Accha House
&
Umma House

A Mixed Childhood in the Sri Lanka of Not Very Long Ago

Asiff Hussein

Accha House and Umma House
A Mixed Childhood in the Sri Lanka of not very long ago

2nd Edition: December 2016

ISBN: 978-955-0028-46-7

Printed & Published by: Neptune Publications (Pvt) Ltd
302, Pahalawela Road, Pelawatte, Battaramulla, Sri Lanka

For My Parents
For all those wonderful childhood years

INTRODUCTION

Once Upon A Time Twelve Thousand Days Ago….

So let me begin the story of my childhood lived thirty three years ago, give and take a few years. That's not a very long time ago, but much has changed since those days when life was like a song, wild and carefree like a spirit in the wind, when even the sun so high above groomed the earth while playing peek-a-boo, for, to my naïve childish imagination the spot of warm sunlight peeping through some opening to light the dancing dust particles nearer the ground, seemed as if it were beaming them all up into that blazing lamp of the sky to consume in its fiery mirth.

But methinks, woe betide the one who lets his past be cast to the realms of forgetfulness, for he is what he is because of what he was. Does not one, despite the tide of time, still live in the after-glow of one's childhood? Change will come as the years roll on, but let not it take away one's happy memories though the years fade its colours. I for one have experienced a lot of change, seeing that my childhood home, and my home away from home, are no more, nor the many mundane things I came to associate with them. The vast volumes of water that have quietly flowed from the picturesque Beira Lake close to that place we once called home, and home away from home, to the sea to its west, slowly but surely, imperceptible at first, but nevertheless moving on, best shows how such change takes place, taking away with the tide those things that once were, but which survive only in one's reminiscences of those happy days aided perhaps by a picture or two or the shared recollections of like-minded kith and kin - An island of delight in a murky lake, a ship of peace in a stormy sea, a beacon of hope in a confused world.

How indeed I long to relive those days, which come like a breath of spring on a cold winter's night or a cooling breeze on a sultry midsummers's noon. How many times have I drifted away on those balmy afternoon siestas between wakefulness

and slumber to those happy days, like a sweet dream occasioned by a lullaby, to wistfully savour every moment of it in spite of its ethereal nature, to wallow in and ensconce myself in an age I know will surely never come. It is to this strong feeling of nostalgia that keeps taking me back to memory lane again and again that this book owes its origins.

Human memory, they say, is short, but mine is pretty long, going back to my days as a tiny tot of two years, for I can distinctly remember mother breastfeeding my baby brother in a little room we once stayed at in Kirulapone. Since the nursling was younger to me by one year, six months and fifteen days and mother did not suckle him for more than six months, I reckon that the incident took place at the latest two weeks after my second birthday. It is mainly using this faculty of mind that I have pieced together this book, to share with my readers a most fascinating childhood my siblings and I lived while growing up in the urban Sri Lanka of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although there is a tendency to look back on one's childhood with rose-tinted glasses, in our case it was more than that, which explains why we could never really outgrow those years.

Firstly, ours was a mixed family with a Muslim father and a Sinhalese mother, both hailing from rather conservative backgrounds, but broad-minded in their outlook. Besides our mixed background, the hybrid vigour we inherited from the mixed union, still in its nascent phase, would have also played a part in shaping our young lives into a most exciting and unconventional one. Secondly, we were three brothers with a very small age gap between us. Two of us, Asgar and I were twins, separated by only twelve minutes, while our younger brother Altaf was no more than twenty months younger. Indeed, so close were we that we called one another by our first names and not by the senior/junior-based kinship terms used by all the major communities in this country. Thirdly, we lived as part of an extended family, among mother's folk. Fourthly, many of our neighbours, as many as five families, were also our relatives on the maternal side, and fifthly, father's family home where his

parents and siblings lived, was a little more than a stone's throw away, a home away from home which we could visit at our whim and fancy.

The story of our childhood is therefore the story of two houses representing two different cultures, Accha House and Umma House, named after our maternal and paternal grandmothers respectively, which stood in old Colpetty, one no longer standing, having been replaced by a green glass-facaded multi-storeyed edifice, and the other fragmented, modified and transformed beyond recognition. The tide of the times has ensured that materially they are a thing of the past, though in my mind'e eye they are still very much alive.

I have employed a free style so different from the structured prosaic style I am used to, but one which I believe can best capture the mood of a colourful childhood that experienced variety in all its richness. The reader will find sentimental reminiscences besides down to earth digressions, matter of fact explanations made in all seriousness alongside terser observations made in lighter vein, prose interspersed by verse, all befitting the context of the narrative. Call it an experiment in writing if you will.

The reader will notice that I often use the plural form *we* and this he or she must bear in mind is not the Royal Plural, the author having no pretensions of royalty. Rather it reflects the reality of our upbringing as three siblings closely bonded by blood and an entire culture peculiar to ourselves, a result no doubt of the larger environment in which we were brought up. As for place names, the street names used here are the older names we were used to as children, not the cumbersome names that replaced them. Though some of these street names had been changed by the time we were kids, our parents and elders throughout our childhood used the older and simpler names in preference to the long and often cacophonic ones that took their place. General's Lake Road refers to the present Sir James Pieris Mawatha, Turret Road to Anagarika Dharmapala Mawatha, Flower Road to Ernest De Silva Mawatha and Green Path to

Ananda Coomaraswamy Mawatha. What sweet simple names unlike the double or treble-barrelled names that took their place, the very mention of which has even decent people cursing under their breath the very men they have been named after.

This is not just a biographical sketch of the author and his immediate family, but also the saga of two larger extended families with all those who enriched their lives - including friends, employees, domestics, and even cats and dogs, not to mention horses, being brought into the narrative. Also woven into the narrative are all those things that were inextricably linked with our lives and made our experiences such a wonderful and fulfilling one; the cultural conflict between east and west we experienced even as children, the thoughts we had, the foods we ate, the books we read, the songs we sang, the toys we played with, the fads we indulged in, indeed, all those things we grew up with that were part and parcel of the culture of those times .Life even three decades ago was fairly stable when compared to today when a good many things are in a constant state of flux so that one cannot even remember a brand or product one used a few days back; here today, gone tomorrow. Recording some of it for posterity is therefore not a worthless exercise, and as the older reader will notice, there are some things that have n't change and hopefully would n't.

So let me commence this narrative, requesting readers to bear in mind that it's all true. No additions to spice up the narrative or poetic licence or embellishments of any kind. It's all as it happened – the good, the bad and the unspeakable!

Asiff Hussein

CHAPTER 1

A Long Romance

Islamic tradition tells us that the first man was Adam whom God made after His image and blew something of his spirit thereby giving him a soul. Eve God created as his mate and the twain He united in the Garden of Eden. The bliss was not to last long, for eating of the forbidden fruit, they were banished to earth to live and die and propagate their species for better or worse.

The spot where Adam is said to have alighted was, according to a widely accepted Muslim tradition, upon the summit of a mountain in the island of Sri Lanka, now known as Adam's Peak. Eve is said to have made landfall in the Arabian Peninsula. The separation was not to last long, for an angel led Eve to Adam, thus commencing the long and fascinating story of the human race. It is not only Muslims who hold on to this tradition. Even George Bernard Shaw held this view when he famously declared: *Ceylon is the cradle of the human race because everyone there looks an original*.

And so it was that the sons of Adam mated with the daughters of Eve for God had put desire in their hearts, desire of one for the other, man for woman and woman for man. It had to be that way or else the human race would have passed into oblivion long ago. With the baser desire also came a loftier sentiment, that of love, for to love and to be loved is the goal of all. True love however knows no barriers, but this can be a prerogative only of the strong-willed, not the weak-minded.

Going by this count, both my parents were rather headstrong people without a care for the world and its whimsical ways. To love despite barriers also means that one must be strongly attracted to the other, which means that looks also count. All the more so when they belong to different races. There has to be

something rather exceptional to attract one to the other. That my parents were beautiful people goes without saying.

My father Wazir Ghany Hussein came from a conservative Muslim family, one line of which traced its ancestry to the Prophet of Islam – Muhammad. This line, if not the other, had a relatively recent Indian origin, the memory of which was lost within a generation or two as they became integrated, if not assimilated, into the local Muslim community. All this in spite of the fact that a good part of the local Muslims, descended as they are from Arabian merchants and mercenaries who arrived here very long ago, have had a very ancient presence in the island and have become more or less *sons of the soil*.

The fact, however, is that Islam, obsessed as it is with the absolute equality of all men as the children of Adam recognizes no caste or race as a bar for separation or discrimination and has an enviable reputation for breaking down barriers of nationality like no other faith. This notion of a common brotherhood has been deeply entrenched in local Muslim society, more so than among many other Islamic communities such as in India, which having come under Hindu influence, have numerous *zats*, as Muslim caste groups are known there. That is why even today, the Moors prefer to identify themselves by their religious designation of *Muslim* rather than by the ethnic label of *Moor*.

The larger Muslim community here little doubt regarded the family as a noble one, further facilitating its assimilation. My great grandfather Mehdi Hussein was after all no ordinary Indian interloper, but a *Sayyid* who traced his ancestry to the Prophet himself. Little wonder he had no difficulty finding a Moor bride from the upcountry and returned the favour by giving all his daughters in marriage to local Muslims. This went against his family tradition, for the *Sayyids*, especially those of Indian origin, do not marry out. That he did so, speaks much of his Islamic character, independent spirit, and as importantly his broad mindedness. Little wonder then that his eldest grandson Wazir, my father, went one step further, to marry my mother

who hailed from a conservative Sinhalese Buddhist family after converting her to Islam.

Father certainly had no qualms about marrying out, especially with a woman from the majority Sinhalese community. He fondly believed that the colloquial Sinhala name given to local Muslims, especially Moors, *Marakkala*, was a corruption of a longer designation *maa rekka le* (The blood I protected) supposed to have been uttered by the Sinhalese mother of a Muslim child, which he took to be a fitting testimony to the close relations that existed between Sinhalese and Muslim since time immemorial. The term actually had its origins in a Tamil loan *Marakkalan* meaning 'boatman', a legacy of the Moors' one-time reputation as mariners engaged in importing and exporting merchandise. But father could n't be bothered going into its etymology. The explanation he had for it, probably picked up from a like-minded friend, sufficed to prove his point.

My mother, Padmini Buddhadasa, hailed from a conservative Sinhalese Buddhist family with roots in Galle in the Southern coastal belt, part of the old Ruhuna country, long regarded as the bastion of Sinhalese Buddhism. Her paternal clan, the Wewelwala Hewages had their origins in Kalegana, Galle while her maternal folk, the Hewadewage Fernandos also had a Southern origin.

The fact however is that the Sinhalese are not a homogeneous nation, but rather a motley collection of different groups that came over from various parts of India at different times, the two main factors unifying them into a single community being language, in this case Sinhala, an Indo-Aryan language, and religion, namely, Buddhism, both of which also had its origins in India. Mother's folk belonged to one such group that had found its way to Sri Lanka from the subcontinent in the distant past. They were known as the Deva or Vahumpura, a caste group whose origins very little is known about save for the fact that they claim a military origin from the ancient Kshatriyas, the Aryan warrior caste, a claim supported by the fact that a good many of their upper rungs are rather fair-skinned and bear

names like *Hevage* 'House of the Soldier' and *Devage* 'House of the Deva', *deva* being a synonym for the Kshatriyas of old.

They were, and still are, a staunchly Buddhist community, remaining so even in the days of European colonialism when Christian missionary activity was at its peak and making inroads into the more dominant castes such as the Govi and Karava. Of this they would vaingloriously boast, often even proudly proclaiming that all their members were good Sinhala Buddhists; all except for a very few of course, like my mother who embraced Islam before marrying father and her youngest brother Lalith who became a Christian after marrying his sweetheart Cheryl. That the family was staunchly Buddhist is borne out if nothing else by the name their father bore, *Buddhadasa* meaning 'Slave of the Buddha' a name shared also by a well known Sinhalese King reputed for his outstanding medical feats even on animals.

As providence would have it, father's family home *Darlington* in Alwis Place and mother's family home *Chitrangi* in General's Lake Road were not very far apart and if not for Bishop's College, an Anglican Girls School in Colpetty sandwiched between Boyd's Place and Beira Lake the two houses would probably have been visible to one another. The good Christian school however did not stand in the way. Bishop's, in the best Anglican tradition, despite being founded by Christian missionaries from England, had opened its doors to students of other faiths, and mother who lived almost opposite had no difficulty in getting into this hallowed institution, bringing her a step closer to meeting her beau.

Those were the days when father, a strapping teenager, was schooling at Zahira College in Maradana. After school he and his brothers would find their way to their grandfather's house Darlington for lunch and would in the late afternoons play cricket in the large garden that bordered Bishop's College, with friends like neighbour Ranjith who lived down Muhandiram Road and Berty who lived down Nelson Lane being invited over. Having played a match or two, they would race one

another from one end to the other. Resting a bit, they would notice, peeping through a wire mesh that separated the property from Bishop's College, some lovely lasses playing netball, spurring them to pass a comment or share a joke before finding their way home. They would have perhaps even caught a glimpse of a fair sprightly girl named Padmini who played a leading role in the school's netball team.

In the evenings after a game of cricket, the boys would find their way to the famous *tosai kade*, Shanmuga Bavan's at Galle Road, Colpetty, almost opposite the American embassy, where they would order the waiter to get them those thick pancakes known as *tosai* the Tamils are famous for, crying out in Tamil: *Nalla tosai soodu soodu kondu vaanga* (Bring us some nice tosais hot hot!). The food here was not only delicious, but also cheap with a *tosai* costing a mere 5 cents or so. Sometimes they would, crossing St.Michael's Road, find their way to the nearby Perera & Sons outlet along Galle Road nearer the old Walkers' Petrol station. Here they would have a few shorteats and perhaps an iced coffee while at the same time 'fooling around' with the girls from Bishop's College who resorted to the place after their classes.

Soon the shy Wazir would espy a fair lass playing tennis on the other side of the fence from the large garden of his ancestral home Darlington. She stood out from the rest of the girls frolicking on the tennis court of Bishop's College. Her name he found out was Padmini and it would have come as a surprise to him that she lived down General's Lake Road, a stone's throw away from Darlington. He would later tell his children how he used to scale the wall of the school to have a glimse of his sweetheart. He was hardly eighteen years old at the time and she just fourteen.

Despite living so close to each other, they could not meet face to face. That changed when the Disney Circarama came to town in the early 1960s. That was as part of an American industrial exhibition, which in typical yankee style mixed business with pleasure, doling out doughnuts to the crowds who thronged it

for a couple of weeks. Nothing, not even the doughnuts dished out by a fancy doughnut making machine they were showing off, pulled the crowds like the Circarama, a panoramic motion picture of America projected onto a giant circular screen so that it looked as if one were being driven through the US in a car. The tryst would change their lives forever.

Later times saw the young Wazir, who had just stepped out of his teens, accompanied by his usual coterie of friends, visiting the yearly Saint Margareth's fair organized by his sweetheart's school. The fair, then as now, was a very lively one with a lot of stalls, like the games stall run by the senior girls which included among others a game where one had to toss three tennis balls into a bucket or hurl them to knock out some empty beer cans to bag the prize, much like the old fairground game of coconut shy the girls of an earlier era had played. It was only on such occasions disguised as chance encounters that the shy Wazir could meet his sweetheart accompanied by a girlfriend or two. One picture postcard he sent her showed a little girl with golden curls dressed in a chequered red frock and cradling in her hands a cute chick against the backdrop of an azure blue sky. It had been printed in Italy in the muted colours of those days and was addressed to Padmini Buddhadasa, Bishop's College. Guess from whom - ??Z??.

The courtship lasted ten long years before the two decided to get hitched. For long had they tarried, and it was time to get married. Getting the blessings of the parents was no easy task. Society was still conservative at the time and mixed marriages were hardly heard of. Wazir's mother certainly did not take to the idea too kindly and told him that if he indeed intended marrying a Sinhala girl, he had better wait till all his sisters, including the youngest, Shanaz, then just a little girl of seven or eight, had been given in marriage, lest his intended marriage out of the community harm the prospects of his sisters. She had of course overreacted, for as time would prove, her son's marriage to the Sinhala girl would not dampen the prospects of her daughters in the least bit, with the eldest going on to marry an

engineer, the second a lawyer and the third a doctor, just as she had wished.

Padmini had to face a harsher reaction at the hands of her father who could not bring himself to accept the idea of his eldest daughter marrying a Muslim. They were, after all, good Sinhala Buddhists and he likely felt that he would lose face in his community which was known to be jealously Buddhist. The rest of his offspring would save him the trouble, for his second daughter Sunethra would choose to marry a Tamil from Jaffna and many, many years later his youngest and favourite son Lalith would marry a Catholic girl from Kohuwala. The old man eventually came to terms with it and took it quite well. How the rest of the clan reacted to mother's marriage to father I cannot say, though judging from their later attitude towards our parents and us, it couldn't have been bad. It was certainly better than when uncle Lalith was considering converting to Christianity to marry his sweetheart Cheryl, when one of his more outspoken cousins lamented, intended perhaps more as a pun than anything else, that he would no longer be a *Buddhadasa*, but a *Jesudasa* – a slave of Jesus!

Upon converting to Islam mother took a new Arabic name *Sameera*. Although the Islamic faith does not require that converts shed their names, it is a common practice in this country to do so, if for nothing else to give them a more Middle Eastern ring. Curiously her new name was rather unbecoming for a Muslim woman, or any woman for that matter, for it meant 'night partner' rather like some shady character from the Arabian Nights. Her earlier name *Padmini*, a Sanskrit word meaning 'Lotus-like one' arguably had a better meaning, but such considerations are often lost in the fervour of conversion. Since the bride had no *wali* or guardian to give her away as required in local Muslim law based on the Shafi school of jurisprudence which the majority of the country's Muslims follow, she declared that she belonged to an alternative law school, the Hanafi which is followed by the majority of Muslims worldwide and a few Muslims of Indian origin domiciled here.

This school does not require the consent of the bride's father to marry, laying down that it is her choice and hers alone, which agrees with the teachings of Prophet Muhammad. And so it was that the lovers were wed, free to do as they wished with their lives. The newly weds were soon on their way to Kandy and rented a house at Victoria Drive, Kandy (Present day Sangharaja Mawatha) nicknamed *Ginipetti Gedara* (Matchbox House) after its peculiar shape.

Why they chose Kandy, then a sleepy town by the lake, is intriguing. Perhaps it had something to do with father's fascination for cooler climes. Legend has it that Kandy, the capital of the Sinhala Kingdom of old, was discovered by a Brahmin hermit - an earthly Eden of sorts, with clear springs and groves of orange in the forest and strange happenings such as a hare pursued by a pack of jackals suddenly turning on them and putting them to flight. Kandy had its dark days as well, especially in the days of its last king, Sri Vikrama Rajasinha, a cruel despot of South Indian origin, who, fearing for his throne in the days the English were ruling the coast, first turned on the Moors, suspecting them to be British spies, and then on the Sinhalese of high birth. He not only cut off the nobles, but also their families, such as when he had the children of a chieftain named Ehelepola beheaded before forcing their mother to pound the little heads in a mortar. The woman was then bound to a stone and made to leap to her death into the waters of Bogambara Lake.

The Brits, exploiting the disaffection of the people towards their King, took over the land-locked kingdom, opening it up to the rest of the country by building a vast network of road and railway. This was of course not a bad thing, for it allowed low country folk to trek uphill without having to move mountains if they chose to, as my parents did.

CHAPTER 2

The Early Years

Being born on a Leap Year is not a bad thing, except that your birthday falls once every four years. But there I was, a Bohemian from birth, pushed to start life in a bright new world that fateful day of 29th of February, 1972. It would have come as a relief that I wasn't alone, for my twin brother Asgar had been born 12 minutes earlier, that very same day. I would n't grudge him for getting a head start ahead of me in life though. We were, after all, twins.

There is no elder or younger with twins, all the more so with identical twins. Identical twins are alike as peas. They are the clones of the natural world, sharing the same genetic make-up as both have their origin from a single fertilized ovum that for some inexplicable reason still unknown to science, splits into two. A twin is therefore in a sense, one's other half, and despite often being seen as one of two, he is an individual in his own right. Indeed, the founding legends of many well known nations have twins, or rather one of a twin, as their founders. Romulus, the founder of Rome was a twin as was Jacob, the father of the Israelites. So was Vijaya, the founding father of the Sinhalese nation, and Elvis the King of Pop and the founder of Rock N Roll was also born a twin, though he could not enjoy the other's company as he died very young. Despite their individuality twins are often dressed alike, like we were from our very early days so that hardly anybody except our parents and those near and dear to us could tell the difference. Indeed, even a blood hound, despite its keen sense of smell would not have been able to make us out from one another since even the scents of twins are the same.

Our early infancy was spent at Victoria Drive facing the picturesque Kandy Lake. Here, our parents rented out a house nicknamed *Ginipetti Gedara* owned by one time Kandy MP Shelton Ranaraja, almost next door to the place of our birth

Lakeside Adventist Hospital. Our little family, nine months after our birth, moved to No.16, Stratford Avenue in Kirulapone where father's family was residing following their departure from their ancestral home Darlington and was given a little room upstairs facing the front garden.

It was here that my earliest memories were formed, for I can distinctively remember mother breastfeeding baby brother Altaf seated on a chair near the entrance to the room. Also still fresh in my mind is father's little sister Shanaz rushing up or down the stairs with a broom crying out that a mouse had bitten her toe though it is possible that she was simply acting it out, a pantomime of sorts, just to amuse or frighten us. These incidents took place when we were very young, for mother did not breastfeed Altaf for more than six months and as he was only a little more than a year and a half younger to us, this would place the memory at about the age we had just passed our second birthday at the latest. Curiously my twin brother Asgar would also recall these incidents as clearly as I, proving beyond doubt that it could not be a mere figment of a childish imagination.

Before long we had moved to my mother's parental home at No.201, General's Lake Road, a fine residential area at the intersection of three wards of Colombo, Colpetty, Slave Island and Cinnamon Gardens. Here we would spend much of our childhood and even a good part of our adolescence, indeed the finest moments of our lives. And to think we simply called it *Accha House* (Grandma House). We called it as such to distinguish it from another house which was close to our hearts and a second home of sorts *Umma House* not very far away, where our paternal grandmother whom we called *Umma* lived.

