows…, as my hand went to my chest, quite unconsciously. ‘The itch is gone,’ I cried out loud…. ‘The itch is gone, for ever! For ever, for ever, for ever!’ I broke into a dance, and hugged him. ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you… Doctor. Thank you for a last chance given to me…’ And, oh how hard I shook his hand, as he stood there smiling.

“You have a long history.”

I looked at him, and suddenly began to cry on his shoulder, a dam opening up, and the waters gushing.
As Swadesh turned to the next page, he encountered her words again in the form of a Diary Entry.

**A Paean of Joy**

Freed am I
of an itch of a lifetime,
in the mirror alone now a patch
of a samsaric scratch.

A scratch born
of a sharp spear,
a scratch born
of a compassion lost,
a scratch born
of a lost love.

Roaring Sinha Lion I am not.
Nor Kuveni of yore.
Neither Elara, nor Manimaykalai.
Not even Tangamma.

But a process alone, ever-changing,
of a mindbody.
This body not me.
Me this body not ….

Sinhabaahu he’s not
nor Vijaya,
nor King Asela,
nor Dutugaemunu again,
not Uthayakumar,
not even Milton-Milinda,
but a mere process…
This baggage, carred two millennia and a half …, propelled into a Samsara cycle of suffering, by a moment of lost compassion.

Oh, how true the Buddha’s words…

From now on, Metta meditation my comfort, my treasure, my guide, to weave a blanket of friendliness to all…, once and for all…, never to lose it…

Now to experience that incomparable Grand Finale of my mindbody, that Sublime Nibbana, I make my vow, today, this very moment, to enter the Holy Sangha Order.

May I be, from now on, free from enmity, free from anger, free from distress.

May I, from now on, keep myself happy!

Saadhu saadhu saadhu!

Oh, Tangamma’s writing again, Swadesh noted.

When Milinda came home today, he was sort of taken aback, to see me dash… towards him, open
arms, in my Empress’s clothes! Had I gone mad, I’m sure he wondered. I was oily all over, I mean all over. I wanted him to be part of my oil.

When I got home from my last session with the Last Chance Doctor, the first thing I did, before he got home, was to dash to the washroom. Opening the cabinet, I reached out to the bottle. But as I was about to open its cap to pour out the contents down the toilet bowl, I felt a sense of ingratitude. ‘This oil, the trusted kowkatat thaile oil for all ills, has served me well all these years, keeping my itch under control, if failing to get rid of it.’ So I wanted to extend my lovingkindness, my friendliness, to it…, by making it part of my body, if also my mind, pouring it all over my body. I could not wait for Milinda to come home. And when he did, I couldn’t wait to embrace him, pulling off his clothes, piece by piece. … shirt, vest, pants, brief. Getting now the oil on his face first, I rubbed myself against him, gently, slithering against him, pressing my breasts on to his chest, and then …, down. down down… Then, going around, I repeated the ritual. Now, holding his right arm …, and I was hoping his left brain, too, I moved in on him, doing the same thing with his left arm, right brain.

I then led him to the bedroom.

“What’s this?”

“Oh, some banana leaves, so they could keep us cool. And the oil will stay on us long….”

Then, pulling him on to the bed… I hugged him again, entering… into ….a deep sleep … of the sort I had never had, I thought, in my entire life.

Swadesh closed the page, and put his head down on his folded hands resting on the table. He felt the chest heave….
What a way for such a compassionate woman to go…. And what a way for him to go…. And, oh, the hand of karma…. How it works…… But, how wonderful to see a resolution … to a millennia-old love-hate relationship. He felt a trundling of peace within his heart. Am I so fortunate to have the Samsaric karma to share in their journey!

Suddenly, his hands went to the envelope sitting on his lap. He had ignored it when it fell off the pages. Opening it, and seeing Milinda’s own handwriting, he began to read with excitement… “Oh, what a lovely thought,” he said to himself, after reading it. “What a thoughtful parting gesture!” He read it again...