The room we were given by mother's folk, not as a dowry, but as a gesture of goodwill to a daughter of the house, was a delightfully spacious master bedroom with a very high ceiling and a skylight in a corner attached to which was a smaller chamber which doubled as a kitchen. But this was not all we could call our own. A section at the very front of the house which had the added commercial advantage of opening out to

the road on one side was also given to our parents to serve as a base for their auctioning business, a board on top of it boldly proclaiming that it was the office of 555 Auctions run by our parents Wazir and Sameera Hussein. It also showcased items to capture the fancy of passers-by, the one I best remember being this little silver-coloured helicopter whose rotors would whirl at the slightest kiss of sunlight. A portion of the room screeened by a partition of some sort housed a large open wooden bookcase which we called 'Our Library', for it held our entire book collection that had steadily grown over the years.We were soon taking over other parts of the house as well, such as when we built a little lab with about a hundred chemicals – not just the basic elements, but more corrosive ones like acids, alkalis and even liquid gases that gave out horrible smells - near a corner of the dining room. Nobody objected even to this, though every once in a while we had to put up with the occasional grumble from grandma that dabbling in chemicals was not a good thing.

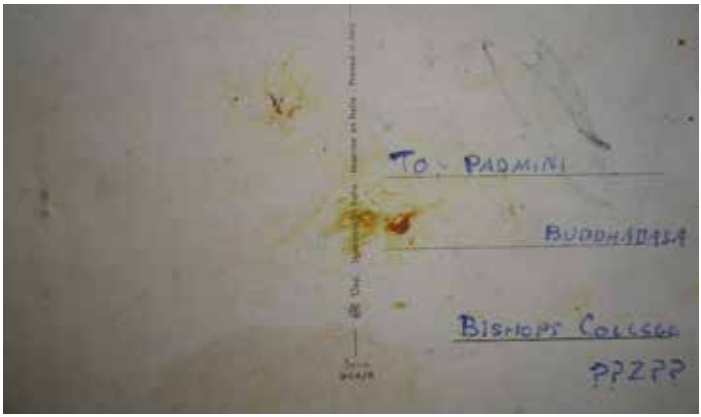
That we were naughty goes without saying, but they all had to put up with us, even the matriarch of the house. If it's anything to go by, grandma addressed us twins as *Jo* and *Po*, a corruption perhaps of Asgar and Asiff, though how many transmutations it went through to acquire these simple monosyllabic forms I cannot say. Or could it have been some lingering thought of that horrid little fellow Georgie Porgie which she broke into two when she chortled out our names, the Georgie Porgie an old nursery rhyme sings of:

Georgie Porgie pudding and pie
Kissed the girls and made them cry

Father in his carefree days at Darlington

Mother in her carefree days

An Italian postcard father sent mother during their courtship



And guess by whom

Father and mother on their wedding day

Father and mother with the twins

Happy family. Baby Altaf makes five

CHAPTER 3

Accha House

It was at 'Accha House', mother's parental home that we spent the good part of our childhood. Accha House was not its real name though. It was the name my siblings and I gave it, calling it after its matriarch - our maternal grandmother whom we called *Accha*. The actual name of the house was *Chitrangi* and it stood on an estate once occupied by a bungalow – as large houses were known then – named Villa De Lauris which went as No.79 Turret Road, Colpetty and was named after Lauris, the eldest daughter of Mohandiram Namunudewage Suasaris Fernando Wijeyesekera and Dewnuge Caroline Pedris. The lady was married to Hewadewage Samuel Fernando and the property went to their son Alexander Fernando who died childless, leaving his brother Stanley Fernando of Cooper's Hill, Colpetty to serve as his executor and dispose of it, the proceeds of which were to go to his children, my grandmother Myra and her brothers Elmo, Justin and Kingsley.

Put up for auction in the 1940s it was purchased by some Vahumpura clansfolk of the Fernandos, chemical magnate Wewelwala Hewage Hendrick, and his wife Diunuge Dharmawati, a nouveau riche couple who had their roots in the Galle District in the southern part of the country. The couple would, a few years later, arrange the marriage of their eldest son, my maternal grandfather Buddhadasa to Stanley Fernando's eldest daughter Myra which took place in 1945 – a clear case of an elite transaction, a *ganu-denuvak* as the Sinhalese would say, in the form of a matrimonial alliance, which it was thought would benefit both families.

Land at Colpetty back then was not as prized as it is today since much of the commercial development at the time was still focused in the Pettah or the downtown area just beyond the

Colombo Fort, the Fort itself being a much coveted residential area of classy gentlemen and gentlewomen, many of them Burghers of Dutch descent. The spot even before the British takeover in 1796, is said to have had beautiful buildings with glass windows, a rare sight in the east at the time, though after the British victory it was stripped of the old winding walls that girdled it and divested of its moat and drawbridges, one of which could be approached from Colpetty. Colpetty, being placed not very far from the Fort had by the inter-war years burgeoned into a fashionable residential suburb of sorts, but could in no way compare with the Fort. The property W.H.Hendrick acquired encompassed a vast continuous stretch abutting General's Lake Road and Turret Road in what was then a part of Colpetty (Colombo 3 ward). It was only in later times that the section facing General's Lake Road came to be considered part of Slave Island (Colombo 2) and the section facing Turret's Road part of Cinnamon Gardens (Colombo 7). Historically however it was all part of Colpetty.

Upon this vast estate stood an old building, perhaps vestiges of the older Villa De Lauris. This, Hendrick partitioned into two, gifting one portion of it to his eldest son, Buddhadasa who would call it *Chitrangi* and the other to a younger son Sumanadasa. Two more houses immediately to the north of Chitrangi were gifted to daughter Indravati and son Piyasena. The land the couple owned extended eastward as well, facing Turret Road, allowing two more daughters Bhadravati and Chandravati to build their homes. The rest of their ten offspring were gifted separate pieces of land broken up from the garden of their large estate facing Cotta Road in Rajagiriya to which they had moved to around 1945.

The couple themselves lived in a grand old house, a veritable manor at No.10, Cotta Road, Rajagiriya styled 'The Hague', an appellation which along with the family name of Hendrick, an old Dutch Name and the extremely fair skin of their offspring would give rise to a joke that the family hailed from Holland. The house served the family, including the married offspring

and their children, as the *Mahagedara* or 'Great House' - as grand family homes where family members used to assemble on special occasions were then called. Following the death of the old couple – Hendricks in August 1971 and Dharmavati's in November 1972- it was inherited by their youngest son W.H.Nimnasiri nicknamed Muni in keeping with Sinhalese custom. The practice, however unfair it may be, has, like the old European rule of primogeniture where the eldest inherits the family estate, ensured that many an old family property survives without being fragmented. Needless to say, *The Hague* survives to this day.

Chitrangi, our 'Accha House' at No.201, General's Lake Road was occupied by Buddhadasa and his newly-wed wife Myra in the immediate post-war period, in 1946 or 1947. It was here that all the seven children of the Buddhadasa family, including my mother Padmini, grew up. The house was named *Chitrangi*, Sanskrit for 'Charming body' by my grandfather who obviously thought much of her beauty. Though not very impressive from the front, being a single-storeyed house with a modest facade, it was nevertheless a large one that extended a long way backwards, with big airy rooms and tall ceilings.

A grill iron gate with ornate floral patterns much like *fleur de lis* and painted a light blue stood proudly between the outside world and Chitrangi of charming body. Though forged out of iron the gate could easily be scaled by any intruder and if nothing else it served as a sort of flimsy see-through veil to the beauty within. Her mouth, through which one entered comprised a series of steps on one side, polished or painted bright red as if she had like some amorous, nay lascivious maiden stuck her tongue out beyond her almost dribbling lips in the rapture of a lover's embrace. This led to a double door, painted milk white, rather like teeth, that opened in to her copious throat - the hallway which was quite large in comparison to the rest of the rooms that formed her innards.

For her eyes, she had a couple of windows at the front of the hall that looked out towards the road, the three or so white metal bars that secured it sufficiently spaced to give her a good view of the outside world and let in a fair amount of air and light. Further down, in the centre of the hall stood a sturdy circular wooden table with four legs. This was in a sense the heart of the house. It had stood thus for well over thirty years and still stood strong. In a way it symbolized the conservative spirit of those times, so unyielding to this thing we call change, to which eventually it would have to give way, losing its commanding position in the hall and a place in the house, but only when all its members had left it for good, never to return again. For it was only then, when there was no life left, that the heart of the house ceased to be.

The main hall opened out on the right to a large inner hall which had all the insignia of a decent Sinhalese family, including among others, some framed black and white family photographs including that of a man with a toothbrush moustache that looked very much like Hitler's, but fortunately happened to be a great grandfather of mine going by the name of Hendrick; a cabinet of some really outdated tomes belonging to a grandfather named Buddhadasa; curios like a Geisha girl attired in red kimono which for some peculiar reason was placed under a round table which hardly anybody could see unless they bent low, as if kow-towing to it; a vintage tube radio embedded in a light brown wooden cabinet which covered all except the speaker set in the centre of it in circular fashion, a black dial-up telephone bearing a 5-digit number 26465 as was usual then and when television came, a box-like TV set or two. Here also stood on one corner a little table upon which a garish image of the Buddha sat in calm contemplation.

Passing the hall through a white double door paned with glass one entered the innards of the house; firstly, her stomach, the dining room which was frequented by gluttons and gourmands of every description, who, sedately seated along the length and breadth of its large table, gulped, gobbled and gormandized

whatever they could get past their throats till their tummies could take no more. Aiding and abetting in the gastronomic orgy closer to the doorway in one corner stood a large enamel-coated creamy-white refrigerator standing ever so still that one might think it played no part in the unsavoury goings on here.

Facing the dining room were two spacious bedrooms, the one on the left occupied by our grandmother Myra and her grown up, yet unmarried brood, and the one on the right by father, mother and their three boys. Further down, a passageway opened out in the right to a pantry with rows of brightly coloured wooden cupboards placed against two sides of the wall while a door on the left led to a quaint old bathroom with a rather gritty floor sporting a huge porcelain bathtub like the kind one might expect to see in old Victorian homes. Mounted on a wall above the tub was this disused gas geyser, a silly looking cylindrical contrivance fired by pipe-borne gas that had a decade or two earlier given the master of the house hot water for his baths. And if anybody didn't like the look of the discoloured flush toilet with ceramic bowl, they were welcome to use the servant's bog at the back of the house with its porcelain squatting pan permanently embedded on to the ground like a giant keyhole into which one could let go without much straining.

A series of steps at the end of the passageway led to the backyard, a large playpen of sorts with a flat concreted area dented with two large sandy squares, the one on the right verdant with a mango tree that bore fruit only in its later years and the one on the left usually bare but sometimes carpeted with pumpkin vines, green gram plants or the local variety of spinach with large leaves and purplish seeds we kids grew when we caught the green bug. A further flight of steps led to a still lower area clothed with wood ash out of which a patch of banana trees darted out, their droopy green fans dimming the sun, giving the place a rather haunted look. And as if that were not enough, a few paces to the right took us to a roofless four-walled structure which we simply called 'The Garage' as it was once a busy workshop run by uncle Suranjan, a motor maniac. We turned it

into a hanging garden of sorts when we let run some bitter gourd creepers that trailed down from its roofless walls.

But that's not all the playing space we had. Starting from the grill gate at the front was this long sandy passage running along the entire length of the house, quite broad nearer the gate but gradually tapering to a very narrow passage towards the rear of the house, the way to which was barred by an arched wooden door. The musty beige or cream-coloured boundary wall on the left which separated the property from the neighbouring Ambawattes was often overrun with Bouganvillea blooms, papery bracts of pink or purple smuggled in by thorny vines that came scrambling over from the garden next door. Nearer the arched doorway leading to the backyard stood a shrub or two which was home to a legion of budding butterflies, for dangling from its leaves were these beautiful almost fairytale-like little silvery mango-shaped chrysalises of some species of Lepidoptera, the like of which I have never seen since.

And now to get on with the inmates of the house, a motley lot amongst whom we would grow up. Here lived who I might as well describe as the matriarch of the house, its chief occupant, our maternal grandmother Myra whom we kids simply called *Accha*, a slight makeover of the usual Sinhala term for grandmother *Acchi*. So matriarchal was she that we kids called the whole house after her – Accha House.

Grandfather W.H.Buddhadasa lived at Galle Face Courts close to the Galle Face Green. They had fallen apart after the birth of their seventh child Lalith. Rumour had it that she would not serve him as a good Sinhalese wife would, even when he came home after a hard day's work; even a cup of tea she disdained making herself and if that were not enough had a servant serve him the tea rather than serving it herself. She had obviously not been privy to the kind of advice a wise mother once gave her daughter: *To keep a man, you must be a maid in the living room, a cook in the kitchen and a whore in the bedroom*. Grandpa needless to say moved to greener pastures not very far away, though maintaining the family even when

they had grown up, to the extent of providing them with a regular supply of fireworks to welcome the New Year.

All of Accha's brood lived with her except for one daughter Sunethra, who had migrated to Kenya with her Jaffna Tamil husband Karunagaran in 1974. Even her firstborn, Padmini, having married a Muslim and taken on the more Arabic sounding name of Sameera had moved in, bringing with her, her husband Wazir and three little boys.

This interesting cast of characters included the dowdy duo Nandani and Chandani, both younger to mother. So close were they to grandmother that the only word to describe them would be 'mummy's girls'. Grandma who needed servants at her beck and call, spoiled them rotten so that they ended up like Cinderella's two stepsisters, hardly able to do even a simple domestic chore. We would always associate the two as both often dressed alike in spite of the fact that they were not twins. Both of them were also spinsters and seem to have had no desire to get married. They would have probably been better off in a nunnery, but they were Buddhists. Nandani the elder one we called Renday Aunty, why I cannot say, except that everyone else called her Renday. She was a bit slow on the uptake, slower even than your usual tubelight, which I am told was because she was starved of oxygen while in the womb. Chandani, the bandy-legged younger one was cheery at times and peevish at times, being prone to mood swings that could spin into temper tantrums such as one sees in a tiny tot of two or three and flaunting a priggishmess not seen even in aging Victorian spinsters, such as when one evening she dashed in a huff, to change the channel of a particular TV show we were watching just because it featured some women with long fingernails, which needless to say was too sordid an exhibition for her chaste eyes.

Then came Accha's three boys, the eldest of whom Suranjan landed a job as a laundry boy at Oberoi Hotel (where the Cinnamon Grand now stands between Colpetty Junction and Galle Face) and stayed put, eventually going on to become its

Laundry Manager. When we knew him at Accha House he was somewhere in the middle but nevertheless steadily working his way up the rungs of the laundry establishment. With time he would bring home a wife, Priyanthi, who in turn would bring forth another addition to the family, a daughter Lakmini nicknamed *Toto* but whom we simply called *Shimpy* as she had this Chinese look when she was a toddler, quite fair and somewhat slit-eyed. She would eventually blossom into a beautiful woman, but long after we had left Accha House.

Suranjan's younger brother Chandana was not as stable as big brother. An easy going type, he never had a regular job, contenting himself with odd jobs of various descriptions, and if not so occupied tended to be the stay-home boy, helping his mother keep the house tidy. A tipsy fellow, he loved guzzling down cheap hooch like the locally produced *arrack* - strong stuff as far as I can tell from the peculiar smell he reeked with. He eventually settled down to a very brief marriage to a girl who one would have thought would sober him down. It didn't work out, for it was like hitching a wagon to a dragon. Their marriage was so short that I am still unable to recall the name of his beautiful bride. She was beautiful nevertheless. Of that I am certain. A pretty face, after all, is hard to forget, even for a little boy.

And finally there was Lalith, whom we called 'Lala Uncle'. The youngest of the brood, he was the 'baby' of the family and mollycoddled by the women of the house. Accha doted on him and garrulous as usual would mumble and bumble nonsense just to get his attention, to which he would josh rather dramatically and mantra-like in English "*Don't jabber ma, jabbering jabbering no end!*". A fairly good-looking fellow save for the large ears that stuck out of his noddle, he was, towards the end of our residence at Accha House, smitten by the charms of a Catholic girl named Cheryl Dawson whom he would later marry, adopting her Christian faith.

And then there was our great-grandfather Stanley Fernando, quite advanced in years, who was looked after by his daughter

Myra. He usually slept on a hard red couch in the inner hall-rough riding for a man who had known some really good times. Stanley was, after all, a man born to luxury.

The son of very wealthy parents, Samuel and Lauris Fernando, he lived easy in a large two-storeyed house in Turret Road. His father was a partner in a very successful mercantile house known as N.S.Fernando & Sons established by his father-in-law N.S.Fernando Wijeyesekera. The man had been honoured with the rank of Mohandiram by then Governor of Ceylon, Sir West Ridgeway for his generosity and munificence. It was thanks to his largesse that the Victoria Memorial Eye Hospital, a large building in Indo-Saracenic style near Lipton Circus saw the light of day. The company was probably the largest stationary provider in the island and also imported drapery from Europe and silks from India and Japan besides exporting tea and other produce sourced from its large estates in Kurunegala District and dabbling in native drugs such as musk, bezoar and camphor.

Stanley grew up a prodigal son, it is said, because of his mother's sterling advice. She told him that since he had sufficient family wealth, he had no need to earn a living. A job was demeaning and below the status of her family. Stanley followed her advice well and soon developed a penchant for the high life, frittering away his inheritance on wine, women and song. Despite his immense wealth and landholdings in Colombo where he is rumoured to have had several houses in Forbes Road given on rent or lease, he never thought of owning a house, even after marrying his cousin Gertrude. He rented a house at Cooper's Hill, a little lane off Turret Road facing the Colpetty Municipal Market before moving to 502, Galle Road, Colpetty (where Mc.Donalds now stands) which served as the family home for over a decade. It was there that he arranged the marriage of his eldest daughter Myra to Buddhadasa, eldest son of chemical magnate W.H.Hendrick, the wedding being held with much fanfare at the Sinhalese Sports Club then situated near Victoria Park.

Stanley had for his neighbour well known showman Donovan Andree, a Burgher impresario who introduced to the country such shows like *Harlem Blackbirds*, an Afro-American Dancing Troupe which featured swarthy, scantily clad cabaret girls at the old SSC grounds and *Holiday on Ice* where skaters glided blissfully on an ice rink at Victoria Park. Donovan's sons often came over to the Fernandos to play cricket with their boys Elmo, Kingsley and Justin. However Stanley was not far behind his neighbour Donovan in being a showman. Impeccably dressed, he had this black mask which he wore Zorro-style on certain occasions and even adorned his home with pictures of himself attired as such. He cruised around in a flashy grey Flying Standard 12 car and floated among luxuries only a few families of his day could afford like a large player piano, a pedal-operated piano that mechanically played music encoded as perforations on a piano roll and an HMV (His Master's Voice) radiogram (Portmanteau of radio and gramophone) from Cargills, the leading departmental store at the time.

Stanley even had a menagerie of sorts with deer, rabbits, guinea pigs and birds like mynahs and parrots, not to mention a Saint Bernard's he specially got down for himself. He was also a great showman when it came to entertaining his elite friends like the Kotalawelas, buying them expensive liquors at the Sinhalese Sports Club, then located near Victoria Park or Price Park, Pettah and the Aero Club at Ratmalana. His kids too had it good, amusing themselves with costly playthings like British-made Frog aeroplanes, miniature band-powered planes with sheet metal fuselages and wings of card which had to be winded upon a fixture in a specially provided box and placed upon the ground, whereupon it would hedgehop for quite a distance, hence its name of FROG, widely supposed to stand for Flies Right Off Ground.

The family eventually shifted to Lauries Road, Bambalapitiya, to a house they could call their own, but even this was not destined to last long as a family home, for following the death of Gertrude, Stanley disposed of it and moved to his daughter

Myra's house at General's Lake Road, Colpetty. He never sobered down though and even in his old age was rumoured to carry a tot about in his trouser pocket. We kids would see him wobbling into the house in drunken stupor like a wizened old hobgoblin, so steeped in drink that he was not in a state even to pay his taxi fare, which was paid without demur by his dutiful daughter.

If not sodden with drink, he was awash with vanity. He was narcisissitically vain, for I remember him dyeing his hair a cloying black, applying the murky cream from a saucer onto his hair and combing it backwards even in his most greyest of years when the wrinkles had kissed his cheeks, prompting snide comments from some of its younger inmates like my mother that old as he was he had not given up on his vanity.

Him we called *pappa*, simply parroting how grandma used to address him. Though we knew what *papa* meant, Grandma pronounced it differently, doubling the p between the vowels so that it never struck us that it meant father. That is until one evening when ambling down Green Path with mother we spotted the old man from a distance and called out loudly "*Pappa, pappa !*", only to have mother tell us in a hushed tone "*Don't shout pappa, pappa, men, people will think he's your father*". The thought of people thinking that the old codger was our father no doubt horrified her. We nevertheless stuck to the term till his dying day, and even then it was not in hushed tones that we addressed him.

Pappa passed away in the early 1980s, giving us our first lesson in death. His was the first - and the last - death in the house. They cremated him at Kanatte, that sprawling necropolis in Borella. Father was horrified at the prospect of cremation, used as he was to the Islamic way of disposing the dead by burial. When we were about to leave for the last rites, we heard him say, rather sadly: *Burning a dead man, what a thing to do*".

Besides these regular inmates, we had Accha's brother Justin dropping in and eventually settling down. We addressed him simply as *Justin Uncle*, despite his being a granduncle. The poor

fellow we would often see hobbling in to the house with his characteristic limp, the result of losing a foot in his youth. One day while cycling to work at a radio shop run by a kinsman near the Bo Tree Junction in the Pettah, he had just passed a handcart unloading some goods onto the payment when, out of the blues, a red double decker bus emerged from one side of the road and knocked him down, the front tyre running over his right foot.

In the early 1970s, about the time the Husseins had moved into Chitrangi, this Sad Sack like character found work as a watcher at Hendrick & Sons stores at Hulftsdorp run by his brother-in-law's family and eventually settled down at Accha House, spending the nights there, sleeping on the hard red couch in the inner hall that had once given rest to his departed father, Stanley.

His wife, Nimala, a lean lady from Matara, and their children Chamira, Shyamali and Anusha visited Accha House during the school holidays for a month or so. Although mother's cousins, all the children were younger to us and made good playmates. We would often play a crude form of hockey with the boy Chamira or join the the girls Shyamali (or Chammi as we called her) and her little sister Anushi in more homely games like *Snakes and Ladders* or making *sellam bat*, a village pastime they introduced to us involving cooking rice in little clay pots.

And then there was aunt Sunethra, her husband Karu and children Rajiv, Kumeshi and Mirukshi then resident in Kenya who would visit us once about every three years during the long December vacations. With these cousins of ours we spent some wonderful times especially during the Christmas season, enjoying their company at Accha House and at our beach resort in Kosgoda. Over the years, they introduced many things which we thought to be exotic but were freely available locally, like modeling clay, scrumptious crabs and marvel comics.

The fact is that despite growing up in a largely non-Muslim household, we were brought up conscious of the fact that we were Muslims. Needless to say, to the Muslim his staunchly monotheistic faith is an impenetrable fortress, brooking no intrusions from any other as it could dilute or even undermine

its Unitarian character. Our names, so distinct from the Sinhalese names of our kinsfolk, the few prayers we learnt such as *Al Fatiha*, the equivalent of the Lord's Prayer and the rituals we followed such as fasting impressed on us that we were a bit 'different', but not distinct, from the rest of the household. Our frequent intercourse with father's family who lived just a lane away further consolidated our Islamic identity.

Another feature that marked us apart was our somewhat westernized English-speaking upbringing. Speaking English came naturally to us. Both our parents were English-educated since Colombo's elitist schools where they studied at the time, Zahira and Bishop's College, imparted a good English education. They always spoke to one another in English, perhaps not only because of their educational background, but also because father knew only a smattering of Sinhala at the time while mother's Tamil was unspeakable. English was naturally the language of choice and this we inherited from them.

Not only did we speak among ourselves and our parents in English, but also to the rest of the household who were Sinhala-speaking but who addressed us in English, an arrangement that extended to the neighbouring houses where mother's uncles and aunts lived. So it was with our father's folk to whom we always spoke in English, though they usually spoke to one another in Sona Tamil, a dialect of Tamil widely used by local Muslims as a 'home language'. Given our unique situation, speaking English was the ideal solution, for it did double duty, serving as both bridge and barrier. A bridge because it was a language everybody in the house, despite their vernacular background, understood. This would not have been possible had we spoken another language such as Sona Tamil. A barrier, because it served to stave off Buddhist ideas permeating into our small world, for had we spoken Sinhala, it could have opened up the doors for the ethos, mythos and pathos of Buddhism to seep into our lives, especially since we were growing up in a largely Sinhalese Buddhist environment.

The fact that our home language was English also had other implications. Quite naturally we looked up to the West, which also meant that our respect for all things national suffered, including for the national language Sinhala which we did not show much interest in mastering. We knew basic spoken Sinhala, a result of the largely Sinhala-speaking environment we grew up in, but not much beyond that and absolutely loathed the literary language with its cumbersome grammar which we had to learn at school. Had we known at the time that Sinhala, mother's mother tongue was an Indo-European language sharing a distant relationship with a good many European languages including English, German and French, our feelings about it might have been a bit different.

And when it came to faith, we could only gleefully compare our Islamic faith to Christianity. Christians, after all, held a special place in our faith. Had not our Holy Book, the Qur'an declared: "*And nearest among them in love to the Believers wilt thou find those who say "We are Christians". Because among these are men devoted to learning, and men who have renounced the world*".

Islam had much in common with the teachings of Christ, which we Muslims regard as a Divine revelation known as the *Injeel* or Evangel. The Almighty Creator whom we Muslims call *Allah* 'The God', Christians simply called God or God the Father. Our prophets were also the same. Thus the first man known as Adam to the Christians is Aadam to us Muslims, Noah is Nuh, Abraham is Ibrahim, Joseph is Yusuf, David is Dawud and Solomon is Sulaimaan. Jesus too we Muslims regard as a Prophet by the name of Eesa, but not as the Son of God. He we believe to have been immaculately conceived in the womb of mother Mary whom we call Maryam following an angelic visitation and he we believe will return to earth to usher in an era of just rule before the end of the world.

We too believed in angels as the Christians did, calling Gabriel Jibreel and Michael Mikail. Man's arch foe, that fiendish devil Satan we Muslims knew as Shaitaan, a horned

evil being created from fire whose only desire was to drag men to his fiery abode. The Lord's Prayer had its equivalent in Surah Al Fatiha which is the opening chapter of the Muslim holy book, the Qur'an and when the Christian says *Amen* at the end of his prayer, the Muslim says *Aameen*. We also shared a belief in the afterlife, the gardens of paradise for the godly and hellfire for the evil ones. Such similarities between our Islamic faith and Christianity we loved to stress.

Despite all this, our Sinhala Buddhist kin never once attempted to impose their views on us, not even clandestinely. There were the times when grandma hauled us to see the colourful, brightly lit pandals in the month of Vesak which narrated the life story of the Buddha and stories of his previous births as told in the Jataka tales - modern versions of the *toranas* or the gateways of the temples of old on which were carved similar themes. But that was it. They knew well the teachings of tolerance the Sage preached and followed it to the letter.

The only occasion when there was something of a 'friction' was when one day, Asgar and I suddenly got interested in a colourful cut-out of the sage that serenely sat in a corner of the inner hall to which aunt Chandani lit a little lamp and offered freshly culled flowers like the fragrant jasmine as part of her daily *pooja*. We were wondering who the handsome robed figure really was. Our curiosity had been aroused by the kindly appearance, finely chiseled features, top hair knot and most strikingly by the long pendulant lobes of the Sage which we took indicated that he wore earrings, and which we reasoned could only be worn by women. That was also about the time when we thought in all innocence that women were born with 'holes' - pierced ears.

Aunt Chandani who happened to be there quickly rushed to the defense of her master, snapping at us "*Can't you see he's a man ?*" or something to that effect. The words and the tone and tenor in which it was expressed dispelled any doubts we may have had of this whole 'earring' affair. Men too wore earrings in the olden days and noble men wore them most often. The

Buddha, who was born into a powerful royal family, had in his great compassion for his fellow creatures, renounced the world and taken them off, becoming nobler still in the eyes of men.

The Buddha's manliness is proverbial among good Sinhala Buddhists who call him *Maha Purusha* or 'The Great Man' and give him as many as thirty two signs of manhood including lion-like chest and black body hair curling clockwise. He had to be. After all, he belonged to the noblest Aryan warrior stock India could boast of. Whatever style he is depicted today does not do the great sage any justice, for as I would learn later in archaeology class, the representations of him we have today with soft features and peppercorn hair is the outcome of the Greek influence that reached North India in the days of Alexander and afterwards, as seen for instance in old Greek statues of Apollo.

Stanley Fernando & Gertrude with kids

W.H.Buddhadasa, Myra and four daughters Padmini, Sunethra, Nandani and Chandani

Padmini as a babe on the round table at Accha House

Padmini and Sunethra on the front steps of Accha House.1960s

Morning read at Accha House. Mother and aunt Chandani run through the newspapers of the day, the Weekend and Island

Sinhala New Year at Accha House.Grandma and children partake of a meal of milk-rice and sweetmeats on a banana leaf

The Hussein kids and their Karu cousins with grandma

Hussein boys and Karu cousins in front of TV sets as they looked back then at Accha House

CHAPTER 4

Umma House

'Umma House' as we called father's parental home served us as 'a home away from home' in our younger days. It was once a thriving estate known as 'Darlington' with stables and even a circular horse track patronized by the elite of Ceylon, as Sri Lanka was then known, in the decades preceding and following independence in 1948.

Located at No.30, Alwis Place, Colpetty, in an area traditionally known as Polwatte or Coconut Garden, Darlington was the residence of an Englishman named Charles William Horsfall whose son Basil, a Lieutenant in the British army, died in action in France towards the end of the Great War in 1918, receiving the Victoria Cross for valour in the face of great odds. One of its daughters, simply known as Ms.Horsfall worked at the nearby Girls Friendly Society. Before long it had passed into the hands of the Hussein family - Seyyad Mehdi Hussein and his blue-blooded brood.

The house must have been named after the beautiful market town of the same name in England famed for its Quaker heritage and old clock tower that thrived in the Victorian era. This magnificent manor-like single-storeyed house had a frontage quite typical of old Ceylonese houses that incorporated both native and European colonial manor type elements in that it had a roofed porch and verandah, not to mention two large halls and as many as six bedrooms. Its ceiling was of Burma teak and it was roofed with flat red Calicut tiles imported from India. The house itself was situated on a sprawling estate of about 2 acres bounded by road in the front, Bishop's College in the rear, the Mukthar manor on the right and the bank of the Beira Lake on the left as one entered it from Alwis Place. A gravelly driveway in semi-circular fashion led in and out of the porch which could accommodate a couple of cars.

Here stood the famous 'Cottonhall Stables', which at one time served solely to house the well known race horse Cottonhall which Mehdi Hussein trained, but in later times was converted to as many as eight smaller stables, four on each side with a pathway between them. Between the stables and the Beira Lake to its north was a large circular horse track where the horses were trained and which the denizens of Darlington, passing through a four-piece dark green folding door at the rear of the house could view at close range.

In this manor 'Darlington' lived the grand patriarch of the family, Seyyad Mehdi Hussein, his wife Rukiya, son Sharif and daughters Safiya, Zakiya, Haseena, Khadija, Hafi and Khatoon, not to mention some of their spouses and offspring who used to ensconce themselves there on a more or less permanent basis or drop in for a long holiday. Darlington was welcome to anybody who could claim kinship to its master either by blood or marriage. A large visitor's room near the main hall served the purpose of a bedroom for those who wished to reside there for a couple of days or even several months. It was here that in later times the married daughters of the Seyyad who were living elsewhere would resort to after giving birth, spending a couple of months with their newborns in the grand old house, all their cares being diligently looked after by the lady of the house.

The denizens of Darlington were a happy family. Its undisputed head Mehdi Hussein lived a contented life as Ceylon's best horse trainer patronized by the country's elitist families who seemed to care more about horses than people. He had amassed a considerable fortune as an award winning world class trainer in the years leading up to and following independence in 1948, though his experience as a trainer went back to the inter-war years, especially the 1930s.

Mehdi Hussein was not a man who always had it easy. It is said that he arrived in the country from Lahore in North India as a young and budding jockey. The punters of the day - and that was shortly after the Great War of 1914-18 - would observe him closely as if wondering whether he could deliver the goods, and

he would gently stroke his chest as if to say his horse would be the best bet. The man settled down here after marrying a Moor lass from the upcountry still in her blooming teens and became so 'Ceylonised' that his offspring were considered Sri Lankans by all and sundry. Ceylon, like India, was then part of the far-flung British Empire and its residents subjects of the British Crown. The policy greatly facilitated the free movement of peoples and goods from India to Sri Lanka which no doubt was looked upon as a happy land to live in and do business. Many such migrants, attracted by the beauty and the opportunities provided by the country, chose to settle down here.

Seyyad Mehdi was a stout, strongly built man whose lineage went back to the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima, hence his title of *Seyyad* 'master'. His family claimed descent from the Prophet's grandson Husayn who had espoused a Persian princess Shahrbanoo, the daughter of the last Sassanian emperor Yazdegird whose vast empire the Islamic Arab army overthrew in the 7th century. Their son Zain-al-Abidin given the title of *Eben Al-Khiyaratain* 'son of the best two', united in his person the Prophet's bloodline, regarded as the noblest among the Arabs, and the bloodline of Persian royalty. Interestingly both these bloodlines could not be acquired in the direct male line, but rather through female personalities, on one side through the Prophet's favourite daughter Fatima and on the other side through Yazdegird's daughter Shahrbanoo.

Still the Seyyads traced their descent in the male line, from father to son. They also jealously sought to preserve their proud ancestry, often intermarrying among themselves to preserve their bloodlines, which is quite strange since they themselves originated from a mixed union. In fact it was almost unheard of for a daughter of a Seyyad, a Seyyidah, to be given in marriage to a non-Seyyad. That Seyyad Mehdi Hussein himself married a non-Seyyad woman and gave all his daughters in marriage to non-Seyyads would have been looked upon with askance by his blue-blooded clan. He probably could not care less. Mehdi

Hussein was nevertheless proud of the blue blood he so fondly believed flowed in his veins. He would brag to his grandchildren that he never suffered from mosquito bites, gloating that the little vampires had so much regard for his blood that they dare not suck the red gold into their unworthy bellies. He had live caterpillars crawl across his forearm without irritating it in any way. Naturally, it was covered all over with hair, which needless to say, kept the critters' bristles at bay. The little children of course believed the story.

Strangely, he could not acquire this uncanny knack when it came to that extremely proud breed of animal, the camel, who were perhaps even prouder than the most blue-blooded of Arabs. He had until his dying day a light scar on his nose which he got when as a little boy he tugged at the tail of a camel. The furious animal, not used to being mishandled, let out a kick smack on his face, leaving a permanent scar on his nose. Little wonder he switched to horses. They gave him more respect, even the sturdy Arabian ones.

He was a devout man and regarded his headgear as an indispensable appendage of a proud Muslim. Though attired in suit or coat, he would like all good Muslim gentlemen of his day, never doff his headdress, a Red Fez or Black Jinnah cap, in public even on the most formal of occasions, even if it were in the presence of the Queen's representative, the Governor General of Ceylon. His favourite, I am told, was a rather robust red skullcap done on the top with silver filigree work like the domed headpiece of a mediaeval Islamic warrior which he fondly called *Dil Pasand* (Favourite One).

Mehdi Hussein was best known as a horse trainer for Colombo's racing elite. The 1950s had seen horse-racing emerge as a top sport in newly independent Ceylon with the Havelock Race Course opposite Royal College in the Cinnamon Gardens of Colombo and the Nuwara Eliya Turf being among the best racecourses in Asia at the time. That was before horse racing died an untimely death in the early sixties as a result of growing nationalist sentiment, which came in forms such as

restrictions on the publication of racing news, heavy import duties on thoroughbred horses and the takeover of the Havelock Racecourse, perhaps the best in Asia at the time, for an industrial exhibition and eventually for the expansion of the Colombo University. It was only in the early 1980s that horse racing was revived by the Nuwara Eliya Turf Club.

Mehdi Hussein's most notable achievement in the field was as the trainer of Cottonhall, Ceylon's most famous race horse of the olden time. Legend has it that this chestnut with a white blaze on its forehead arrived as part of a consignment of thoroughbreds imported from England by the Ceylon Turf Club. Since little or nothing was known of its pedigree and it did not seem very fit, apparently having a spoilt hoof, the Turf club which could not find a bidder, had decided to sell it at a give-away price. This was when Mrs. T.G.Francis bought it for Rs.18,000, a princely sum even then, but certainly worth for a thoroughbred. Thoroughbreds after all make fine racehorses. The offspring of Arabian stallions with European mares, they typify the benefits of mixed breeding, taking after the virtues of both parents and the vices of none.

Although by itself the Arabian is a small horse, the infusion of its blood with that of the European mare makes the offspring larger and with a longer stride than either parent. It was due to Mehdi Hussein's untiring efforts in nursing it back to health that the equine castaway became a legend of the turf, so much so that whenever it raced to victory, which it very often did, it became headlines in the national newspapers. Its trainer, it is said, loved it so much that he used to sleep with the animal in its stable while tending to its wound as if it were one of his own offspring. Curing a spoilt hoof after all was no easy task in a sport which clung to the dictum: *No hoof, no horse!* The concoction he is said to have employed to treat the creature was a blend of eastern medicinal herbs in which margosa leaves figured prominently.

The horse repaid him a thousand-fold, for many were the races Cottonhall won, among these the coveted Governor General's Bowl at the hands of jockey Jack Raffaele, earning name and

fame for its trainer who had so painstakingly tended to it in its most thorny days. It is said that when Cottonhall was taken to run in the Colombo races, Mehdi's wife Rukiya would kindly address him in Tamil *Cottonhall, vettitta vanda, na onakku carrot taruven!* (Cottonhall, win and come. I will give you carrots !). The horse, having raced to victory, getting as usual a bad start, but catching on in the second lap and speedily overtaking the rest in the third and final lap, would proudly be conveyed to Darlington by the *gudurakaran* (horsekeeper), a fellow named Eedoo, who having reached the gates, would release the reins, whereupon it would rush to the porch to receive the promised gift from the hand of the lady of the house. On those rare occasions it lost, it would, walking sadly with head bent down, find its way to the stables. Such was Cottonhall.

The Seyyad loved his horses as much as his family. Both were, after all, high breeds. Such was the love Mehdi Hussein had for his horses that he was often seen patting them gently and even talking to them, addressing them by diminutives such as *Baba'* baby'. The stables of Darlington located near the house were almost synonymous with the house of that name. This is where some of Ceylon's finest race horses were trained. A large store room in close proximity to the stables was regularly supplied with horse feed by Moosajees Forage Works, a large firm run by a group of Indian Muslims. The feed which comprised of oats, corn and a grain known as *kollu* were stored in large square wooden or metal containers. The horse-keepers, turbaned Indian or Plantation Tamils bearing names like Perumal, Ramasamy and Mutthiah would mix the feed into a mess, adding vitamins to it for good measure before placing these in large circular pans with handles which were then conveyed to the stables for the hungry horses to feed upon.

In the late afternoons or evenings, usually around 4.00 or 5.00 pm the horses would be taken out for a trot, one behind the other, round the circular track facing the Beira Lake to the left of the stables. The horsewalk would be keenly watched by the little

grandchildren of Mehdi Hussein seated on the rear steps of Darlington. However training horses called for much more than a mere trot or canter and this was especially so of the Arab horses got down from Iraq.

A proud, stubborn and unwieldy lot, they could not put up with a man on their backs and tended to throw him off. Their trainer had come up with an ingenious way of training the rustics, placing upon their backs a dummy while at the same time attaching a rope to the bridle. The horses would move about in circles while gradually getting used to a load on their backs. That was when the resident jockey, a man named Ramalan would get onto their backs displacing the dummy. The horses would get used to him and eventually be put to race.

Seyyad Mehdi's love for horses was also shared by his son-in-law Faacy Ghany, my grandfather, who owned as many as three horses, namely, a thoroughbred named Tickle, an Arab named Hilal Ahmed and another named Fazly's Pet named after his youngest son. Fazly's Pet is said to have collapsed at the races and died then and there. Faacy's wife received the news with shock and forbade her husband from naming any more horses after their offspring.

None of the Seyyad's grandchildren would ever make it big on the turf, except for his eldest grandson Wazir, my father, who in later years went on to own a horse and a good number of ponies stabled at the Nuwara Eliya Turf Club. Grandmother used to say that whenever Seyyad Mehdi and Faacy Ghany went to the *Grand Stand* to watch their horses race at Havelock racecourse, father would supplicate to the Almighty while perched high up atop a guava tree in the backyard of the house, beseeching the Good Lord for grandpa's horses to win, little doubt for the ice cream and other goodies that would come his way in case a horse or two won. This victory celebration of sorts with ice cream perhaps kindled his interest in horses in later life.

Darlington treated its horses well. They were meant to be ridden only for the races. That these well bred sturdy creatures could be used to convey humans for their day to day affairs was

unthinkable. Outside Darlington was a rickshaw, a hooded two-wheeled cart drawn by a man trotting on all twos kept for the use of its inmates, especially the womenfolk who would liberally use it whenever traveling outdoors.

The only humans who seemed to have it better than the horses in the stables were the inmates of Darlington. Mehdi Hussein, needless to say, treated himself well, believing as he did that he was a mix of Arabian and Persian royalty. In a country that only knew of a British sovereign and a local landed Radala aristocracy he could not reasonably expect any right royal treatment from the powers that be and did himself that favour, at the same time dispensing with the trappings that went with it.

The queen of his house, and of his heart, the fair Rukiya, steady as a rock by his side, also lived a happy life, fattening herself on the fowl she reared in the premises of Darlington, conveniently feeding the gluttons with her husband's horse feed to fatten them for the table. She also shared her husband's love for horses as it brought her good money. The Seyyad regularly gifted her a number of aged or disabled horses unfit for the races. These she formed into a horse training school in a part of the estate that extended near the Beira Lake, taking as its caretaker the resident jockey named Ramalan. The dame earned good money from the venture, packing the dough into pillow cases. Muslims then did not bank their money as it meant taking interest which was forbidden by their faith, and instead saved it or invested it in land. She was charitable nevertheless and gave away part of her earnings to needy folk who would visit Darlington every Monday and Friday morning for the sole purpose of receiving some coins from her generous hands.

Mehdi Hussein's firstborn, and only son Sheriff was himself an accomplished horse-trainer who had his stables somewhere between Green Path and Alwis Place. His second child, and the eldest of his daughters, Shafiya Bee married one Faacy Ghany, an astute businessman and social worker who eventually went on to become Deputy Mayor of Colombo. She bore him as many as ten children, seven sons, Wazir, Nazir, Ameer, Ashroff,

Hyder, Mazahir and Fazly and three daughters Fairoze, Shafeeka and Shanaz. Her younger sister Haseena also married well, to a scion of a prominent Moor family of the south, Proctor Anwar, a handsome, well-to-do and yet down-to-earth gentleman who whisked his wife away to live with him at Brown's Hill in Matara. Their five children, four sons, Akhtar, Saftar, Sharwar and Musharraf and a daughter Faizoona were all born in Colombo and spent their early infancy as well as much of their holidays at Darlington. Khadeeja, yet another daughter of the Seyyad married one Ariff, a dark, bespectacled lanky looking draftsman, through whom she had a daughter Fatima, their only child. The little family lived in Wellawatte, but moved into Darlington to spend a couple of years while Fatima was still a little girl.

If these three daughters of the house had it good, there were three more who were not so fortunate. Hafi, a daughter of the Seyyad who married a railway guard from Kandy named Kareem died in childbirth while giving birth to her son Jaufar. Another daughter Zakiya remained a spinster throughout her life. She was unable to marry as she was hunched a bit, the result, it is said, of cracking her spine when as a little girl she crept under a table and suddenly stood up, the force of the hard wood striking against her back, leaving her a bit bent even later in life. Despite being unable to marry, she fulfilled her duties as a daughter of the house in the kitchen, cooking for the rest of the household. She was fondly called Zaki Sacchi by her nephews and nieces upon whom she doted, despite being unable to have children of her own.

And then there was Khatoon, the youngest daughter of the house whose fate was a sad one. She lived a cloistered life as a cripple tucked away in a room at Darlington. It is said that when her mother was expecting her, she had attempted to pluck a bunch of bananas which came crashing down upon her belly. She came into the world, it is said, with swollen red eyes and blood clots on her arms, but otherwise seemed to be healthy. In fact as a little girl, she would, upon learning of her brother-in-

law Faacy's approach, run towards him, inquiring *Macchan, ais kireem, ais kireem* (Brother-in-law, ice cream, ice cream).

When she was about five years old, she began experiencing terrible bouts of epileptic fits, so intense that her elders had to hold her tight to control her till it subsided. It was on one such occasion, when they held her harder than usual, that they heard a crack and discovered that she had broken a leg, crippling her for life. She could not stand or walk or even sleep upon a bed as she could topple over and further injure her frail body. She was therefore kept on the floor upon a mat and supplied with all the essentials to live away her life in solitude and relative peace until God took her away.