Soon he was walking along Pederson Lane, reminiscing about his many visits to his friend. Standing at the gate, he looked at the house. There was an emptiness, it occurred to him. Birds were languishing, as if they were denied of something. A lazy cat walked towards the house. Now he saw Dasa in a corner of the verandah, squatting, and gazing at the sky. He was sighing from time to time. Suddenly, he broke into a hysterical cry, banging his head against the wall. “Oh my Podi Mahatteya…. Aney magey budu Mahatteya…. Oh my Buddha-like Master,” he continued to wail, now pummeling his chest with both hands amidst the wailing. “When will I see you again?” Now, feeling a hand on his head, Dasa looked up through a wet blanket.

“Oh, Sir, it’s you,” he started crying, kissing his feet.

“Oh Dasa,” Swadesh said, as he helped Dasa to his feet. “I have something for you,” Swadesh said, taking the envelope from his attaché case. Dasa looked on. Opening the envelope, Swadesh read it out to Dasa. “This house,” he read, pausing to look at Dasa, and then continued. “This house, in which I have lived all these years, I will it to be given to Dasa.”

Dasa kept looking at Swadesh. “No, no…. Oh no, this just can’t be… No… not for me…. Then he suddenly
started crying, curled up squatting, “I want,” he said through sobbing, “I want…” He lifted the hem of the sarong and keeping it to his nose, blew into it. “I want my budu Mahatteya…..”, he cried out, “Not his house…” Then he started rolling from side to side, moving his head from side to side to side, too, as Swadesh watched, not knowing what to do.

Walking out, the structure of the Milinda-Tangamma novel came to his mind. Story within a story within a story! A smile came upon the lips of Swadesh.

But dear Reader, remember the waiter? One who waits, with patience…. because there’s just one more little matter…. 
POSTLUDE

Never never appeased is hatred by hatred,
by non-hatred alone overcome it is.
This is the eternal Dhamma!

- Dhammapada, 5
Thirty One

A Bengali Folktale

As the Air-Brazen plane took off, Swadesh settled down to his first-class seat, well buckled into a first-class history, he thought. He watched the Stewardess coming down the aisle with a pile of Newspapers in hand. “Daily-Misnews, ‘Rong Times, Bharat Daily, Bengali Herald, Delhi News”, she called out, looking the passengers in the eye. As she reached his aisle, he lazily reached out saying, Bengali Herald. Though he had never been to Bengal, the great Poet Rabindranath Tagore made the connection for him. The Bengali words he had heard flowing out of his mouth over the radio in his younger days in the Island had always fascinated him, especially the mellifluous dance of sound patterns. And then the controversy whether the De-Leonese, and their progenitor, Prince Vijaya, came from the North East of the Bharat Desh, or the North West. Then the whole story, or myth, of Vijaya’s Leonese, or is it Lionist, heritage, recalling also Tangamma’s past life regression.

Turning the pages lazily, his eyes fell on a headline in the Features Page. A Bengali Folktale Revisited. Never having read a Bengali folktale, it piqued his interest. Tilting his backrest to a half reclining position as he lazily looked through the window into the empty sky, he began reading.

We all know the simple story. The King’s beautiful daughter Suppa was on her way on a state visit in a caravan of several carts, donkeys and horses. Attacked by a ferocious lion, smelling animal flesh, the retinue ran helter-skelter, leaving Suppa alone in her carriage. Unprotected, the lion carried her away in its teeth, screaming, she flailing her hands and legs. Eventually, she bears two children, Sinhabaahu and Sinhaseevali, sired by the lion.
Returning to the city later, however, their mother’s hand is betrothed by the new King, and Sinhabaahu is appointed Vice-Regent, and sent out to a remote area. Discontented with the posting, Sinhabaahu, headstrong and tempestuous, turns to terrorizing his subjects. He is packed off with 700 men, but shipwrecked, they land in Tambapanni, the Brazen Island, anointing himself Prince Vijaya.

“What?” he said to himself, pushing a button on the armrest to bring the reclining backrest upright. He wanted to take a closer look. He read the paragraph again, in total disbelief. “This is a Bengali folktale? Unbelievable! I thought this was the national myth of my very own De-Leonese people…” He knew the story by-heart alright, he thought, catching himself in his old-country English usage – by-hearting, everything from arithmetic tables to amo amare amavi amatum – love love love love…. But what he found intriguing in the Bengali Herald story was how …

Literary hands have, over time, embedded flavour into our favourite tale, particularly the part about Suppa being carried away by the lion.