Darlington also had a watchdog named Jimmy who watched over the horses like a sheepdog, so much so that if they ever tried to run away, it would bark out loud and catch hold of the rein. Jimmy was always kept outside the house as Islamic teachings held that angels would not enter a house where there were dogs though it permitted the keeping of hunting dogs and watch dogs provided they were not taken inside the house. Besides letting faithful Jimmy watch over the estate like a sentry, the Seyyad also had this penchant for shooting his shotgun into the air every once in a while as if to say to all those within earshot*: No messing around here !*

And so it was that the denizens of Darlington lived in relative peace and security under the guardianship of the man they all called *Abba* 'father' which included not just his children but also his grandchildren as this respectable term of address for the sire stuck, which is not surprising in such a patriarchal household. The little ones had it better than anyone else here, with ample space to play about in the house and garden and so many cousins as playmates. Though most of them were not permanent residents of Darlington they spent a good part of their childhood here, like in the school holidays, not to mention during the Islamic festivals of Ramazan and Hajj when the entire family would gather at the great house. Further company came from the Deutrom boys Peter, Ryan and Sean and their sister Zorina

all of whom lived at Darlington Estate, in a large oblong building running almost the entire length of the Seyyad's house which had been rented out or leased to this lovely Burgher family.

Besides the usual games kids of their age played, they had come up with a number of other unconventional forms of recreation from the flora and fauna in the vicinity. Near the entrance to the house was a large and flamboyant Trumpet Flower tree that every now and then sent forth countless flared bell-shaped pink flowers that would, ruffled by the wind, drop to the ground like parachutes. The boys from the Ghany, Anwar and Deutrom families would compete with one another to catch the flowers before they made landfall, the one who caught the most number within the stipulated time, say an hour or so, being the winner. Another interesting game involved the large black tortoises that crawled up from Beira lake and found their way to the kitchen at night to nibble at the cabbage and other leaves that had been thrown away. Once they had their fill, the boys would light their own candles, stick them on the shells of the critters and watch them amble back to the Beira, keeping an eye for the one that made it to the lake first. This nocturnal pastime was not without its dangers, for one of Darlington's daughters Haseena would recall to the young ones an incident when she and a sister had done the same, letting a tortoise out of their sight, only to discover the following morning that instead of finding its way to the lake, it had taken the opposite path, making its way to a heap of straw outside the stables and setting it on fire, roasting alive the unwitting arsonist.

Interesting encounters with the human kind also took place on occasion, sometimes scaring the wits off the younger ones. One was when the grandfather of the Deutrom boys, a fair Burgher of European ancestry would dress as Santa Claus for Christmas Day. Most kids would have found him fascinating, but not so Haseena's little daughter Faizoona who was simply terrified at the sight of the old man dressed in the strange garb clowning about. The poor thing had been so scared that she would vividly

recall it even after thirty years. One can only imagine how Santa's monotonous drawl of *ho,ho,ho,ho* would have been met with the little girl's shriek of *eek!*

The folk who lived here also recall encounters of a more mysterious kind. There had once stood in the Mukthar's estate closer to the border with Darlington a huge mango tree bearing *pol amba*, large mangos almost the size of coconuts. These would, in windy or rainy days, fall over to Darlington estate to be immediately set upon by the little Ghanys and Anwars on one side and the Deutroms on the other, the first to grab hold of it being reckoned its owner. However a strange thing happened one night. That was when Haseeena was pregnant with a younger son, probably Musharraf and residing at Darlington as it was her practice to move to her parental home whenever she gave birth, which was always in a hospital or nursing home in Colombo. She was occupying a room facing the Mukthar estate when she heard a loud thud which she guessed was a falling mango that had hit the ground like a bombshell. She crept out the window and started towards the mango, only to find it rolling towards the stables whenever she attempted to pick it up. Suspecting that some unseen force was moving it away from her, she gave it up and returned to her room. Was it her imagination running riot, or was it a hungry jinn or two on the prowl claiming their spoils. These imps or goblin-like creatures who according to Islamic belief were created from smokeless fire are particularly active at night and are even believed to pilfer food from humans to satisfy their needs.

Haseena was particularly prone to strange visitations when she was expecting Musharraf who was fondly known as *Baba* or Baby on account of his being her lastborn. She once saw in a dream a woman with a deformed hand clawing at her belly, and strangely, when the child was born, one of his hands was *kora*, a bit disjointed, though it was eventually corrected. The poor fellow was shot dead within earshot of his mother in the early 1990s, at whose hands none could tell.

The really good times at Darlington were soon coming to an end. The virtual ban on horse racing in the mid-1960s by the nationalist government of the day had deprived the Seyyad of his livelihood which was training the horses of the rich and famous. His favorite steed, Cottonhall was soon gone and its days of glory only a fleeting memory. The poor creature, neglected by its once proud owner, died, it is said, 'a pauper's death' without care or nourishment and was buried in Nuwara Eliya. Once a wealthy landed proprietor, the Seyyad was by 1970, compelled to sell a good part of his front garden to survive the lean times.

Worse was to come his way- a string of deaths in the family. One of his daughters Hafi died in childbed to be followed by his only son Sheriff. But it was the death of his beloved wife Rukiya that affected him most. Though she had a long life – she was 72 years when she died – the man was inconsolable. A man who hardly if ever wept could now be seen weeping like a child.

On the fortieth day after her demise, when the family held a ceremony known as *khattam* in her memory, he temporarily lost his memory. One day when he took his gun out to renew the license, the fugue got him, and he was seen wandering about aimlessly in the streets. A Malay policeman named Tuan, recognizing the man, conveyed him home and warned its shocked residents never to let him out like that again. He did not have long to suffer the solitude, for he passed away a couple of months later. He was 86 years old at the time. It was 1972, the year that my twin brother Asgar and I were born. Father, who was living with mother shortly after our birth at Victoria Drive, Kandy, got the news from uncle Nazir. The telegram briefly read: *Abba expired. Funeral tomorrow 9AM*.

Abba 'father', an Urdu word of Syriac origin widely used by the Christians of the east in addressing their monks and even in the West in forms like French *abbé* was the name by which they all knew him. His children, his grandchildren, they all called him that. His surname of Hussein was even passed on to his daughters' sons as their middle name with some members of the

following generation being bestowed it as their surname. Needless to say this included me and my brothers, all of whom bear the surname *Hussein*, Arabic for 'little beauty'.

Once the Seyyad had been laid to rest, the tongues, especially of the women of the house, started wagging. Some like Haseena thought that the inexplicable string of deaths was the result of an evil, perhaps in the form of a spirit of some sort, that had taken hold of the house after the destruction of a tree. There had stood near the entrance to Darlington a huge Pink Trumpet Tree which one of Mehdi's sons-in-law Ariff never liked. Given to superstitious mumbo jumbo he urged the old man to chop it down as it was, he claimed, a 'bad' tree from whose wood coffins (*ponampetti*) were made and could be possessed by spirits (*pey*). The Seyyad, not wishing to fall out with his obstinate son-in-law got the tree cut down.

However, something strange happened the night after it was brought down. The Seyyad's daughter Hafi, pregnant with her first child, had looked out of the window and heard this eerie sound, a sort of rumbling, as if somebody were dragging a heavy chain. She told her mother the following morning *Umma, umma, dar marutta ilitita poran* (Mother, mother, somebody dragged away the tree). Not much later she experienced a very strange dream where she saw herself picking up a paper, one of several that were falling down near her, only to be told by a mysterious voice that she would die in childbirth. The bad dream she confided in her mother, and certain of the premonition coming true, entrusted her child to her. The poor woman died in childbed.

Another explanation put forth by another daughter of the house Shafiya was that evil had befallen the family as a result of the bad mouth of a domestic named Alice who upon seeing the big happy family gathered together at Darlington for the Muslim festivals of Ramazan and Hajj would utter words such as *Loku nonata, mekama eti* (This itself is enough for big madam!) or *Mekama eti ogollanta* (This itself is enough for you'll) to her mistress Rukiya. Now, Muslims like the Sinhalese believe in the

ill-effects of the evil mouth, the *kata-vaha* or 'mouth-poison' where words of high praise heaped on somebody is believed to invite disastrous results irrespective of the intention of the speaker. If one should do so, he or she must say *Masha Allah* (As God wills) to prevent evil befalling the object of one's admiration. Needless to say poor Alice was not aware of this and so was blamed for the family's misfortune.

It did not end there. Akhtar, one of the Seyyad's more thoughtful grandsons had come up with a more ingenious explanation. He felt that the deaths were the results of the grand feasts the family gave to the poor including their neighbours as part of the *khattam* ceremonies. The Muslims of those days, though not so much today, held on the fortieth day following the death of a family member, a function known as *khattam* which involved the recitation of the entire Muslim holy book, the Qur'an in one sitting, and entertaining family, friends and neighbours rich and poor for a meal, in the belief that the merit so acquired would pass on to the deceased in the afterlife. Akhtar's reasoning was that the sumptuous meals given to the poorer residents of Muhandiram Road and other neighbouring areas had resulted in these folk praying that there be more deaths in the house, so that they could continue to have the free meals being liberally dished out by courtesy of the House of Hussein. Now that was some food for thought. That he was taken seriously is not surprising.

The Seyyad had died intestate and the family decided to sell Darlington so that all his heirs could be given their fair share. Fortunately for them, one of the Seyyad's more enterprising grandsons, Nazir, who had by then amassed a considerable fortune, offered to buy the property at a fair price. Darlington was saved. The Ghanys could now come to roost in their old haunt which they had left a few years earlier for a large upstair house at Stratford Avenue Kirulapone. The entire family with the exception of the eldest son Wazir who was married, moved to Darlington, all thanks to the munificence of this young but wealthy scion of the family.

Nazir did not stop at that. He gave the house a facelift to keep up with the times, completely changing its façade by doing away with the pillars and roofed porch that stuck out of the house like the wide open jaws of an angry beast and rearranging its innards to suit his finer taste. He gave it a more Islamic touch, erecting at its entrance an arched doorway more like a gate, somewhat in the form of an onion dome in true Indo-Saracenic style. The see-through door had at its centre two hemispherical pieces of wood that joined at the point of opening to form a solar disc from which radiated ribbons of white mantled metal stylistically depicting the rays of the sun.

Thinking big as he always did, he also added to its front portion another storey overlooking the garden below, like the visor of a helmeted cop, giving it a very much more modern visage, and as if that were not enough, he also hollowed out from its frontal portion the two eyes of the house, a pair of large windows in the shape of ovals to see from and let in light and air, fortified in the lower part with railings attached to semi-circular pieces of wood from which rays of metal emanated as if representing the lower hemisphere of the sun, though it could also convey the image of an eye half veiled by an eyelid that seemed to wink. The spot commanded a splendid view of the garden below with its marigolds and sunflowers and pretty little flowers of various colours known to our Sinhalese friends as *Japan Rosa* but to our Muslim aunts as *Dubaai Rosa*.

It was this house that we would come to call 'Umma House' after the matriarch of the family Shafiya, the eldest daughter of its one-time owner Seyyad Mehdi and mother of its then proprietor Nazir Ghany, whom we addressed as *umma* or 'mother'. The term, from the Arabic *umm* meaning 'mother' is widely used by local Muslims in addressing their mothers, but we used it to address our grandmother. We had gotten used to the term as her children addressed her as such and we simply took after them. Strangely, it was only her younger children who called her as such. The elder children called her, their own mother, *data* or 'elder sister', having heard from their very

young days the word being used as such by their aunties, who were all younger to their mother. They simply borrowed it to address their mother and nobody thought anything about it. But then again nobody bothered correcting us either. At least we did not take after her elder children in calling her *data*. If we did, it was a sure way of bridging the generation gap.

Curiously my earliest memories of Umma House are not of grandma after whom we had named the house, but of another woman we called 'Coffee aunty' because whenever mother in our very early years took us there for a visit, she would prepare for us little cups of coffee. I remember her as a pleasant kindly woman clad in a long gown, perhaps a *kaftan*. As I would find out later, this mysterious figure was Zakiya, an unmarried daughter of the Seyyad who attended to the cooking chores of the house till her last days. She breathed her last, heartbroken at being separated from her nephew Jaufar whom she had been looking after for several years following the death of his mother in childbed. She died seven days after the boy was taken away by his father. We were around four years old then which is why my memories of her are rather hazy.

Another obscure character I recall to this day was this rather pathetic looking figure, always seen lying on a floor in the gloom of an unlit room. She lay there under a pile of rags or cowering under a tattered sheet. Whenever we kids went that way, she would, aroused by the noise, stir, sitting up or popping her noddle out to rest her gaze upon those who had disturbed her repose. She would stare vaguely with blank, expressionless eyes as if there was nothing behind it like a zombie that had just woken up. Startled, and gawping with excitement, we would scuttle away in fright as if we had just seen a monstrosity, much to the amusement of our aunts. We had no need to fear, for she was frail and fragile, like a flower without sunlight.

She was Khatoon, the youngest daughter of the Seyyad who had in her young days suffered epileptic fits and a broken leg that immobilized her for life. Life had been cruel to her no doubt, but she always had somebody to care for her in her dark,

dim, days, living in a dungeon of sorts from which she could not break away. Even though she was not confined as a prisoner would and could come out of her room if she wished, she never did. She cared not, she dared not, as if invisible walls were all round her; walls her mind had formed to immure her from venturing beyond, to what was a seemingly hostile, unfamiliar world. Her little cell was enough for her. She died young, when we were around six years old, though I can still vaguely remember the poor thing, lame and limp, in her little corner of the world.

The Angel of Death did not visit the rest of the inmates for a long long time and my reminiscences of them are as clear as crystal, slightly tinged no doubt with the roseate tint one's mind's eye acquires when looking back on those happy days. Grandmother, or *umma* as we called her, was a rather plump woman who loved having us around. A devout woman, we would often see her silently engaged in prayer. She always wore a saree well draped over her person with a little bit left over at the back to draw over her head when in the presence of strange men. It often happened that when we visited her in the mornings, she would make us 'egg coffee', milk coffee to which she added a raw egg, a most wholesome and delicious drink almost filled to the brim which we quaffed with delight. The reason I suspect she had us indulge in the stuff was because she thought we were too thin and sought to give our little frames some bulk.

In later times, when we were ten or so, she had cultivated this generous habit of giving us a rupee each whenever we visited her, sometimes going to the extent of winkling out the coins from her large earthen till with the help of a kitchen knife. Very often she had no problem dispensing us the baksheesh, for she kept a particoloured purse made of reed in her person neatly tucked in between her breasts. Being an all too homely type, she was a bit naïve though, and readily believed what her few friends, gossipy old dames like the one we called Nona Sacchi from Slave Island, a fair crone with slit eyes, told her. One such fable she repeated to us was the existence of half-fish, half-

woman creatures in the sea which she thought to be true. We were not impressed, having read that mermaids were the outcome of sailor's imaginations running wild upon seeing dugongs, which is quite likely given the fact that they were without women at sea and were quite naturally sex-starved.

Grandma however had a keen insight into animal nature, for in one part of the kitchen open to the backyard through glass Venetian blinds was hung a tussock of black feathers as if matted or clumped together taken obviously from a dead crow, which she figured would keep the living ones out. Right she was here, for not one dared hop into the house. Local crows, despite being thick-feathered, are very sensitive creatures when it comes to any of their number, holding elaborate funerals for a fallen comrade with a sombre, incessant dirge, cacophonically cawing away *kaak, kaak, kaak* from boughs and treetops, loudly and very publicly lamenting their loss.

Like many Muslim women of her generation, she was given to two exotic habits even her daughters would eschew. One was chewing a mixture of betel leaves and arecanut which she pounded in a little stone mortar and mingled with *chunam*, a pinkish lime paste made of pulverized bivalve shells, before shoving it into her mouth. She chewed the mix till it stained her lips a blood red. What she got out of it I cannot say, except that it probably gave her some sort of pep. Another was sniffing *mookkuttul* or 'nose powder', a brown coloured snuff which she kept in a little container. A pinch of the stuff placed near the nose would result in a sneeze or *hakis* (*atishoo*) as we called it. The pious lady she was, she probably got a thrill out of it since her Muslim faith required that she utter the prayer *Alhamdulillah* (Praise be to God!) after every sneeze with everybody within earshot being obliged to respond with *Yarhamukallah* (God have Mercy on You!).

It was of course her culinary skills that earned for her a place in our hearts, for she could turn out a hearty meal from whatever she had, and this even mother, herself a culinary expert, would concede, saying that she had what they called 'the hand'.

Whether it be that rich rice dish known as *buriyani* or that delicious pudding known as *vattalappam*, or even a simple soft boiled egg in beef gravy, none could beat it the way grandma used to make it.

Grandfather, Faacy Ghany, we called *vappa* or 'father' because everyone else did so and we had no intention of being any different. A self-made man he preferred an independent life and disdained getting too involved in the family business Hijazia Press run by his father Cader Sahib Mohamed Ghany. He rose to become a well known social worker through the good offices of the Ceylon Muslim League of which he was a prominent member in the inter-war years, both as 'propaganda Secretary' whatever that meant, and later as General Secretary during which he played a major role in the Malaria relief campaign following the great epidemic that claimed the lives of thousands in the 1930s before it was virtually eliminated with DDT within a decade.

He eventually stepped into the political arena, contesting the Colombo Municipal elections as an independent and was elected Deputy Mayor of Colombo, a prestigious office given the fact that Colombo was then the uncontested capital of the country, Sri Jayawardenapura, Kotte taking its place only in 1982. In later years he ran a thriving transport business based in Old Moor Street, Hulftsdorp with a fleet of lorries named Ceylon Freighters whose job it was to transport goods from the Colombo Port to the Government Stores. In still later times, he was vested with the task of supplying nutritious 'CARE" biscuits to school children all over the island which continued well into the 1980s, for I remember the stacks of biscuit boxes stored in the house which we liberally helped ourselves to.

It was in the early 1980s that grandfather took a keen interest in helping the country's vanishing Vedda community amidst encroaching settlement projects that threatened to disrupt their traditional way of life. He visited the aboriginal village of Dambana in the eastern hinterland that jealously clung to its old lifestyle and met Vedda chief Tisahamy and his son Vanniya

along with Swedish anthropologist Viveca Stegborn to study the needs of the community and come up with solutions to their problems. All this at a time when the aboriginal communities here and the world over were still a neglected lot, well before any interest in safeguarding indigenous peoples and their cultures emerged in the 1990s.

Grandpa often struck me as a wily old fox which he somewhat resembled. He was renowned for his wit and many were those who tasted of his sharp, unfaltering tongue. Among them his wife's young niece Faizoona who once asked him which of his two daughters, Fairoze or Shafeeka he loved most. She expected him to say *Shafeeka!,* as she regularly supplied him, often surreptitiously, with the dainties her mother made; surreptitiously because the couple was not on talking terms then. Pat came the reply: *If I were to ask you which one of your eyes you loved, what would you have to say ?* We too were sometimes at our wits end to provide a satisfactory answer to his querries. He once asked me: *If you see two people in a fight, who would you help ?* I puzzled over it before conceding I did not know the answer. He answered tersely: *The weaker of them!*

But none of it could beat what brother Asgar had to contend with when one fine day, he formed his hand into the shape of a gun with his forefinger pointing towards him and shot out: *Vappa, surrender or die !* The repartee struck him dumbfound. He would later compose a poem about it *Bang Bang* published as part of a collection of poems entitled *Termite Castle*:

A child, I once aimed my forefinger
At my grandfather for fun
And told him 'Surrender or die'
Calm as always, he replied
'How can I surrender to someone
Who doesn't know the difference
Between his finger and a gun ?'
The words struck like bullets
And I realized the power
Of a loaded tongue

Uncle Nazir, the actual master of the house looked very much like Yasser Arafat sans keffiyeh and gun. A showy character with a silver tongue he drove around in his Datsun and Benz and AMC Gremlin with left hand drive said to have been purchased from a US Embassy official, all the better to be seen in roads that knew only right hand drivers, Sadly he was away from home most of the time, in Japan, Hong Kong or Singapore negotiating business deals. When he did return, it was with a suitcase or two packed with all manner of things for his kith and kin, especially his sisters. He would, calling out to us *raajaa* 'king', present us with playthings like coloured racing cars and toy guns with silver bullets. For his little cousin Fatima whom he fondly addressed as Nona '*Lady'* he brought pretty frocks and toy saucers and pans.

He always made it for the festival days of Hajj and Ramazan to play host to friends and relatives who visited Umma House that day, helping in the slaughter of a goat which let out a spray of blood in its final moments and entertaining the guests for a luncheon where its meat was served in a rich rice dish. Uncle Nazir was by then a leading entrepreneur. He had become rich importing cloth rolls, it is said, taking advantage of a 'loophole' in the law and went on to build the country's largest shopping mall at the time *Bang Bang* in the heart of downtown Colombo. He even tried his hand in film making. That was in the early 1980s when he produced the Sinhala movie *Samaavenna* (Forgive Me) directed by Milton Jayawardhana that had Tony Ranasinghe and Vasanthi Chaturani in the lead roles. Umma House, which had until then shied from public gaze became one of the locations for the shooting. It was around this time, while playing upstairs that we kids stumbled upon some polythene packets containing false blood, obviously meant to be used for the movie in true tinseltown style. We found the packs more inviting than hungry vampires would and soon the thick crimson fluid was splattered all over.

Though he could not be a patron of the arts for long, uncle Nazir was a man of fine tastes and this was seen in his home. In

the front portion of the house below the stairway was a large aquarium with one side of the wall as a backdrop adorned with natural scenes like a mango tree that grew out of the wall to shade the tank with a couple of overhanging branches. Even the fish in it had it good, being fed with tiny red bloodworms that came in transparent polythene packs. He eventually married the girl next door. The lucky lass Adilah was the only daughter of Bookie Baron Mukthar who lived in a magnificent snow white mansion with a lovely lawn next to Umma House.

The wedding was celebrated with much fanfare at the bride's house as was the Muslim custom then, though the bridegroom's house whence we proceeded to the wedding house was also gaily lit that night. Adilah, whom we addressed as Sitty aunty was a sprightly lady with a gift of the gab who never failed to create a sensation wherever she went. She felt we were a bit too naughty and threatened to pull our trousers down whenever we became too noisy, the threat sufficing to keep us quiet for a while. Unfortunately their marriage was a short-lived one.

Uncle Nazir had his sidekicks who stuck with him longer. One fellow, a small made Sinhalese chap whom everybody simply called A.D - after his initials no doubt - was a frequent visitor to Umma House. He blended well with the rest of the household, so much so that he was almost like a family member. He could be mischievous at times, such as when he once offered us a whitish coin, rather bleached and very light in weight, in exchange for a packet of *chiclets*, little pillow-shaped, peppermint flavoured, candy-coated, chewing gum produced by Cadbury Adams that came in yellow rectangular cardboard packets that uncle Nazir had brought home from one of his overseas trips. The piece, he had us believe, was a foreign coin. Not so. It was actually a local square-shaped 5 cent or a scallop edged 10 cent coin made of aluminium which had only been recently circulated and which we were still unfamiliar with, the coins of such denominations circulating until then being made of a heavier copper alloy such as brass.

Little did we know then that the government of the day -that was around 1978 - had commenced minting coins out of aluminium instead of brass due to increasing reports of people melting 5 or 10 cent coins for the metal as its value exceeded the face value of the coin itself, a result no doubt of increasing inflation. Another good thing that came out of it was that it was lighter on the pocket. The downside was that it got defaced within a few years of use. The chiclets we then so gladly parted with gave better value for money than these almost worthless pieces of crummy metal and would have probably lasted longer had they remained undigested, so that we ended up having a pretty raw deal.

And then there was uncle Ameer just younger to Nazir who bore a certain resemblance to him, in that both were sturdily built and curly-haired. One trait however marked them poles apart, for while uncle Nazir was fair-complexioned, uncle Ameer was as black as a Nubian, being the darkest member of the Ghany family. Being an Elvis fan, he had formed his curly crop of hair into a bump and grew sideburns. He was a very lively character and a showman of sorts, who even on his wedding night, held at his bride Misiriya's residence at Quarry road, Dehiwala in mid-July 1977 put up a 'magic show' just to entertain us kids.

Uncle Ashroff, a more businesslike character, loved taking the kids on a ride, either piggyback perched on his sturdy shoulders or on a joyride in his car. An independent man, his presence in Umma House was less marked than his siblings. And then there was uncle Hyder whose real name was Farook, but had been bestowed the nickname *Hyder*, meaning 'Lion' by his maternal grandfather Seyyad Mehdi Hussein. The Seyyad gave him the name as it was the epithet of his forefather Ali, Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law and fourth Caliph of Islam, also known as 'The Lion of God'.

A moral luminary, he thought of us as a bit too worldly-minded and I can still remember his sagely counsel to us in our very young days when we were pestering mother for something

or other: *I cried for a pair of shoes till I saw a man with no legs.* He was also a visionary of sorts. Once while we were discussing how hard maths was, he prophesied that very soon there would be no need to work out sums with pen and paper since electronic calculators which were then coming into the country, would render it obsolete. He was right, except that at school we still had to do our math with pencil and paper. Besides well meant avuncular advice, however, he did not give us much else, except for some Rufia banknotes he had brought home after a stint in the Maldives.

Uncles Mazahir and Fazly were inseparable like Laurel and Hardy to whom they bore a certain resemblance as far as their body sizes were concerned, one being lean and the other rather burly. In fact, being the youngest males in the family and obviously spoilt they often banded together to do some mischief or other when occasion arose. Like when their wealthy but somewhat niggardly father took along with him his daughter Shafeeka and her cousin Faizoona for the occasional treat of a *buriyani* at Majestic Hotel, Bambalapitiya. The duo, sensing something was up, would find their way to the hotel by bus before the old man and the two young ladies stepped into the place, whereupon he would treat them as well, but not without a grumble. Uncle Mazahir, whom we always called Maji uncle, eventually got serious and found his way to Iraq, then under strongman Saddam Hussein, to work there for a couple of years, eventually returning with some toys and a set of colourful stickers of the flags of all Arab countries, kingdoms, emirates and republics, which he proudly presented to us. Uncle Fazly always remained the stay-at-home boy known for his carefree and easy-going attitude. A jovial chap he had ample time to play cards with us kids and regale us with his jokes.

And then there were our three aunts Fairoze, Shafeeka and Shanaz who along with their mother took care of us whenever we were left over at Umma House by our parents when they were busy at the auctions. An adventurous lot, they often took us out in the evenings to the Galle Face Green and on one

occasion to the cinema to watch *The Jungle Book*. It was also from them that we received our earliest religious instruction, at about the age of four. They would have us sit cross-legged on the floor and utter *Allalla, Allalla* with our eyes closed, and as we continued with the recitation, a 5 or 10 cents coin would fall from above, a reward for our prayer. They had us believe that it came from the heavens, from the Good Lord *Allah* Himself.

Aunt Fairoze, the eldest and prettiest of the lot, married her namesake, an engineer from Kandy named Firoze, the wedding being held on a grand scale at Umma House in 1977. Those were the days when Muslim weddings were still held at the house of the bride, though even at that time the custom was gradually changing in favour of having the wedding at a hotel. In this sense aunt Fairoze's wedding was more in keeping with tradition than those of her two younger sisters both of whose weddings were held at leading hotels in Colombo. When the big night came, it was one great party with Umma House well lit and gaily decorated so that passers-by would have probably thought that it were a little carnival. I even recall a makeshift stage erected in the front garden where a live musical band was playing. They were *The Three Sisters*, Sri Lanka's top all-female Sinhala pop group comprising of the three sisters Mallika, Indrani and Irangani who were especially got down by uncle Nazir for the occasion. The wedding of aunt Shafeeka to lawyer Imran Hassan, though held in grand style at Hotel Ranmuthu in 1982 never had the kind of ambience aunt Fairoze's wedding had, and still less so was aunt Shanaz' s wedding to Dr.Abu Thahir. The good old days of celebrating weddings at the bride's place were all but over.

Also contributing to the fun at Umma House were the members of the Anwar family who were cousins to the Ghanys. They often visited and stayed at the house as if they owned it, a throwback to the good old days of their grandfather Mehdi Hussein who made everybody feel at home at Darlington. Little wonder they cultivated a sense of entitlement to it. Especially memorable were the antics of the threesome of Akhtar, Sharwar

and Musharraf who we often saw clad in flamboyant shirts and bellbottoms as was the fashion then. They were a fun-loving lot obsessed with Bombay, often singing the song *Bom bom bom bom, Bombay meri hai* and even joking that my twin brother Asgar who had a slight squint was *Bombay looking Calcutta going!*

Their little cousin Fatima, the daughter of grandaunt Khadija who lived at Wellawatte also visited Umma House and made a good playmate, being only a year or two older to us. With her we played some silly games like *Hide and Seek*, *Hopscotch, Mulberry Bush* or *London Bridge is falling down* though sometimes we found occasion to send her to Coventry, only to be chided by mother who had a soft spot for her.

There were of course some things we loved doing together, like cracking open the *kottang*, the nuts of the Ceylon almond we found scattered by the roadside of Alwis Place near the turn to Muhandiram Road or in the little lane separating the Mukthar's from Umma House. The tree grew in the Mukthar premises but strewed its nuts all over. We cracked these open with a stone or grandma's heavy iron pestle which she used to pound her arecanuts and betel with. It would, like a pearl oyster, reveal a starchy kernel with a light brown coating resembling an almond which we popped into our little mouths. There were nevertheless occasions when Fatima had to pay a price for our friendship such as when one day she informed me that a beggar was at the gates. I promptly gave her an aluminium 1 cent coin to be given to the ragged old fellow, only to have the poor girl, visibly annoyed, tell me a while later that the ingrate had spat at her and gone away fussing and cussing and muttering all sorts of obscenities for giving him such a trifle. She was quite cross with me and to think I had done her a favour. I should have known better; beggars, in spite of their slothful temperament, haggard appearance and tattered garb tend to have great expectations, fondly imagining being at the receiving end of things we would not deign conjure up even in our wildest

fantasies. Nothing after all is so wild as the imagination of a beggar.

Living in the same premises, but in a little rickety timber cabin made of wooden planks and roofed with crinkled tin were Ramalan, the family horsekeeper, and his wife Vimala. The superannuated jockey could not shake off his thralldom to the house he had served for so long and was permitted by its mistress to build his log cabin in the precincts rent-free. The old couple continued to be dependents of the house, doing all sorts of odd jobs for grandmother every now and then. We often saw Ramalan, a thin, swarthy balding old fellow with two little tufts of hair on either side of the head near the ears crouching on his haunches near Umma House looking much like a giant bat while Vimala, quite frail looking, would regularly run errands for grandma.

Their sons Razik and Farook were accomplished jockeys with the elder serving millionaire industrialist Upali Wijewardena and the younger serving father during the great horseracing days of the early 1980s. Facing Umma House at the turn from Alwis Place to Muhandiram Road was this rather elongated house known simply as 'Malay House'. Here lived a Malay family, the Ibrahims, whose forbears little doubt hailed from the Indonesian archipelago or Malayan peninsula about three centuries ago when the Dutch were ruling our maritime districts. With their daughter Zeenah we would play now and then, though she always payed more attention to our bonnie little brother Altaf who was fairer of skin than me or my twin, much to our chagrin, the green-eyed monsters we were then, which to digress a bit, was precisely why we did not like Russian folk tales where the youngest of the trio of brethren, the ubiquitous Ivan is invariably portrayed as the hero.

Seyyad Mehdi, son Sheriff and victorious Cottonhall

Grandfather Faacy Ghany and Sheriff Hussein with horse

Grandaunt Khadija and daughter Fatima outside Darlington

Homely scene at Darlington. Khadija and daughter

Baby outside Darlington

Little Akther at Darlington

Three sisters performing at aunt Fairoze's wedding in the garden of Umma House

Ghanys in dancing mood at a b'day at Umma House

The three musketeers at the gates of Umma House closely guarded by the escort of uncle Amir, aunt Shanaz and their cousin Fatima

Us kids with grandmother and uncles Amir, Mazair and Fazly dressed in flamboyant shirts common in the 70s

CHAPTER 5

Going, going gone!

Auctions are nothing new to Sri Lanka. They were probably introduced during the period of Dutch colonial rule in the island three centuries ago. The Sinhalese word for auction *vendesi* itself has its origins in the Dutch word *vendutie*. These early auctions were possibly what are known as Dutch auctions where the auctioneer starts with a high asking price, gradually coming down, until a bidder decides the price is right and shouts out his acceptance. Being the first bidder to do so, he gets the goods.

That it was the Dutch system of auctioning that prevailed in the country is borne out by the fact that until as late as the 19th century auctioneers in Galle were heard to urge the crowd *mayin kiyapan* (Say mine!). This implies the existence of a Dutch auction since "*Myn*" (Dutch for mine) could only be uttered by the bidders when the auctioneer himself is stating the price and the prices are descending. Be it as it may, in later times it was thankfully the English form of auctioning that prevailed, where the auctioneer starts with a lower price, with bidders competing with one another and offering increasingly higher bids till there are no more takers, the bidder who bid last bagging the item for that price.

What inspired father to be an Auctioneer I cannot say. Maybe it was his antiquarian tastes, for he loved old things, Another motivating factor would have been the closed economic climate of the mid-1970s when he commenced his auctions. The left leaning United Front Government led by Madame Sirimavo Bandaranaike strongly discouraged and even clamped down on imports in pursuit of its vision of utopia - national self-sufficiency. Although an unpopular move as it led to much privation, it was not without its beneficiaries, for it created a great demand for foreign goods of various descriptions including the more luxurious items like antique furniture which figured prominently in the auctions of the time. Just as the era

of prohibition in the US, when alcoholic drinks were totally banned in the 1920s created a climate conducive for bootleggers to thrive, so did the era of the closed economy create the ideal environment for auctioneers to prosper, and prosper they did even years after the economy was opened up with the victory of the United National Party which pursued a laissez faire policy.

Father was already familiar with auctions when he embarked on it in the mid-1970s. He had this thing for old things even back then and did his part to conserve them. His earliest trade was buying up old cars and scooters for patching up and painting by his helps Somay (Udukumburuge Somapala) and Peter (B.M.Appuhamy). These were then put up for sale at his family home 'Darlington'. He then got into the used refrigerator business when he got his helps to fix the fridges and freshen them up for sale at the Auction Rooms run by Auctioneer Earle H. Nicholas opposite the Maliban Kreme House along Galle Road, Colpetty. Nicholas was a seasoned auctioneer and meant business; he had as his symbol a crown with two gavels on either side. This was probably father's earliest exposure to the auctions and the one that inspired him to go on his own.

The name father chose for his business was *555 Auctions* after that well known brand of smooth taste cigarettes manufactured by British American Tobacco, a brand that is quite popular in Asia, mainly, it is said, because the number is thought to be lucky. What intrigued me was why father, a strict non-smoker who could not even brook the butt of a fag chose it as the name for his auctions, unless of course he was banking on the number bringing him luck.

Father was one of the few auctioneers of those days, among other leading names being Dunstan Kelaart, Earle Nicholas and Schokman & Samarawickreme, not to mention Alexis Auction Rooms run by Alexis Siriwardhana of Killarney, Colpetty. He never thought of any of them as a threat, He had immense trust in himself and even went to the extent of declaring open S & A Auctions run by that aspiring duo of auctioneers, Nimal De Silva and Herbert Amarasinghe, in spite of the popular belief

that opening a venture one was already in could bust one's business.

Father's earliest auctions were held at the grand hall of the Girls Friendly Society in Green Path, Colombo 7 on a more or less monthly basis, and this would, even in later times, continue to be the favoured venue. Besides GFS hall, he also held a few outstations like at the Galle Gymkhana Club inside the Dutch-built Galle Fort to which he would resort to by motor bike, his underlings Somay, Joseph and Velu reaching the town with a lorry jam-packed with the goods to be auctioned off. Later times saw some of his auctions at the Municipal Cricket Club premises opposite Victoria Park and CNAPT Centre next to the Colombo Museum. A few auctions were also held at the YMBA Hall, a sturdy rectangular building by the road facing Savoy Cinema in Wellawatte. Its rear portion overlooked a canal and on the other side of its bank we could see what looked like crocodiles basking in the sun.

It was GFS hall, almost a stone's throw away from home, that was the most common venue for the auctions. The hall possessed an old world charm of its own, having a wooden floor and even a stage at the back facing the entrance while a little doorway further back led to a spooky looking place reputed to have been haunted, for it was said that if one slept upon a bed there, he would find himself thrown on to the floor the following morn.

At the back of the building, in a little house much like an annex lived lonely old Miss Lockhardt, a fair Burgher dame with close cropped pixie hair. In the sunset of her years and on the brink of slipping into that long, long night, she would welcome us into her cosy home to keep her company, enticing us with her little brown cookies which she kept in a jar. The quaint, enchanting chamber, though small and snug, looked very much like the home of an elf or fairy, as it seemed somehow to exude a golden effulgence, the result no doubt of the bright yellow glow of the tungsten filament of an incandescent bulb

acting on the little, amply furnished room, suffusing it with an amber tint.

To the right in a ramshackle little house lived the caretaker, a lean, mustachioed character named Simon and his family of one wife, two sons and three daughters. The elder boy Sunil, a bespectacled fellow in his teens was a Bruce Lee fan who very realistically regaled us with the stories of his hero including one where he plucked out an opponent's heart, while the younger boy Jayantha was a less imaginative happy-go-lucky sort. Between the hall and the hostel for the old girls, formerly a palatial house known as '*The Tent*' was a bare ground which when we dug a few inches revealed thickset sago worms, the whitish grubs of the Palm Weevil, which I imagined were the kind the Chinese used to shove live into coconuts to fatten them up for the table, perhaps another of Sunil's yarns.

The auctions here were like no other. Greeting bidders at the gates was a well manicured hedgerow of dark green bushes with little red berries the size of mustard seeds which led to the beautifully canopied porch of the hall. One might have supposed the road took its name from the two hedgerows on either side that led to the hall forming a sort of crescent driveway - but not really. The street name was in fact an English rendition of the Dutch *Groene Weg* "Green Way' so called by the Hollanders of an earlier age who used it to convey the much prized cinnamon harvest from the nearby Cinnamon Gardens to the Colombo Harbour. The lofty hall was paved with hardy wooden floorboards and this formed the auction floor - the scene of the day's proceedings. A few items also to be auctioned that day would be prominently displayed outside in the front lawn, between the two hedgerows, among them beach chairs, garden umbrellas and tents firmly pegged on the ground as if a family of gypsies had camped there.

The auctions drew a considerable crowd, for father touted it well, getting posters pasted prominently in the boundary walls of the city and taking advertisements in the leading Sunday newspapers of the day. The posters were pasted on the city walls

by some of father's stooges or hirelings the night before the auctions by smearing it with *paappa*, a crude glue produced by adding flour to hot water. There were occasions when we too helped out in the nightly chore, daubing the backs of the posters with the pap from a big bucket and pasting them on the walls. The Sunday newspapers too carried black and white advertisements with some choice wordings. Here's a sample of one placed in the Weekend newspaper: *Grand Auction Sale of Household Novelties, Niceties and Necessities. You name it, we have it ! Almost anything from the verandah to the kitchen*. It was of course very short notice, for the auctions were held that very day, beginning at 9.00 am. Depending on word of mouth for publicity was of course not a good idea, for potential buyers preferred minimum participation, since more participants meant more bids which in turn could undermine one's own bid.

The auctions were usually held on Sundays, with Saturday the day before being kept for 'on view' when potential buyers could come have a look at the items to be auctioned off the following day. When the big day came, not all were really welcome, in spite of a banner at the entrance proudly proclaiming *555 Auctions. Another grand sale again!* Entrance was not free, but by admission tickets priced at Rs.2.00, not so much for the money, but to deter the riff raff from taking it as a form of entertainment. In fact one of the ads taken in a weekend newspaper very bluntly put it: *As usual to avoid undesirables. Admission by ticket Rs.2/.*

Nay this was serious business, and father intended to keep it that way. Simon, the caretaker of the premises was assigned the job of selling the tickets under a large umbrella, though it was not always easy going for him since there were the occasional upstarts who made him feel the heat in spite of the shady canopy over his head. One, I remember, almost came to fisticuffs with the poor fellow. And to think there was a time I thought father made his money selling the tickets. It was only later that I learned from mother that he kept a tidy sales commission, as much as 15 percent, for every item sold.

When it started, the auction floor was one big marketplace, only that the activity, rather than being dispersed all over, gravitated at a particular spot at a given time before moving on to the next nearest item to be sold so that the entire length and breadth of the hall and all that in-between experienced similar activity, the entire proceeding being like a set of dominos tumbling upon one another in pre-determined order. Father would move from place to place, showing off to the bidders the item to be auctioned and describing its merits in great detail before calling out a starting price, which would be successively raised by each bidder.

The final bid needless to say was the last one. If there were no more takers, the item would go to him or her that bid last, but not before father had uttered the parting words: *Going once, going twice, going, going gone!* and struck the object with his gavel, a hammer with a black triangular piece of hard rubber stuck on to a steel handle. It sometimes happened that before he could say *gone!* a buyer made another bid, spurring a further flurry of bidding.

It was of course in father's interest that the item in question get the highest possible bid, for the higher the bid, the higher his cut. In later years, when the auctions were not doing that well - the result, little doubt of cheap imported goods flooding the market - uncle Fazly had got into the habit of making superficial bids to up the previous bid, which he sometimes overdid, for father could sometimes be seen glowering at him oblivious to what the people around might think of it. He very well knew that the overly keen bidder, the stay-at-home-boy he was, could not afford the goods and that he would have to pocket it out.

The auctions brought together a lot of people who seemed to enjoy bidding against one another. A bid usually superseded another by ten Rupees, but there were those rare exceptions, one such being from an Iraqi embassy official who rather than bidding for an item at the usual 10 rupees had this habit of increasing his bid by a mere 5 rupees. Father found the haggling rather irritating and took a potshot at the fellow: "*What Mister,*

you come from a country with a lot of oil !". Unruffled, the Mesopotamus shot back: "*Mr.Wazir, do you think every Iraqi has oil in his backyard ?*

Father had a knack for swaying the crowd. Standing tall above the sea of heads - he often used a chair to stand upon, the better to be seen and heard - he would throw his voice about to tout his wares. His flair for the English language he put to good use, sometimes even stretching it a bit too far in his characteristic style of grandiloquence. His descriptive power was remarkable, so much so that he could describe an antique in such detail that one would have thought he were a seasoned arts connoisseur. He would also throw in some humour for good measure, cracking a joke or two to liven up the folk huddled around him so that it sometimes seemed more like a razzle dazzle showbiz stunt than your usual auction sale.

Added to this was his stentorian high timbred voice that never seemed to go hoarse despite almost an entire day of verbal fire. During the short intervals he would rejuvenate himself by gulping down copious quantities of King coconut water, an energizing and cooling beverage that possibly had a refreshing effect on the area about the vocal chords that took most of the strain.

The people around him also mattered a great deal. By his side, but somewhat lower down, stood mother, diligently taking down the names of the successful bidders and the price they had settled for in her ledger, sometimes helped in the task by her assistant, a young Muslim lady named Zameen. And then of course there were the auction workers who did most of the heavy work, unloading and arranging the furniture into the desired order supervised by Zameen.

The foursome Joseph, Somapala, Sena and Velu were a motley lot. Joseph, by far the most senior amongst them was a dark, gaunt old fellow, rather tall, with straight grey hair who often wore shorts, usually of a khaki colour. He spoke excellent English despite hailing from the upcountry estates, which gave him a cutting edge over the rest of the crew. He was, in a sense,

the leader of the pack; Somapala whom everbody called Somay was a more humble chap despite the fact that he was the first among them to come into father's service. A willowy fellow, he had sinewy limbs that could take some really hard work; Sena was a small-made, almost inconspicuous little wisp of a man with whiskers and Velu, a towering, balding figure with a high forehead and a complexion that could be best described as pitch black.

The four served father well, for he placed much store on loyalty. Prominently hung up on the walls of the auctions office at General's Lake Road was this glass-framed black and white board that captured the wise words of Elbert Hubbard: *If you work for a man, in heaven's name work for him. If he pays you wages which supply you bread and butter. Work for him; speak well of him, stand by him and stand by the institution he represents. If put to a pinch an ounce of loyalty is worth a pound of cleverness. If you must vilify, condemn, and eternally disparage, resign your position, and when you are outside, damn to your heart's content, but so long as you are part of an institution, so not condemn it. If you do that you are loosening the tendrils that are holding you to the institution, and at the first high wind that comes along, you will be uprooted and blown away, and probably you will never know why*.