He pressed another button as the headlight beamed a ray on to the page.

Tamed by the calmness in his ferocious presence of the only human being left in the carriage, the lion, curious, moved towards Suppa, head down, taking one slow step at a time, as if not wanting to scare her. As she watched the humungous beast approach her, it appeared to her more like her kitty at the palace than a wild beast in the jungle. Not sensing any danger, but not knowing what to do either, she closed her eyes, soon to feel a wetness on her face with each smooth swish of a tongue. She thought
she enjoyed it even more when she felt the warmth of its hair on her breasts as it, sending its paw around her, pulled her gently towards it. Feeling an inner tinkling of her beastly desires in the presence of the beast, she opened her eyes gradually. She felt her eyes locked into the lion’s, when with a smile, she began stroking it, now the main, now the nape, then the back, the legs, soon the underbelly, as the beast stayed still, like a kitten enjoying a scratch and a tender grooming. As the beast continued to lick her in her face... and all over, animal desire peaking, she stretched flat on to the floor of the carriage, as the lion, aroused, mounted her, oh so gently...

Creative all right, Swadesh thought, bestially creative, containing a chuckle.

Soon, she found herself riding on its back, as if on a palanquin, to its jungle abode. She bore him a son Sinhabaahu ‘Lion-Arm’ and a daughter, Sinhibeevali ‘Lion-Nourisher’.

He continued reading the next part, which he realized he was more than familiar with.

Raised in a cage, door covered with a stone slab, which only the strength of a beastly lion could move, Sinhabaahu was beginning to feel restless. However, it was a secret shared by her mother - that she was, unlike his father, no animal, but indeed a human, that spurred the youthful Sinhabaahu into action! Jolted by the revelation, he vows to seek out his heritage. Seizing a moment of opportunity when the lion-father was away, collecting food for the family, he heaves the cage-door out of
The way and carries mother and sister to safety, on each shoulder... out of the jungle...

He visualized Sinha-baahu, a hunk of a young man, teeth clenched, huffing and puffing and sweating all over, removing the slab, over mother Suppa’s protests, as sister Sinhaseevali peeked from inside as a gleam of light entered the cave. Immediately, the scene from the operatic play Sinhabaahu he had seen, before he had left the Brazen Island, came romping. He was now sitting on the front row at the YMBA Theatre, watching the Lion acting in rage, upon his return, to the clanking of cymbals, and heightened drumming, but also with fond memories. The words in the melody began to reverberate in his ear.

Gal dora bindalaa.

He translated it to himself, as if he was trying to explain it to his seat partners on the plane.

Gal dora bindalaa, Shattered a stone door,
Len dora aralaa, ajar the cave door…,
Sinhaa..., Sinhabaahu,
Sinhaa..., Sinhabaahu.

He continued humming, in his mind, closing his eyes.

Mama daenagatimi. I knew it, I just knew it.
Mama saeka kalem. I guessed it... did I not?
Sinhaa..., Sinhabaahu.
Sinhaa..., Sinhabaahu.

And then the Lion’s forlorn fond memories, still in song, to the accompaniment of a lonely flute...
Tender loving daughter, your brother, I knew, was rough and tumble, and rebellious. But you? You, on your lips always my health, returning home carrying my hunted wealth! But gone you, too, tender daughter, now? Keep my sanity, stunt my anger, tell me how!

As if felled by a heart rent, the Lion collapses on the stage!

Swadesh enjoyed the memory of the scene as he continued to keep his eyes closed, experiencing the airborne lightness, flying through the skies. Soon, however, opening his eyes, he went over the last line in the Bengali Herald story again, and continued reading:

Seizing a moment of opportunity when the lion-father was away, collecting food for the family, he heaves the cage-door out of the way and carries mother and sister, on each shoulder ... out of the jungle... back into the land of Banga.