What was most memorable about the auctions was the vast variety of items dolled up with spit and polish put up for sale that day. These were spread out higgledy piggledy or sat calmly cheek by jowl. So much so that even a veteran museum curator popping in on the day before the auctions, when it was open to the public to view, might have been entranced with the array of goods on display, for it were as if an entire museum representing different eras and realms had been put up for sale on a piecemeal basis. Here were long stately beds and tall majestic cupboards; regal grandfather clocks and placid-looking gramophones; rickety rocking chairs, sedate night lamps and sparkling crystalline chandeliers; glassware, brassware and silverware; cutlery, crockery and camping gear; Chinese porcelain vases

and jade ash trays, ornate Persian carpets and Bohemian crystal ware; pricey curios and cheaper knick-knacks and bric-a-bracs of diverse substances, shapes and sizes and on occasion even vinyl music records and well illustrated books - all for a price of course.

Since the auctions were held in the weekends, we kids often made the most of it, inspecting and admiring the stuff that interested us most and sometimes even conspiring to coax mother to purchase those that caught our fancy. Among the few items we acquired in this manner were some Walt Disney books and imported packets of seeds of flowering plants. Some of the books came as huge lots to be auctioned off probably from some embassy official or expatriates of European origin. Some were in German including a couple of hard cover Walt Disney story books like *Mickey Maus* and *Donald Duck,* while at least one, a black and white comic book of *Popeye* was in Dutch. These had a story behind them as well. It happened one night that we espied the stuff sitting cosily in a large coffer at the GFS and informed mother about it. She told us very plainly it was not in English, but in some other lingo.

We would not budge, maintaining that they were in English, since when seen from above about a couple of feet away that's what it looked like. German and Dutch, like most other Western European languages are written in the Roman script just as English is, and this we would learn when mother got the lot for us. In the days and months that followed, we tried to unravel the stories by avidly going through the pictures, but without much success. We did have a series of German language primers titled *Familie Baumann* based on a well known radio language course which father had bought in the times his tourist resort Sihina Beach Village was doing well, but we could not bother studying the language just to make out the stories.

As for the imported seeds which came in flimsy little colourful packets, we were certainly captivated by these and anticipating a bloom in blossoms sowed these in a specially prepared bed in our backyard, only to discover that they would

not as little as sprout even after a week or two. The seeds were either not suitable for our climes or had expired. The truth is that much of the stuff that found its way to the auctions were outdated, and indeed this was one of the draws, especially for old timers who clung to the notion: *the older the better*. Thankfully foodstuffs, even those of foreign provenance, did not come under the hammer, for had they, father would likely have lost a lot of his hard-earned money settling fines for selling food unfit for human consumption, or still worse, fighting lawsuits from victims of food poisoning, which could have been very, very damaging to his reputation.

With time, 555 Auctions gave way to what was called '*Alties Auctions*' named after little brother Altaf who happened to be father's pet and after whom he also named a pony called *Alties Girl*. An auction like any other held on Sunday mornings at the GFS in the early 1980s, offering among other items '*household furniture of the very highest order for every nook and corner of your home sweet home'*, it gradually lost its steam, being affected in no small way by the influx of imported goods that were flooding the market at very competitive prices.

It eventually shifted to the rear portion of a commericial premises down Green Path becoming a more or less permanent feature, in other words a showroom where items were sold at a fixed price, before dying a slow death as customers, now drawn to the newer imported stuff to be seen in almost every shop, became increasingly scarce.

Father the auctiioneer Beside him are mother and assistant Zameen

Girls Friendly Society, where many an auction was held in the 1980s

555 auctions advertisement,
Weekend newspaper. June1980

CHAPTER 6

Dream Village

Tourism was booming in the early 1980s. That was before the race riots of July 1983 and the scourge of terrorism unleashed by the Tamil Tigers that followed in its wake for nearly three decades. Needless to say, the industry, hinging as it did on the tranquil image the country portrayed to holidaymakers, suffered terribly as a result of the war.

Prior to 1983 Sri Lanka was a peaceful country that had all the ingredients for a successful tourism industry- friendly people, golden sun-kissed beaches and a rich and diverse culture. Foreign tourists, especially from countries like Germany had begun to stream in and increased in numbers over the years, especially in the wake of the liberalization of the economy in 1977. Supply catered to the demand and many saw an opportunity to cash in on the upswing by setting up tourist hotels and resorts. Father happened to be one of these aspiring entrepreneurs of a new order.

The auctions were doing well and now was the time for empire, beginning with a foray into that burgeoning and very happening industry of the day-tourism. But father in his characteristically unconventional style wanted to do it differently. Foreign tourists, he figured, had seen enough of concrete hotels and longed for something more natural. It could not cost dear though. He did not have the kind of money the bigwigs had.

What better way to house our dear visitors from overseas, he thought, than in the most natural looking houses one could think of - cabanas made of coconut thatch and straw, so archetypally primitive that one might easily imagine Adam and Eve living in one. Before long, father had set about achieving his dream, becoming in a sense, the pioneer of eco-tourism in our country. That was in 1980, well before anybody else in our little island ever thought of such a unique concept.

He could n't have got a better piece of land for building his dreams upon than the beachfront stretch at Mahapalaena, Kosgoda in the South Western coastline he purchased from a local. Abutting Galle Road at the 44th mile post, the plot was idyllically situated between two ancient rocks, the Naya Endu Gala to the South and Arangala to the North, offering a stretch of relatively secluded almost virgin beach extending a few hundred yards to the left and an equal distance to the right, from which point it was cut off by the two large rocky outcrops, one of which almost kissed the sea and the other which actually jutted into the sea, giving an impression of a bay.

Here he set about building fourteen beach cabanas with the help of the man who had sold him the land, an influential chap from the area known as Thomson. About ten to fifteen village hands supervised by a kinsman of Thomson named Jagath were put to work and within as little as three months these hardy men of the Haali caste had put up over a dozen of the cabanas from material sourced from the area including dry woven coconut leaves for the walls and Alastonia wood obtained from a tree known locally as *Ginikooru gas* (matchstick trees) as supports for the high sloping roofs. The roofs themselves were made of woven coconut leaves which were covered over with straw obtained from the paddy fields of Induruwa. The stretch of land surrounding the cabanas was carpeted with green grass that came as clumps from the interior while the flimsy fence that served as a barrier between the cabanas and the roadway was made of cinnamon wood and bamboo sticks laid out in criss-cross fashion.

The cabanas were set in two rows of seven each with a pathway in the middle whose entrance was lit at night by a couple of old incandescent ornamental lanterns resting on high white stands that gave out lambent light - an almost fairy tale setting. Natural light here shone even at night, for near each cabana were placed what were known as *Bunker Lamps*, a hardy lamp with a thick wick made of gunny sack fibre whose flame was fed by kerosene, so resilient that it could be used even while fishing in

storm tossed waters. Also hung inside each cabana was some sort of hurricane lantern known locally as *Herikal Lampu* with a glass covering inside of which burnt a flame fed again with kerosene. A vintage car, dark green in colour and beautifully painted with a scene of the resort, and an old man-drawn rickshaw added further beauty to the spot. To cap it all, on the southern end overlooking the vast Indian Ocean, he put up a lovely circular restaurant- the crown of the resort.

Father aptly called his dream resort *Sihina Beach Village*, from the Sinhala word *sihina* meaning 'dream'. In fact, a handout in German billed it as a '*Traum-Dorf*' (Dream Village) and proudly quoted what a German tourist guide on his first visit to the resort had written about it to a friend, perhaps subjected to a bit of poetic embellishment: "*This dream village by the beach is wonderful, a first of its kind in Sri Lanka. You can throw yourself in extreme peace and privacy to the tanning rays of the bright sun on the golden sands of the clean virgin beach. The village faces the beautiful blue sea, cool and calm. You can also dine in a rustic restaurant overlooking the mighty Indian Ocean. The seafood here is excellent. At night the music of the waves drives you to a deep sleep for which this romantic place is most unforgettable*".

Our visitors were no doubt happy doing time in these *first of its kind* one-roomed cells with attached bathroom. The breeze from the sea wafting through the doorway or the movable thatched window on the high sloping roof ensured they got plenty of fresh air. Imbuing further life to the resort were father's five or six ponies including a beautiful white pony which he raced in Nuwara Eliya, but which at other times were stationed here under the care of a jockey named Farook. This dark podgy fellow with a squint lived with the rest of the resort staff in a little house opposite the cabanas, on the other side of the Galle Road and would take resident tourists for a ride on the ponies around the little beach village.

There were quite a few regular visitors to our little village by the sea. One was a German brunette named Gertrude who sallied

forth from her fatherland during the winter season to be here, sometimes accompanied by her son and his wife and grandson David, a bubbly little fellow a few years younger to us. This happy family introduced to us a few Western fads including that delicious chocolate and hazelnut spread called *Nutella* and jellied fruity chews that came in various shapes and colours. We were quite fascinated by these white families basking under the tropical sun and even wondered whether not the sand in those countries was like our sea sand, lighter in colour than our brown soils that seemed to match the skin colour of a good many of our locals. We might as well have pondered whether not the blonds on the beach got their gold locks lounging under the sun so long as to bleach their hair to a sunny hue.

We also had our share of eccentricities. In one of our earliest visits to the resort which we reached at night we were told about this a resident tourist who had made a hue and cry about a monster in his cabana. *Big, big,* he had described the brute, excited and animated. Upon investigation the blighter was found to be a mere cockroach probably on the lookout for a mate with wings outstretched.

But it was not only our overseas visitors who enjoyed staying here. We too loved it and often visited our dream village over the weekends or in the holidays, sometimes taking with us our favourite story books like our bumper *Richard Scarry's* and *Sesame Streets* which we enjoyed reading in our beach chairs under the shade of the *Pandanus* trees that grew near the cabanas, with their hydra-like candelabrum branches and reddish orange pineapple-like fruit hanging like strange ornamental lanterns. Interestingly a little book we took to our beach village, a Ladybird hardback on *Islands* even had a picture of the Pandanus fruit we were so familiar with besides other scenes characteristic of island beaches such as giant turtles and sailors on the beach bludgeoning to death those big birds known as Dodos that once lived in the island of Mauritius but are now extinct, an episode that gave rise to the English simile

As Dead as a Dodo and may even well be the origin of a little known local word *Doedoo* meaning crazy or stupid.

The lure of the sea right in front of our little village was too strong to resist and there we were morning and evening taking a dip in the ocean as the rolling waves came tumbling down with a roar, bathing the shore with water and foam. There were occasions we ventured further out to sea but only when equipped with the orange-coloured inflatables the resort stocked itself with for the use of foreigners to beat the billows. We reasoned that the gear, which bobbed with the waves, would keep us afloat even if we were dragged out to deep sea, giving ample time for a grown-up to rescue us from the clutches of the ocean or the sea demon known as *diya-rakusa* who would have been lurking nearby. When we were safely back on terra firma, we would mould sand castles out of the sodden sea sand by the waters edge, scooping out the sand around it to form a moat at mother's behest.

The circular restaurant was the centerpiece of the resort. A good part of it was open to the breeze as it was only the lower portion that was walled and the roof capped with straw. It served some appetizing meals such as fish and chips, lobster, prawns and even barbequed meats on occasion, much of it prepared in the attached kitchen by a local hand named Sarath, the *kokiya* (regular cook) of the restaurant who doubled as the gardener, tending the little flower gardens near the cottages.It was here that much of the mingling took place. Foreign guests played games and talked sweet nothings. Father invited friends and family over for the weekend or a brief vacation. He even hosted uncle Nazir and his wife Adilah for lunch after their wedding in keeping with the local Muslim custom of *virundu*, a repast given in honour of the newly married couple. The luncheon was attended by both their extended families and concluded with father proudly mounting his pet son Altaf on his white pony and sending him off on the stretch of beach between the sea and village. It took off in a flash, throwing Altaf on to the soft golden sea sand. Father's little cousin Fatima saved the day by joining

him on the beach to build a multi-tiered sand castle that got progressively smaller as it rose upwards.

Among other notable visitors to the place were father's old friend Mutthiah Devaraj, a well known national cricketer and his Sinhalese wife Neela, one Doctor Vamadevan and another Doctor Wijenayagam and their families and of course Uncle Karunagaran, aunt Sunethra and their three children Rajiv, Kumeshi and Mirukshi with whom we had the fortune of sea bathing and playing on the beach in those balmy days of peace. Karu uncle, as we called their father, had made for his two daughters, still not quite grown up, little bikinis of cloth. So impressed was cousin Kumeshi with the place that she thought her Hussein kinsfolk were very, very rich. Little did she realize that our resort by the sea was not a very costly affair and a far cry from the big hotels of the time.

Our frequent visits to the place and somewhat long stays brought us closer to the thriving marine life of the area. It was after a very early visit to the place that I brought home a rather bumpy pale brown starfish. It had probably been taken from a rock pool low down on the shore or given to me by a fisherman who had hauled it up from the seabed with his catch of lobsters. It may have already been dead as it did not move an inch, but taking it to be alive I brought it home and kept it in a basin of water, only to find a couple of days later that it was giving out a rather bad smell. I took it for dead and put it away. Little did I know it then, but starfish need salinity to survive so that the water from our bathroom into which I had so innocently placed it might have actually killed it.

Sometime later during a longer holiday I found the beachhead invaded by an armada of Portuguese man-o-war.

These were jellyfish-like creatures of the sea with a lucent cock's comb-like sail floating on the surface of the water; they were also armed with stringy bluish tentacles whose sting could kill or paralyze little fish. They came, riding on the back of the billows in droves, but were initially imperceptible as they blended beautifully with the water with a camouflage even a

modern soldier could not match. One fine morning while wading in the waves near the shore, I was stung in the hand by a rather bellicose critter keen on flaunting its arsenal. The sting sent a sharp piercing pulse of pain that reached my arm and lasted for several hours before wearing out. The invasion did not last long and was soon over, never to repeat itself again. Sometimes landing on to the shore like castaways were little whitish mussels that clung on to pieces of driftwood that washed up on the beach. The tiny bivalves would stubbornly stick to the wood anchoring themselves by means of some sort of mooring gum.

Turtles too made landfall to lay their eggs in Kosgoda beach. The strip of beach where our resort was located was a favourite rookery for turtle nesting. The shy creatures would head to the sandy beach they themselves were born decades earlier for the sole purpose of scooping out a nest with their hind flippers to deposit their eggs, after which they would waddle back to sea perhaps never to return again. The young ones, when hatched, would instinctively rush to the sea, fanning out to increase their chances of surviving lurking predators.

One night father was told that a turtle had made its way to the beachfront towards the south in the vicinity of Naya Andu Gala to lay her eggs. Taking us with him, he hurried, flashing his torch. From what little I could make out in the dead of night, some men, residents of the area, had clustered around an enormous turle, judging from the size of its domed shell, and a few of them were stealing her eggs. I gathered that father was not too happy about it going by the look of his face. It was not just an inhuman thing to do, turtles were also an endangered species. Unfortunately many of the locals back then did not take conservation too seriously. Turtle eggs were in high demand, especially given the belief that consuming these made one exceedingly strong. It was commonly believed that taking turtle eggs made one's muscles taut and rigid, so much so that if one were given an injection the needle would snap.

Fishermen in their canoes were a common sight then as now since a patch of the beach to the south of our little village served as a sort of mini harbour to put out to sea. One evening we helped haul in a catch of fish caught in a *madel* or seine net. The large net had been cast into the sea by a boat and we joined the men in pulling it back onto the beach in front of our resort. We were rewarded with some fingerlings with yellowish tail, very likely the young of the *Parav* or Trevally which we gifted to our restaurant.

While on a long holiday at the resort we noticed one morning that the sea had rushed deep in to the beach, receding and leaving in its wake a large pool of water in a depression in the sea sand. We lost no time wading in the water and as the pool got smaller and smaller over time, a result of being soaked up into the sandy ground and evaporated by the heat of the sun, we noticed this wiggly little fish that had been trapped in the pool. Floundering knee- or at certain spots waist-deep in the water, we caught it with a bucket. We were thrilled with our catch, especially since it was a fine-looking fish with yellow fin or tail, more like an ornamental fish, though it might have well been a young Trevally. Having taken it to the resort we were contemplating safely conveying it home to keep in a tank. That was when saner counsel prevailed, for father, who had a soft spot for dumb creatures like this, bade us take it back to the sea and release it, which we promptly did. It quickly made a dive and was gone.

Also strewn on the beach were countless seashells, cockles, cowries, mussels and topshells, the dead denizens of the ocean the bowels of the sea, unable to digest the calcified remnants, had vomited onto the shore. Particularly charming were the cowries, the remains of sea snails, little humped thick shells with a flat undersurface having a narrow opening at the centre. We learnt from a little Quiz Me book on coins by Dean & Son we had that these cowries were so dear in the olden days that they were used as currency by certain people.

There was also the occasional cuttlebone, the porous calcareous internal shell of the cuttlefish which helps it control its buoyancy and hover above the ocean floor like a submarine. The cuttlebones, which looked like mini surfboards, only bright white in colour, we would often pick up in the course of our rambles on the beach before the golden orb of the sun which had already imbued the cerulean sky with a blaze of red and yellow sank into the ocean yonder.

On the coastal stretch to the north of the resort stood a group of black boulders piled one atop the other known as Arangala. The rocky portion closer to the sea was constantly engulfed in water. It was garbed on the lower surface with slimy bright green seaweed and studded further down with prickly sea urchins, living crowns of thorns that revealing themselves at low tide, looked rather like the golliwogs of the stories we read with black spikes sticking out from their equally black bodies, doggedly clinging on to the rock for support and to feast on the smaller aquatic creatures that had found their way there. The folk here harvested the purplish mussels that clung on to these boulders. When boiled these would open like a duck's bill to reveal a lump of edible flesh though whenever we climbed up the rocks we could not find any as they had already been scraped off by local folk who greedily gulped them down or sold them for a fast buck. Here in the rock pools formed by the sea water that cascaded over the dimples in the boulders were little fish that darted hither and thither that we loved to watch but simply could not make a meal of, though bigger fish fit for the table swarmed in the sea nearby. Towards the west, surrounded by shallow seawater were a few more similar rocks crawling with lobsters.

To the south of the resort lay another group of black boulders near which a limpid stream from the hinterland emerged to empty its waters into the sea, but not before forming a shallow pool in which we occasionally bathed and frolicked. This pool of water appeared rather like a cul de sac formed by the seawater that found its way there with black brown rocks on almost every

side except the western side facing the sea, but actually the water it contained seems to have flowed in from a rivulet known as the Kalugal Oya to its east through a subterranean channel under the Galle Road though seawater at high tide could have also found its way there on occasion. The large red boulder to its south, surrounded below by smaller black rocks was known as Naya Endu Gala or 'The Rock upon which the Cobra cried'. Legend had it that the rock had been the abode of cobra which lost a gemstone in its possession and cried till it split into two, its blood dripping down the boulder as a large red streak seen to this day.

The dream was not to last long, for the nightmare that was war though fought far from the scene now took its place, leaving in its wake a stub of what was once a beautiful little village, the result of the downturn in tourism the island was experiencing in the aftermath of the 1983 riots and father's own disillusionment with the turn of events.

Unable even to maintain it, he stripped it off of its more costlier furniture including its lovely antique almirahs and abandoned it to the elements, which within a decade or so had whittled it down to its very foundations, so much so that there would come a time when we would not even be able to make out the spot where it once so proudly stood, all that remains of it now being some old photographs, handouts, advertisements and of course the happy memories it gave us.

Frau Gertrude in front of vintage car and the cabanas of the traumdorf in the background

In the old hackery or rickshaw with mother and Frau Gertrude at Sihina Beach village

The Hussein boys and their cousins, the Karu girls at Sihina Beach Village

Mother and three clowns at Sihina beach village restaurant

The Husseins at breakfast with the Karus
at Sihina beach village restaurant

Husseins and Karus seabathing in front of Sihina Beach Village.
Father in the background with inflatables looking like the Hulk

Cuttlefish bone, Kosgoda Beach

Seashells in variety, Kosgoda Beach

CHAPTER 7

No business like food business

There is no business, they say, like food business. Little wonder father got into the processed food trade, having seen some really bad times with the auctions and his tourist resort, Sihina Beach Village.

The trade of his choice was spicing choice cuts of meat with a piquant concoction of chilli and garlic, which when sauted or fried, made a very hearty meal. It was quite addictive really, even to us kids. The 400 gms packs of beef and chicken were turned out at a small workshop in Wattala with the help of a few hired hands though there were even occasions we kids used to help out. Father used to say it was alright to pack a bit more meat, but not less. Each pack sold for only Rs. 19 back then.

He called this simple range of meat products 'Bahera' no doubt inspired by one of his business heroes Naleem Hajiar whose popular brand of poultry products known as Bairaha had become a household name by then. Whether he wanted to exploit the similarity in name or simply thought that imitation was the sincerest form of flattery I cannot say. What I do know is that father admired Naleem Hajiar, the astute entrepreneur from the coastal town of Beruwala who started off as a gem merchant before putting his energies into poultry farming. Its near namesake Bahera, though quite popular in Colombo at one time, did not make it as big as father had anticipated. He eventually lost interest in it and it died an untimely death.

However, this was not to be the last of father's forays into the food business. In a couple of years he had come up with the idea of a mobile restaurant at the Galle Face Green similar to but smaller in scale to that already run by another Muslim businessman simply known as *nana* (Big Brother), actually a resident of Slave Island known as Sulaiman Farook who had started off as a green gram seller on the green. The man had

given his sobriquet to his fast food outlet which was also known as *Nana's*, a name which would in time spawn a number of similar businesses bearing similar names that would mushroom near the walkway fronting the sea, in the process dwarfing the original Nana's that once did a brisk business nearer the Galle Road where it enjoyed a virtual monopoly till father came into the scene.

Father did not give him any real competition though. He would have, had he taken a name after *Nana's* as many others did later. Though he himself had once basked in the glory of another's business, as he did *Bahera*, he simply could n't bring himself to calling it *Naanaa's* or *New Nana's* or even *Wazir Nana's*. Unlike Nana's which employed many Muslim youth and included tantalizing barbeques, ours was a much more modest venture, selling fried chicken, French fries and sandwiches to the hungry visitors of the green.

Our parents did much of the preparatory work for the day's business, spicing the meats and cutting the spuds into strips after which they would be loaded into the Volkswagen van we had, along with a few small tables and some white linen. By late afternoon or early evening, father and two or three of us boys would get into the van and pulling into a parking lot between the green and Galle Road would get to work, setting up the tables to form a U shape with the van strategically placed at its opening. Father, sometimes assisted by a help or two who made their way to the green, would fry the meats and chips while we kids would do the serving.

This continued for a year or so before father decided it was not making the money he had anticipated and called it quits. We missed it though, for we enjoyed doing our little part amidst the inviting aroma of the fried meats and the cooling breeze of the sea as the sun sank into the ocean yonder, tinting the waters with a glistening gold and bathing the sky in a brazen orange before taking with it its light and casting that dark veil we called night.

Father also toyed with the idea of getting into the making of strawberry jam; not the cheap artificial stuff made from a kind

of local pumpkin, but the real thing. Strawberries were then been grown in the hilly climes of Nuwara Eliya in special enclosures that looked very much like airport hangers but served the purpose of glasshouses. He likely got the idea when we visited the home of mother's classmate Nirmali who worked at the GFS. That was when her husband remarked that artificial strawberry jam made out of ash pumpkin was good business, only to have father remark that he did n't believe in artificial things. It had to be natural or nothing.

As there were no books available on the topic, he placed an order to get one imported at a leading bookshop like Gunasena's or Lake House. Sure enough, the book arrived after a few weeks and father rushed to receive it. '*Strawberry Jam'* it sure was, but not about the jam. It was a play in the form of dialogues, probably the play of that name by Bruce Fisk, a British black comedy about two spinster sisters. The book he brought home in good humour, but with it died his plans to get into jams. It was too great a risk as this simple incident had proved and he did n't intend taking any more.

Among the few books that father had in a box-like appendage that stuck out of the head of his bed were big titles like *Handbook for the Ceylon Farmer* and *Animal Husbandry* and a slim volume on *Banana Cultivation* which perhaps reflected his intended forays into more ventures of the kind. That nothing came out of them is not surprising.

CHAPTER 8

Holidaying in the hills

Holidays come but once in a while; but when they do, they simply refuse to go, for they cling on to one's memory as if they have nowhere else to go, so that even in later times one could always relive those happy days that stand out so clearly from the rest that the mists of time have befogged and are but a haze. No truer can this be than the holidays one spends in the hills, amidst natural piles, heaps and mounds that soaring high like colossal cones peak hither and thither and seem to know no horizon, hemming in one's memories as they do their surroundings.

Some of the happiest days of our childhood we spent holidaying in the hill country, in the midst of mountain fastnesses the Sinhalese of old called *giri-durga* 'Rocky Fortification'. The mountains were, after all, an almost impregnable natural barrier that made foreign forays into the Kandyan Kingdom, the last independent Sinhalese kingdom, an extremely difficult one, which is the very reason why the jealously independent highlanders were able to hold out against the might of three European colonial powers well upto 1815, when it fell to the British, not due to the superior arms of the Imperial Raj, but because of the internal intrigues of the Kandyan chiefs.

Although my twin brother Asgar and I were highlanders by birth as we were born in Kandy and even spent the earliest part of our lives there, we would soon grow to be strangers to our natal land and eventually come to look upon it as an exotic place, rather enchanting really, like the cold countryside of a Hesperian fable, encompassed by virgin hills draped in sylvan raiment and caressed only by that whitish nebulous ether we called mist that seemed so strange and outlandish; a far cry from the tropical urban jungle that was Colombo where we spent the greater part of our childhood.

Little wonder that our adventurous little family looked upon the central highlands as a getaway from it all, a cooling bower for a sultry summer. It certainly did not disappoint us, especially the spot we resorted to most – Nuwara Eliya, a peaceful little town nestled in the hills of a rugged country known to the Sinhalese of old as *Kanda-uda-Rata* 'The Country on top of the Hills', a name perhaps more suited for a fictitious tale set in some celestial realm beyond the clouds than the sun-kissed tropical island we lived in. This picturesque little town sat comfortably perched like a gigantic eagle's nest on a mountain top, upon a huge, rather flat table-land that could only be reached by driving cautiously on long winding serpentine roads that traversed precipitous hillsides, vigilantly navigating countless hair-pin bends sculpted into the crowns of soaring mountains; mountain after mountain till the rugged terrain carpeted here and there with patchworks of almost every imaginable tinge of green gave way to a vista of rolling hills densely clothed with tea bushes before lending itself to be groomed and garbed with the vestments of what men call civilization.

Nuwara Eliya was arguably the fastest developed metropolis in the country. Lost to the world and quietly reposing in an uninhabited tract of land visited occasionally only by hunters looking out for elks or sambhur, it was accidently discovered by a shooting party in 1828 during the governership of Sir Edward Barnes. Impressed with its cool climate which no doubt would have reminded him of his English countryside, this far-sighted British Governor of Ceylon decided to convert it into a sanitarium for sick British soldiers. Within a century or so, the spot, with its scenic Lake Gregory and other breathtaking natural features had been transformed into a typically European landscape with pinus trees and country houses in typical English style dominating the architecture. Little wonder then that it came to be known as 'Little England' to locals, a name perhaps originally bestowed by Englishmen who would have looked upon the spot as a home away from home.

Our earliest visit to the place was when I was four years old. That was when father's friend and regular auction customer Sena Kavikara offered us his bungalow complete with caretaker for a holiday stay. We we were soon on our way to the hills muffled in some sweaters mother had sewn out of flannel, blue with pink collar for me and Asgar and pink with blue collar for little brother Altaf. This old country style house in Glenfall Road even had an apple tree growing in its garden which the caretaker warned mother not to let us approach, inspired perhaps by the biblical story of our first parents. Of our stay there, I can recall only a few incidents and that too faintly. For instance, being huddled around mother on the side steps of the house one evening while she regaled us with a pretty tale like *Cinderella*, *Goldilocks* or *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* from a little book she had brought along with her.

One day we found that the caretaker, inspired again perhaps by the biblical story of our first parents fall from grace at the whims of a serpent, had killed a snake and was burning it in a bonfire he had formed of the dead leaves and twigs from the garden. This somehow excited our curiosity and we would learn later that burning dead snakes was necessary to prevent other snakes being attracted to the spot, it being the general belief that these snakes arrive on the scene to avenge the death of their fallen fellow. The belief had a scientific basis nevertheless, for serpents, even dead ones, are known to emit powerful scents known as pheromones which attract their kind of the opposite sex to the spot though the object of their desire lies lifeless.

Also memorable were the pear trees serving as hedges, the light green fruits of which mother would point to us as our car passed by. These famed pears, little doubt the descendants of those introduced by English planters a century or more ago, would, within a decade or so, disappear from Nuwara Eliya's home gardens, the result, it is believed of some fungal rot that came riding on the wings of the 1978 cyclone, wiping out the entire lot, just like the coffee blight a century earlier had destroyed the region's thriving coffee plantations.

The results of this earlier blight we could see around us in the vast tea estates that had taken the place of coffee. Tea certainly did better than the bitter berry and put Ceylon on the world map once again. Few could do without tea, especially Englishmen. And so there we were with the same old bushes of tea surrounding us whenever we rode up hill country. Mother would explain to us that it was only two leaves and a little bud that was used for making the black tea our country was so famous for and we would lend her our ears rather half-heartedly.

One night while driving upcountry mother looked up and saw a flare in the heavens; it was a shooting star streaking across the dark sky, and she quickly pointed it out, but we could not as much as catch a glimpse of it. Even if we had it would not have impressed us. She could have at least spiced it up a bit, like telling us that hoary old Arabian belief held that these were the stones by which the angels pelted the jinn who had eavesdropped on the conversations the heavenly hosts were having on the fates of men. But nay, she had not yet mastered the art of winning our hearts. She seemed to be so obsessed with tea and other such trivia we had absolutely no interest in.

There were certainly much more interesting topics to talk about when on an adventure like this. For instance about the famous outlaw Saradiel whose mountainous hideout of Utuvankanda or Castle Rock near Kegalle father would point out to us while on the road to Nuwara Eliya, informing us that they called him Ceylon's Robin Hood because he waylaid the wealthy and distributed the loot to the needy. "*Robbing from the rich and giving to the poor. Is that a good thing or a bad thing ?*" he would ask us. Now, that was a difficult question to answer and so we kept mum, leaving dad to brood over it.

Little did we know it then, but Saradiel's victims were Moorish merchants plying uphill and downhill in their caravans loaded with merchandise. Strangely, his accomplice Mammalay Marikkar who assisted him in his banditry was also a Moor. The British, staunch enforcers of law and order in the tradition of the Sheriff of Nottingham eventually tracked them down and

hanged them at Gallows Hill in Kandy. The local Robin Hood was perhaps no match for the famous English outlaw of Sherwood Forest, whom he is often compared with, but like him lived on in folk memory well after his death, his exploits being told with such relish and flourish by storytellers that one would imagine he were a virile muscular hero in the manner of Hercules or Conan. The real Saradiel in contrast was a rather lean effeminate-looking man - strange indeed for one who leeched off others.

Talking of leeches, we had plenty of them in Nuwara Eliya. The little saradiels swarmed in the glades of certain parts of the town, especially in its outskirts, lying in wait till an unsuspecting stranger rich in red gold came their way, whereupon they would, somersaulting stealthily, fall upon him. We would take care to evade the bloodsuckers by treading ever so briskly or scurrying over the blades of grass or undergrowth they had made their hideout. The villains had made their presence felt to us rather early in our visits to the place for I remember an occasion when mother once ordered me to put my leech-infested foot into a potty in a house we were staying in, pouring over it some eau de cologne, lime juice or salt to dislodge the blighter.

Stories of the little terrors gorging themselves on human blood to their heart's content till they dropped off, fully sated, the size of a rubber ball, did not make it any easier to allay the lingering fear we would sometimes be seized with when traversing leech-infested territory. Fortunately for us the bloodsuckers did not frequent the more central parts of town where the human population was denser and the wet undergrowth in which they thrived sparser.Nay, here grew taller trees less conducive to their way of life; pinus, cypress and eucalyptus that perfumed the cold air with their mentholated fragrance amidst old English style Tudorbethan houses with gabled roofs and bow and dormer windows. This was no leech country, but one more attuned for an English spring with carefully kept gardens decked

with blooms of various hues. Man was master here and he intended to keep it that way.

With time, our visits to Nuwara Eliya became more frequent, especially during the April holidays, the season when Colombo's elite deserted the sun-beaten city with its heat and humidity and beat a hasty retreat to the colder climes of Little England like the colonials of an earlier age did in times like these. Cold it was no doubt, so much so that whenever we went outdoors and huffed and puffed into the heavy air, we could see little gusts of mist-like cold air emerging from our lips, though there were occasions we had to muff our little hands in woolen mittens as the prickly cold almost numbed our fingers, though this was very likely on some very chilly December morn than a more temperate April day.

But there was an added draw. Nuwara Eliya had by the early 1980s emerged as a popular horse racing destination in the tradition of Ascot in England and father lost no time in throwing in his lot with the Turf Club that had revived it in 1981, taking a number of its stables and filling them with a dark handsome horse and a pack of demure brown ponies. Not that there was any money to be made in it. It was all about winning cups and boasting about it for a year. Father's interest in the sport of kings was prompted not just by the opportunity it gave him to hobnob with the local landed elite who owned horses or patronized the sport, but perhaps also a desire, born out of sentiment to revive the faded glory that was once his family's before an earlier regime, roused by nationalist and socialist fervour, clamped down on the sport due to its obvious colonial associations. The last horse race held in Nuwara Eliya had been a decade earlier, in 1971, following a series of measures the government of the day took to kill the sport including a ban on horse imports in 1965. The acquisition of land belonging to the Colombo Racing Course for the Colombo Campus were among other measures that effectively killed the King's Sport in the country.

And so there we were in the horse racing season which happily coincided with the April vacation, lodging in holiday homes,

visiting the stables and walking the turf of the racing course. One of the earliest such chalets we stayed in was called *The Prairie* in whose spacious lawn we would, at eventide, shoot up a toy helicopter one of us received as a gift. Strolling around, we could not help but notice the distinct vegetation of these colder climes like the neat rows of blue-green cabbages growing in hillside gardens.

When indoors, it was reading that kept us occupied and one such book I recall taking along with me was Enid Blyton's *The Castle of Adventure* which told the story of a bunch of kids Jack, Phillip, Dinah and Lucy-Ann on holiday in the Scottish highlands who solved the mystery of a castle perched high up in the mountains. The book made wonderful reading, given the mountainous setting of the story with its grand castellated rock, especially in a place like Nuwara Eliya nestled high up in the hills, so much so that there were times I would be lost in thought wishing I was there with that adventurous foursome, perhaps even as one of them.

Nuwara Eliya was however no place for mysteries, though a scene we came across almost seemed like one. That was when, one fine morning, while strolling to the Turf Club we came across a large number of dead serpents, a foot or two in length but no bigger, lying on the road or wayside, some with belly turned up and others as if crushed lightly. How they had perished I cannot say though looking back I reason that some would have been run over by vehicles and others trampled by heavy boots or perhaps the hoofs of horses. Back then though it was almost like a mystery to us; so many dead in one day, or rather night; now that was reason for suspicion. Had we cared to delve a bit deeper we may have revealed a killer on the prowl, an aspiring Jack the Ripper perhaps, starting with the smaller victims as many mass murderers do.

The stables where our hoofed friends were housed we also visited on occasion. The horse, a thoroughbred of an almost black colour was a rather tall sturdy fellow who seemed to have this bad habit of looking down on us. The steed, originally called

Sita Jaya was renamed *Diasis* by father after the famous American racehorse of that name. Asgar had suggested the name *Black Bullet* and father quite impressed with it even seriously considered using it. He had purchased the horse from millionaire industrialist Upali Wijewardane, it is said *for a song* as the magnate, in order to encourage the sport here, imported horses and sold them at a very low price for any takers. He nevertheless kept the best for himself, including among others *Kandos Man*, *Cornwall Garden* and *King of Zulu* who won many a race.

The more demure brown ponies including one named *Alties Girl* after little brother Altaf were not as impressive but were nevertheless a thoroughly spoilt lot. One, perhaps a health freak, even refused to eat a carrot it had seen falling on to the ground when one of us kids attempted to feed it for the first time, obviously with trembling hands. The finicky fellow would not as much as take a nibble however much we tried to pass it down its throat. Animals too can be conscious of their health.

Father could obviously not afford to lodge his ponies in the stables at Nuwara Eliya for long, and so when the racing season was over, he would have them banished to his seaside resort, Sihina Beach Village where they would entertain his foreign guests offering them rides on their backs, accompanied by our regular jockey Farook. A humble, small-made fellow with a swarthy complexion and an odd squint, Farook was the son of the family horsekeeper Ramalan who had so faithfully served our great grandmother Rukiya in her horse-riding school. In keeping with family tradition, he served father well and wished we would also have him, for I remember the usually jocund chap seeming rather sentimental one night after having accompanied us into a cabana in Kosgoda where we were to stay during a vacation, inquiring whether we would look after him the way father did when we grew up.

And when the big day came it was one grand show at the circular race course. We could see from the stand the sleek swift-footed steeds racing against one another, till, taking the

curve, they disappeared into the distance, only to make their appearance once more while the crowds cheered. Most of the races, needless to say, were won by the steeds owned by Upali Wijewardene, though there were occasions when our Diasis came close to the cup. However, galloping to glory on a horse was no easy task as father would find out. Upali, a tycoon whose vast business empire included aviation, chocolates and newspapers and who had been instrumental in reviving horse racing in the country mysteriously disappeared when the Learjet he was traveling in went missing in early 1983 somewhere off the islands of the Indonesian archipelago. With him the sport lost its greatest benefactor. The dull economic climate that followed in the wake of the ethnic riots in mid-1983 only made matters worse. This was further complicated by the disappointing performance of Sihina Beach Village which was going from bad to worse as tourist arrivals plummeted due to the terrorist threat that followed in the wake of the riots.

Father, seeing the writing on the wall, gave up his equestrian antics, selling or gifting his steed and ponies and calling it quits. It had cost him dear and never again would he entertain the idea of owning a horse. At least he knew when to back off instead of crying out like mad King Richard 'A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!'

A Tudorbethan house viewed from Sena Kavikara's bungalow at Glenfall Road, Nuwara Eliya where we spent our first holiday in the upcountry

Holidaying in Nuwara Eliya. I had this bad habit of folding my arms for snapshots back then

Father with one of his ponies, Nuwara Eliya Turf Club

Father's pet Altaf on ponyback after a race, Nuwara Eliya Turf Club

CHAPTER 9

Down South

Sri Lanka's southern coast, with its lustrous golden beaches fringed on one side with feathery ashen palms that dance to the winds and flanked on the other by blue-green waters grizzled by the waves never fails to enamour visitors who are constantly drawn to its ethereal charm as we often were.

Our earliest visits to the south were to Brown's Hill in the outskirts of Matara, a well known town in the southern coastal belt. Brown's Hill itself was a scenic residential area dotted with a few houses with spacious gardens which could be approached by little lanes and walkways branching off from Beach Road. Here it is said stood the airy bungalows of the old colonials strategically placed to capture the sea breeze blowing in from the south. Near its base facing the beach was a neatly flattened area bounded on one end by a long strip of rusty metal known as *Taakat* (Target) by the locals whose elders used to talk of cannons been placed there long ago by the *Suddo* (Whites) to bombard enemy ships. The place obviously had colonial associations, judging by the appellation given to it, Brown's Hill – an elevated area named after Englishman John Brown, an able administrator of the region.

Here lived grandaunt Haseena who was known to our father's family as 'Amy' but to us as 'Matara aunty'. The house in which she lived with her husband, Proctor Anwar and five children, by then all grown up, had a pathway leading to it from Beach Road with a spacious garden girdling it on all sides. Here thrived a variety of flora including a strapping cashewnut tree whose apple-like fruits we loved nibbling as squirrels do. In its backyard were coconut palms and a prolific passionfruit creeper that had crawled up a tall tamarind tree, so high that none dare go up but tarry till the yellowish fruits fell onto the ground looking quite wizened.

The house was said to have once been used as a holiday bungalow by well known judge Justice M.T.Akbar and as if bearing testimony to it was a flat land at a slightly higher elevation behind the house which was believed to be a tennis court where the good judge bounced and trounced his balls. The Anwer boys made liberal use of it to play softball cricket especially when their Ghany cousins came a visiting. All the more so since there was not much entertainment to be had around there, except for the occasional movies that showed at places like the Broadway Cinema down Broadway Road with its gleaming brass and strong scent of citronella hanging in the air.

Our first visit to the place we called *Matara House* was when we were a couple of years old, in the mid 1970s. It stands out as a memorable visit not for me who could not remember even a frame of it, but for an unsavoury incident that many in that house would recall like a roll of film even more than three decades later.

That was when a distant kinswoman of theirs walked out when mother was invited for lunch, muttering that a *Sinhalatti* (Sinhalese woman) would not share the table with her, a 'Muslim' woman. The fusspot even frowned upon seeing the only daughter of the house, Faizoona fondling bonny baby Altaf, later going on to comment at the house of a man named Hajiar Appa that she had seen the girl carrying a *Sinhala-kutti* (Sinhalese child). Such racist drivel, though anathema to Islam, one may occasionally find dribbling from the mouths of the unlettered members of the community who in the rabid fervour of ignorance cannot distinguish religion from race any more than they could tell right from wrong.

The telltale never had it good, for her own son got hitched to a Burgher girl, prompting Faizoona to comment when they arrived for a religious function at the Grand Mosque in Matara known as the *Burda Kanduri* that not only had the lad married a *Parangi* (Portuguese, meaning Burgher) girl, but that he had also brought with him a *Parangi* child. Tit for tat, nay worse, for

the term she chose to employ, *Parangi*, was by no means a respectable term in Muslim circles even to refer to the Burghers who are more properly *Lansi* or Dutch descendants. On the other hand, *Parangi* (a corruption of *Frank*, the Germanic tribe that gave its name to France) literally meant 'Portuguese', the sworn enemies of the island's Muslims in days gone by, not to mention that it was also the name of a disease the Portuguese are believed to have introduced to the country.

The ill feeling was still quite strong in Matara, where it is said that the Lusitanian conquistadors, in the manner of the crusaders of old, ruthlessly wiped out the Muslim populace of the town as they suspected them to be in league with their Dutch foes, slaying the men and enslaving the women and children. The Portuguese of those days, unlike the relatively peaceful inhabitants of Lusitania today, were a bloodthirsty lot who had scant respect for the teachings of Christ. The grudge they bore against the local Muslims was twofold. For one thing, they regarded them as their foes in faith; for another they considered them to be rivals in trade, for it were the Muslims who stood in the way of the Portuguese monopolizing the island's lucrative trade, especially in spices such as cinnamon.

My earliest recollection of the place was in the days leading to aunt Faizoona's wedding to uncle Najimudeen which was held, as was the usual Muslim custom then, at the bride's house. So there we were, almost our entire paternal clan, lumbering in hackeries, hooded carts on two wheels hitched to a trotting bullock or two, trailing one after another like a wild west wagon train, from Matara town to Brown's Hill. I wonder how we got to the town in the first place. It had to be by train and not by car, or else there would have been no reason to take the hackeries from the town unless of course the ladies preferred a fancy ride on the bullocks.

Those were the days when Matara town had a fleet of hackeries to cater to the transport needs of locals in the absence of the costlier cabs, yellow-topped, black-bodied Morris Minors that served the more commercial parts of the country such as

Colombo in the late 70s before the Bajaj three-wheelers from India invaded the country, in the process displacing both the dearer four wheeler and the cruder two wheeler, signs of a burgeoning middle class.

The morning the wedding was to take place saw countless fowls being slaughtered for the feast to be held that night. We kids would watch the bloody proceeding outside the house wide-eyed as the slaughterer did his job with precision, deftly slicing their throats with a sharp knife so that the blood spurted out and their feathery bodies went into convulsions, a consequence no doubt of the muscles contracting as a result of blood loss, before they fell dead near his feet.

Though this might strike one as rather gruesome, the fowl do not experience pain except for the quick cut at the carotid artery which immediately deprives their little brains of blood, and at the jugular vein which prevents the blood from the head going back to the heart. The contractions take place after this and in no way reflect the actual pain suffered by the creature.

The job done, the fowl would be plucked and prepared for the feast that night while the oocytes, the little round eggs of the hens comprising the yolk but sans the albumen and the white calcified coating that characterizes laid eggs, would be reserved for a repast the following day, being cooked as a curry, yellowish, rubbery balls varying in size from a ping pong ball to a marble, sitting atop a spicy brown gravy and served in dainty dishes for breakfast.

By eventide the wedding house had become a hive of activity and there we were, the three of us, dressed for the occasion, Asgar and I in bluish safari suits and Altaf in a brownish military kit with a beret neatly perched on his little noddle. And there in the main hall, which was the front portion of the house, was seated the bride, like a princess, arrayed in all her finery, upon a florid bridal throne known as *istaad*, and beside her was her prince charming who had been led there by the bride's kinsfolk. Local Muslim tradition demands that the bride be seated on the dais for some time before the bridegroom is led to her and takes

his seat beside hers, a nuptial custom believed to symbolically stress the dignity of the man on the occasion, for the bride waits, as if pining for him, and not the other way about as in the western tradition where the man stands while the bride is ceremonially led to him by her father.