Banga? He found himself suddenly springing forward. Oh, that’s the connection, Swadesh said to himself, as he slapped on the shoulder of the passenger sitting beside him. When he saw a pair of startled eyes staring at him, he went oops! as he realized it had never even occurred to him in his excited discovery that it was a woman that was sitting beside him, along with her husband. Profoundly apologizing to them immediately, he stretched his hand out to her husband. “I’m sorry, so sorry... I just got carried away from this incredible story ... I mean the incredible connection in this story.” As the startled couple looked in puzzlement, he began to explain to her how what he thought was the national myth of his people was in fact a
mere folktale in a different land, and how he was stunned to be able to make the connection. “Banga, you see here,” he pointed to the word on the page, pushing it towards them. Pardon for imposing on you, but I hope you don’t mind… He was relieved that the two of them, Canadians as they turned out to me, took it all in stride.

So, this is the Wanga of the De-Leonese myth! The words of a determined Sinhabaahu began to ring in his ear:

My duty it is,
by the people of Wanga...

The words resonated. ‘Of course,’ he said to himself, ‘the change of sound … ba .. va… Rabindranath Tagore… Rawindranath…Rabindra… … Rawindra, Banga …Wanga…

The overhead light now sparkled brighter. Casting a smiling glance at the couple who returned the smile, he continued to read. The article was now quoting archeologist Prof. Paranavitana in his latest theory about the De-Leonese myth:

... However, the story turns out to be very different. Recent excavations have uncovered a place called Sinhapura in Bengal, and the inscription on a stone slab found in the area refers to a robber named Garjan Sinha, after whose family name the place was named. So, as can be gathered by putting together archeological and other pieces of evidence, the story may be re-told in the following manner:

Garjan Sinha, or the Roaring Lion as he was called, was dreaded by the King’s men. So the King had him captured.

A robber of no little fame, on the day he was being taken to be hanged, on foot, to the execution
grounds within the Palace compound, the King’s daughter, Suppa, was looking out her window. Impressed by the aroha parinaha beauty of the hunk of a man, she bribed her courtiers to have him released, saying that he was a long-lost brother, sired by her father in a remote principality.

One day, when a caravan of several carts, donkeys and horses, with a royal retinue, was passing a jungle en route to an outlying principality, the robber, returning to his habits, and roaring like a lion, with his well-trained retinue making enough noise as by a pack of lions, waylaid it. Watching the retinue flee in fear, he approached the royal chariot, to find, to his pleasant surprise, the king’s daughter, all crouched up in fear, abandoned by the terror-struck attendants.

Seeing a hairy face, with long hair, peek into the chariot, Suppa gave out a loud cry, Lion Lion... only to hear a human voice.... “I’m no Lion, your beautiful honour ... I’m Garjan...” She panicked. The atrocities Garjan was said to have committed and robberies carried out were part of the royal banter, and public scorn. But now, as fingers parted the moustache hair covering the lips, and a smile appeared on the red thick lips, Suppa sat up, relieved. “You must be Princess Suppa,” the voice said. “I know all about you... how you rescued me...” He smiled, as she smiled back. He continued. “But more importantly, your rebelliousness.... and how your uncles connived with your father to keep you imprisoned in a one-pillar house.”

A smile came upon Suppa’s lips as she looked at the face with glowing eyes. Moments passed, as Suppa listened with mouth agape. And then, moving her-
self to the chariot door still looking at the hairy face, she unlatched the lock. As Garjan made his entry, she could not but be impressed by his aroha parinaha majestic manliness, now at a much closer range than she had seen from her inner chariot.

And soon Suppa, born under the House of Virgo, found herself following Garjan, born under the House of Leo, arm in arm, into the thicket..., and history...

Hunh… so it was not a lion, after all, that was the grandfather of Vijaya. .. I had always wondered about it… But I know now ….

Swadesh was now writing a letter.

Dear Dasa:
I am way up high as I write this. Please allow me to send you this story that I just read in the Bengali Herald.

What a fitting gesture it was that you should decide to donate the house. You must have a large heart to give away a million .... I do very much adore your decision, to have it turned into a House of Peace. Not only your Podi Mahatteya, but also Ven. Karuna would have very much wanted to return to be with you in your gesture.

I hope the story I’m sending you will add to the ‘Last Chance Doctor’s Report on Regression: a case study from Brazen Island,’ as a good starting point for the research at the Peace House... how two people, in love, symbolized an ancient heritage of peaceful living. Don’t they say that knowing the reason is half the solution?

So, good luck! Please let me know if I can be of help. And keep in touch.
Turning the light off, Swadesh tilted the backrest as far as it would go, and closed his eyes. He wanted to enjoy every morsel of the re-discovery of history as he felt himself on the wings of a flight through air, feeling the cool winds poulticing his whole mindbody.

All of a sudden he jumped in his seat. But what about the part about Sinhabaahu killing his lion father…? However, he felt too lazy to think about it, as he said to himself, “At least Milinda got a good story out of it….”

Then, as he closed his eyes, the famous lines in the Dhammapada he had by-hearted…, oops, learned by heart, in Pali, came to his mind.

\[
\text{Na hi verena veraani - sammanti ca kudaacanam} \\
\text{Averena ca sammanti - esa dhammo sanantano.}
\]

Never never appeased is hatred by hatred.  
By non-hatred alone overcome it is.

This the eternal Dhamma – reality, truth!  
Never appeased is hatred by hatred…. Never appeased is hatred by hatred…. Never never never…, he said to himself, soon dozing off…, as the airplane continued its majestic flight through the emptiness of the sky……
NOTES:


The excerpts on pp. 207 to 209 are from _A History of Sri Lanka_, by K M de Silva, 1981, Oxford University Press.

The two lines of the folksong on p. 253 is from J B Disanayaka, _The Monk and the Peasant_, Colombo: State Printing Corporation, 1993, p. 129.

The 4 lines on p. 265 is a translation of a song by the music group, Gypsies.
Woven
for the enjoyment of the many,
for the good of the many,
this epistle,
of

Introlude,
Story Present I,
Story Present II, of Two Books,
Interlude,
Story Present II (continued.), of Three Books,
Story Past
and
Postlude,

here cometh to an
END.

Composed by
Suwanda H. J. Sugunasiri,
son of
Missinona Warnakulasuriya of Dodanduwa, &
Suwanda Hennedi Sawris Silva of Tangalla,
Sri Lanka,
on the soil of Canada, in the City of Toronto,
in the year 2010.

May you be well!

Never never appeased is hatred by hatred,
by non-hatred alone overcome it is.
This is the eternal Dhamma!
- Dhammapada, 5
Untouchable Woman's Odyssey

This is a novel set in Sri Lanka, though not identified per se in the story. A beautifully written love story, the two protagonists, female and male, come from different ethnic/caste backgrounds. They both undergo transformation in relation to each other, their voices "flowing over one another like water". The story development entails mythology cavorting with history, both post-colonial as well as pre-colonial, the latter spanning over twenty five hundred years.

In a structural novelty, the well-woven and highly engrossing novel adopts the story within story technique of the Indian Panatantra, and also the Buddhist Birth story technique of Present and Past story. It is written at a mythical level so as to render it universal.

Additional Reviews

... the juxtapositions of many incidents and episodes and tales ...just incredible. ...[They] left me just gasping...

...What is genius? It can be defined in variegated ways but the utmost genius in the field of writing could surface when an author manages to packet into 366 pages a 2500 saga of his country's history via a story, melodramatic yet extremely touching.

- Padma Edirisinghe, Montage, Sunday Observer, Sri Lanka

..... authentic village life in rural Sri Lanka in the mid-20th c.

- Prof. Shelton Gunaratne, Professor Emeritus, Minnesota State University, Moorhead, USA

... incredibly cinematic, ... like in the films of Luis Bunuel, the Spanish surrealist filmmaker... ... the recurrent motifs within the grand narrative: of "the stench" that occupied the space of Milton's childhood narrative to "chest scratching", and "where have I seen those eyes before?... a beautifully written novel"

- Anura Bellana, Instructor, Film and Visual Arts, Toronto, Canada
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