The bride as usual was pretty and winsome and her man tall and handsome. Aunt Faizoona whom everybody addressed as *Ukku Nona* (a Sinhala word meaning 'milk-lady') was the fairest of them all; little doubt the most beautiful damsel in all Matara. Fair of face and form she had a grace which few other women could match, for her well chiseled features and slender figure so lithe and lissom strikingly stood out from all those ladies around her. Indeed she was the kind of woman one ought not to behold without uttering the benedictory formula *Masha Allah* (As God Wills) to ensure that the effects of one's evil eye would not despoil her feminine allure.

Her man was her match in every possible way, for uncle Naji as always was good looking with a charm and elegance few other men could match. He looked quite European really with a tall stature and fair complexion, not to mention his blue-grey eyes which mother thought was a throwback to some remote Dutch ancestor. The man was a scion of a fairly respectable family with roots in the coastal town of Galle not far from Matara where the Dutch colonists had a strong presence, as seen for instance in the magnificent fort they built which stands to this day retaining all its old world charm with its high ramparts, belt of battlements and phallus-shaped barbicans.

Many were the occasions we visited the house on Brown's Hill, especially during the school holidays. We were fascinated by its fish tank with its riot of colourful little fish and its well kept display of foreign and local banknotes pinned or stringed onto a rigifoam sheet and covered with glass which was owned by Baba Uncle as we called the youngest member of the Anwar family.

There were also times we were joined by father's kinsfolk including on one occasion which lasted for about a week or so by father's cousin Fatima who was almost our age; a year or two older maybe, but still a fine playmate despite her gender. With her we would often walk or bicycle the narrow pathways of Brown's Hill.

The place teemed with creepy crawlies of various kinds. Once while resting in an airy bedroom in the afternoon I espied a yellowish snake gliding along a rafter on the roof and rushed to tell grandaunt about it. She coolly shrugged it off as a harmless *gerandia*, a ratsnake common in those parts. When we inquired whether the story of the *ahatullas*, the green vine snakes going for the eyes was true, she brusquely brushed it aside, assuring us they were inoffensive creatures. These slim snakes used to frequent the guava trees around the house, blending beautifully with its leaves so that one could hardly make them out from a distance.

However she could not brook the *polongas*, the venomous Russel's vipers whose odour she said resembled that of the green bug when crushed. One she spotted coiled under her rose bushes in front of her house she promptly dispatched with some sort of iron bludgeon in our full view and oblivious to what we kids might think of it.

Though we did not come across cobras in our time, the place had crawled with them not long before. The people of the outlying areas did not kill cobras, but rather tossed them into an earthen pot and brought them to the roadside near Brown's Hill. Here they smashed the pots to release the cobras who would swiftly glide into the wild tract of land by the road. Fortunately the family kept a watchdog named Carlo with a long muzzle like that of a mongoose. It dispatched several cobras before it was bitten by one hiding near a Cannas bed. It died within an hour or so after going blue in the muzzle and frothing from its mouth.

The sprawling backyard of the place ovegrown with Coconut and King Coconut palms was also a good breeding ground for critters of various descriptions. Once when I had cultivated this

fascination for fungi, I brought home a very large white mushroom I found clinging on to a tree stump there, only to find a spooky centipede coiled inside it. The stowaway had probably decided it would be better off in our backyard than in its hostile abode back there under the prying eyes of folk like our Matara Aunty who wished its kind no good.

Even when the dead of night fell here, one could still find in the environs obvious traces of life, for moving briskly in the gloom of the unlit nocturnal garden facing the house were fireflies flitting about like little fairies, flashing their lights so brazenly that one would think that Venus consumed by some unquenchable ardour was taking the plunge towards earth spurning the astral lights around her. Though it seemed as if they had turned their lights on to find their way in the dark, the sirens were actually looking for mates, their yellow green lights serving as a sort of Morse code to solicit prospective males. So fascinated were we with the nymphos that we even discussed the possibility of capturing a few of them and putting them into an empty jam bottle to produce a bioluminescent lamp. Needless to say, capturing the critters was no easy task as they would flash their light before melting into the night at our approach, only to be seen some distance away flashing their lights again as if to say *catch me if you can!*

And when uncle Firoze, who was the most learned of the lot, joined us, it was also an opportunity for learning; many were the occasions we benefited from his rich store of knowledge, even when it came to something as seemingly trivial as protesting against a child chewing a piece of old newspaper. For said he, the ink used in it might well contain lead from the type, which could, when ingested, seep through the bloodstream and reach the head. After all, had not the lunacy of a good many Romans in the decadent days of their rot been attributed to the plumbum piping their water passed through ?

One morning while strolling along the beach not far from Brown's Hill with our learned uncle we noticed this cylindrical lingus-like creature. That, he pointed out, was a sea-slug, a

beche-de-mer, adding with some relish that people ate the critters, which we fondly imagined was lightly fried in oil like a sausage sizzling in the pan. The fact however is that the creatures, once a well known export commodity from Ceylon to Singapore and Penang, are dried for preserving before finding their way into costly Chinese soups that are considered something of a delicacy.

The specimen we saw was possibly the last of the sea slugs of the area. Although common in the 1960s they had dwindled over the years. The sea salamanders abounding near the rocks below a large bungalow by the sea had also disappeared by that time. A couple of decades earlier, when the Anwar boys and their sister resorted to the spot to catch colourful ornamental fish, these thick-skinned slimy brown critters which jumped like frogs in and out of the sea to alight on the rocks would get caught in their little net much to their annoyance.

Nor did we ever come across the *ikiriyas* or sea urchins there, though they might have been lurking thereabouts. In the days when the Beatles had released Abbey Road with its catchy numbers like Octopus's Garden, father and his brother Amir had gone a fishing on Brown's Hill Beach with their cousins of the Anwar clan. They had hook and line of strong nylon to which they tied a beach rock. Amir was about to fling it to sea when father stopped him. Saith he in his wordly wise manner: *Adai, oru tayinettuku oru min tanai varum* (Hey, you'll catch only one fish with one hook). Grabbing the line from his brother he tied several hooks on to it and flung it. Plonk it landed on a large black rock out at sea somewhat in the form of a sedent lion, but pull as hard as he could it would not move. Babita as Sharwar was nicknamed was soon in tears asking for his nylon line and Amir feeling sorry for the lad waded into the water and was headed towards the big rock.

Getting on to it, he stepped on a rowdy lot of spiny black urchins who ruthlessly needled the soles of his feet with their spikes. The ordeal ended with over thirty spines that looked like pencil points getting embedded in the flesh of his soles. It was

several months before he would fully recover from the barbs. Fortunately we were spared the ordeal of watching father's folly unfold as he had still not married mother. That was in 1969.

However we did witness some strange things there. One fine morning, strolling down the beach joined by a larger group of kinsfolk from both the Anwar and Ghany clans we came across a strange, and to our young minds, a rather eerie sight, for in a cove of some sort, quite cut off from the rest of the beach by some natural formations, was the bloated carcass of a large cow. How it got there seemed a mystery at first, though we reasoned that it would have fallen off some overpass above the Nilwala river which then took it to sea. It had to be dead well before it hit the sea since only a bloated bovine could float on water and get washed ashore. There were sea-horses certainly, but no sea-cows we knew of. In later times, when the JVP uprising erupted in the late 1980s, the corpses and skeletons of youth suspected to be JVPers could be seeen strewn all over this spot of beach, obviously killed by vigilante groups before been dropped into the river.

An all too familiar sight which often piqued our curiosity was this little island in the sea. *Parai Doowa* or Pigeon's Island it was called after the myriads of pigeons from the town that went there to roost at night. It was earlier known as *Poulier's Island*, after a Burgher gentleman of that name, George Poulier who owned it at one time.

It then seemed so quiet and distant, worthy perhaps of a treasure hunt, for who knows, hidden somewhere yonder might be a chest worth a king's ransom just like the one Captain Pugwash - one of our better known story characters - buried in an island which looked very similar to Pigeon's Island, in as much as it was depicted in a little story book we had, *Captain Pugwash and the Treasure Chest* by Collins Colour Cubs.

It would eventually be converted into a Buddhist monastic site visited by throngs of pilgrims who headed to the islet not by boat but by means of a bridge, recently built, that connected it to the mainland.

Outside Matara House, grandmother Safiya, grandaunt Haseena and aunts Fairoze and Shafeeka in their young days

Uncle Amir at Brown's Hill beach He loved Elvis

Uncle Akther at Brown's Hill Beach as a schoolboy

Uncle Naji in his bright red Fez fixes the Savadi marriage necklet on aunt Faizoona on their wedding day

Aunt Faizoona on her wedding day with father, mother and their three little brats

CHAPTER 10

Park and Prom

Whatever is said of rustic village life, there is no doubt townies have it better, and none have it as good as Colpetty people. Here is where life is, plentifully pregnant with possibilities to get away from the hustle and bustle of it all. Be it a stroll on the Galle Face Green, a ramble round the Beira Lake, an outing with the family at Vihara Maha Devi Park, shopping at the Liberty Plaza or a movie at the Liberty Cinema, Colpetty folk do not have far to go.

Galle face figured prominently in our outings as it was not very far from home, providing us ample space to gambol about amidst the balmy breeze and sea spray. This large esplanade with a nearly mile-long promenade fronting the Arabian Sea to the West seems originally to have been cleared by the Dutch to give their cannons a clear line of fire to keep away invaders from their prize colony which they called Ceylon. The unusual name for the spot, Galle Face, however, has Sinhalese antecedents, as it seems to have originated from the Sinhala name *Gal-bokka* or 'Rocky Bay' which originally referred to the coastal stretch to its north which was well provided with natural rock. The Portuguese called it *Galle Boca* and the Hollanders who succeeded them, taking the Lusitanian usage to mean 'mouth' which in the Portuguese language it actually meant, called it *Galle Faas* or Galle Face which the English adopted, passing it down to us.

The British, whom the big guns of the Dutch could not silence, did much to develop the place as a recreational spot. The Galle Face Walk along the sea-wall, a long promenade about a mile in length was commissioned as far back as 1856 by the Governor of Ceylon Sir Henry Ward in "*the interests of the ladies and children of Colombo*". Horse races were also held here until about 1892 when the Havelock Racecourse in Cinnamon Gardens took its place. It also became a venue for evening

drives, musical bands and even games of Polo, a tradition that died out when the British left our shores.

Pleasant were the evenings we spent as children on the picturesque turf; frolicking on the patches of grass that carpeted the place and gave it its sobriquet of green, and strolling along the walkway on the sea-wall that faced the lapping waves which then as now swarmed with happy families and merry makers. It was not only our parents who hauled us over to the green, but also our aunts, father's then unmarried sisters who itched for an outing once in a while chaperoned by a brother or two or even us little ones, in stark contrast to their arch conservative mother who preferred to remain at home tending the hearth. Curiously, mother's Sinhalese kin never seemed to have had a fascination for the spot in the way our Muslim aunts did and I cannot remember even one occasion going to the green with them. For some reason Muslims seem to gravitate more to this kind of place, so that even today, a foreign visitor, beholding the concourse, might easily get away with the impression that Muslims are a majority here.

The invariable treat a visit to the green brought was an ice cream cone, and in our very young days we would casually comment to one another about an ice cream van being here or there to get mother's attention, hoping she would get the hint. We would say in a roundabout way "*Hmm, there are a lot of ice cream vans today*". Not to be fooled, she would pretend that she did not hear us as she thought that buying us the cones then and there might spoil us, preferring instead to get us the cones a while after the racket had died down.

The Alerics ice cream trucks then parked in the kerb between the road and the green did a brisk business selling cones. Anybody could make them out by their distinctive logo which had the word *Alerics* in red capped by a snow white layer as if topped with ice cream. We were almost always bought vanilla, our parents' preferred flavour which they foisted on us as well. At the time Alerics was the leading ice cream manufacturer in the country. Established by Alerics De Silva it rose to great

heights in the 1960s and 70s, and even set up the country's first ice cream parlour, *Picadilly Café* in Wellawatte, an exclusive hang-out patronized by Colombo's upper crust.

The area nearer the sea wall was occupied by a few see-through hand-pushed carts with glass windows which with sundown would be lit with glowing lamps or lanterns, displaying an array of crunchy savoury snacks like cassava chips loved by both kids and grown ups. Also plying their trade here were small-time vendors peddling their wares-*tinkiri karatta*, miniature toy carts craftily turned out of discarded tin cans of condensed milk that when trundled about with a string gave out a rattling *tuck tuck* sound, and red or multi-coloured paper flowers made of wax paper that rested on a pin fastened to a stalk and whirled with the breeze like a little windmill.

Kite flying was another popular pastime at Galle Face and many were those who found their way to the green just to show off their rustling paper belles. These would dance, caressed by the lusty winds wafting from the waves to the west, sometimes with such ecstasy that their masters had a hard time keeping a grip on the line that bound them, as if trying to hold on to a dog gone mad on the leash. Kites galored then as now at the green and even national kite festivals where kites of all shapes and sizes vied with one another for beauty and grace were held there annually. There were the usual diamond shaped ones made of oil paper and bamboo pieces and the longer serpentine ones that billowed in the breeze.

Even the veil of night here could not hide its charms, for the wide expanse of star-spangled sky the esplanade opened out to at nightfall seemed as if the celestial vault so manifest in the day like an etherial dome had been split asunder to reveal a planetarium of sorts. Lying on one's back on the grass, spreadeagled, as father often did, one could gaze at the nightly heaven in all its splendour with countless little stars twinkling high above that simply refused to melt into the night. Distinct and aloof they stood in all their arrogance as if looking down on us puny earthlings.

One such occasion when we paid the green a nocturnal visit was when we tagged along with mother, her auction assistant Zameen and her young nephew Afzal who was about our age. Having seated ourselves on the grass under a starlit sky, Afzal, the great storyteller he was, regaled us with a fascinating tale from the film *Star Wars*, and all this well before it actually showed on the big screen here. We would listen to him with wide, intent, open eyes, for it all seemed so real under that stellar setting.

Even in much later times, when we were growing up, and in our early teens, Galle Face kept its charm, like when we walked all the way to the spot when we heard a group called the *Bootleg Beatles*, a tribute band of the Beatles, was in town and playing near a leading hotel overlooking the green. Though we could not afford the tickets, we found our way to the green, the three of us, and stood that night on the kerb of the green by the Galle Road pricking our ears to catch their music, the strains of which we could make out at a distance. It was not just the music, but the feel of it all, the ambience, however superficial it were, of reliving the days when the Beatles were at their peak in the 1960s, long before we were even born.

Another interesting feature of the green were the battery of grand old cannons towards the north with their huge barrels aimed at the sea, as if some sea monster were lurking nearby. These were probably mounted by the British artillery replacing the older guns the Dutch had installed at the site to keep their maritime enemies, including the Brits at bay. Passing these big guns, we would find our way to the lighthouse further north with which we were equally fascinated. The beacon, set up to warn ships entering the shallow bay very appropriately called *gal-bokka* or 'rocky belly' had been built in the 1950s, replacing the older British-built one that crowned the clock tower near Queen's House, now the President's House at Janadhipati Mawatha, Colombo Fort.

And then there was Victoria Park, which we called by that name, despite its having been renamed Vihara Maha Devi Park

well before our time. The park, originally called the Circular Park after its shape had been renamed Victoria Park to commemorate the British Queen's Golden Jubilee in 1887 at the same time no doubt boosting the crone's already inflated ego, ruling as she did, an empire on which the sun never set.

The park was renamed again in the 1950s after the mother of the well known Sinhalese national hero Dutugemunu, Vihara Maha Devi who lived more than 2000 years ago and who it said had this insatiable craving shortly after her son had been conceived to drink the water that had washed the sword that had struck off the head of a Tamil warrior. The name change, needless to say, reflected an upsurge in nationalist fervour at the time. We stuck to the Victorian name as our elders did as it was shorter and sweeter. Besides the name change, there was not much else that had changed anyway, save perhaps for the solitary exception of this man at the entrance who had with him an old box camera complete with black cloth. The boys of an earlier age it is said would pose for a group photo on their push bikes before taking off at a snap, catching the poor man unawares and depriving him of even the few cents he charged for a snapshot. Such incidents in the late 1950s simply captured the mood of the coming times. Nationalism was certainly not a good thing and it told everywhere.

Here we resorted to every once in a while with our grandma, *Accha* and our duo of spinster aunts, Nandani and Chandani, walking all the way as it was a very short distance from home. True, the park had many things to boast, but it were the swings that attracted us the most, and I remember swinging to and fro with such force that there were moments I thought I would go under the board through a 360 degree course. Among the other interesting features of the park was a tree house built of wood, prettily perched atop a sturdy tree, a tall tower-like matslide which one climbed from the inside as well as a gigantic tortoise made of concrete upon whose back we would sit as if for a ride.

And then there was the Beira Lake, which like many other landmarks in the city had colonial antecedents. It seems to have

been known since Portuguese times, since the very name *Beira* itself means in the Portuguese language 'brink or bank of water'. It covered a much larger area in the olden days and even had an island where Negro slaves were housed by the Dutch colonialists after being ferried across the lake after their day's work, a shameful past still reflected in the place name *Slave Island* given to the Colombo 2 Ward. It got a better reputation in early British times when pleasure barges, skiffs and ferry boats operated by the Boustead Brothers sailed the lake and overflowing families picnicked on its grassy banks.

A part of the lake formed a body of water close to our two family homes much like a gigantic pond. Unhappily, it had turned a sickly bilious green. This abomination father thought was the work of mercenary firms that had introduced it with the ulterior motive of getting government contracts to clean up the mess. His theory could have met its match with the one that held that the scourge was introduced by the British in the days of World War II to camoflague the lake so that Jap planes sent to bomb the city would not be able to identify the spot at night. Needless to say, both hold no water. The lake had simply been overgrown with blue green algae that fed on the wastes dumped by the shanties near its banks.

Shanties then flourished on both sides of the lake, in the Navam Mawatha area, which is today a thriving commercial quarter famed for plush business offices, and in the area of Perahera Mawatha which was then occupied by about a hundred shanties made of timber. It was called *koriyava* (Korea) on account of its many closely built dwellings, but not for long. A fire around 1980 swept through the entire area and within as little as an hour had reduced the wooden huts to charcoal and ashes. Its residents, who had begun squatting in the area a few decades earlier when a portion of the lake facing the present Jansz Playground was filled and had gained notoriety as thugs and prostitutes, were relocated and the wide roadway today known as Perahera Mawatha built.

All this was a far cry from the balmy inter-war years of the thirties when the Lake Road that went past the Beira was lined with elegant Royal Poincianas with their flamboyant flourish of scarlet orange blooms, so conspicuous that they were reflected in the placid blue waters of the lake, not to mention the teeming animal life it supported like tortoises, pond herons and the infamous lake flies that would, during a certain season, storm the nearby Bishop's College in such numbers that they fell into the soup served for dinner to the boarders who would take it in good spirits, jokingly calling it 'fly soup'. It was very likely this pool of life that rubbed off on the environs of the school which included a rare gold beetle that haunted the giant Madras Thorn trees that fringed it on almost all sides.

In the middle of the lake was an island even the denizens of Darlington could see. Here lived a couple who grew leafy vegetables for a living. The wife who was nicknamed *Doopatay* (from the island) would row an *oruva* (canoe) over to this side of the bank to supply Darlington and neigbouring houses with the leaves. At night my paternal kin who lived in Darlington could see a lamp faintly burning in the wooden hut on the lake, making a lovely picture amidst the glistening waters of the lake grizzled with silver from the street lamps along General's Lake Road.

There was even a bathing place simply known as *Totupola* (Ford) by the locals near the Slave Island area which a few members of my paternal clan like Hyder and Akhtar used to visit when they were little. It had these huge steps that led to the lake. The boys would ask the bathers to catch them the little fish known as *Beira Batto*. They would push the water with their hands towards the steps and the boys would take their pick, the crows carrying away the rest.

This spot, being almost a stone's throw away from home, we took for granted until our teen years when we resorted to the Colpetty Grand Mosque for *Subah*, the Islamic dawn prayer. Having prayed with the congregation which included about a hundred godly souls or so, we would saunter along the walkway

of the lake and tarry a while to allow the blush of the breaking morn to smile on our faces. In our earlier years, it was the Navam Mawatha area close to the Beira Lake that we frequented, not for the ambience, but to skateboard the sloping road that skirted part of the Lake. The place was then a far cry from the mini city it is today with its lofty buildings and corporate offices.

There were at the time only a few modest-looking houses and the road was not at all a busy one except for the occasional car or two whose right of passage we dare not hinder.

Here we would resort to with our skateboards accompanied by our neighbourhood friend Hilal who shared our love for adventure and take our stand at the elevated portion of the newly tar macadamised road at the turn from Navam Mawatha to Uttarananda Mawatha whose gentle slope provided the perfect launch for the skates.

The right foot firmly on the board, a gentle push or two with the left foot would lunge the board forward to a splendid ride though some maneuvering was necessary to navigate the winding road that sloped downwards towards the left. The skateboards, one of which was a rainbow-patterned fiberglass board depicting a flock of geese in flight and the other, a thicker sky blue polypropylene cruiser with kicktail, never failed to disappoint us. Firm and hardy, they would survive even thirty years later in almost the same condition we knew them in our younger fun-loving days.

Turn from Boyd Place to Alwis Place

St.Margareth Convent, St.Michael's Road, Colpetty

Old bus at Bishop's College

Old manually-operated Merry-go-round, St.Margareth's Fair

The Church of St Michael and all Angels, Saint Michael's Road

Colpetty Mosque as it stands now

Kites at Galle Face

Old canon, Galle Face

CHAPTER 11

Shows of colour, shows of valour

Sri Lankans if given a choice between bread and circuses, would go for the bread unlike the citizens of Rome who would have probably cried out for more and more circuses just to let their greedy eyes feast on the blood and gore that coloured the arenas of yore. Sri Lankans are a people more concerned about their stomachs than anything else. It is no surprise then that in the immediate open economy era of the late 1970s that encompassed our childhood, bread was plentiful following the free import and supply of wheat at subsidized prices that went into its making, but not so much circuses.

Circuses then came only once in a blue moon, for the swinging sixties when that enterprising impresario Donovan Andre dominated local showbiz with teaseshows like *Haarlem Blackbirds* and wrestling champs like *Dara Singh*, *Ali Riza Bey*, *Angel Face*, *Hooded Terror* and *King Kong* were long gone. But when they did, they enjoyed immense popularity, like the Apollo Circus that rolled into Havelock Park and which due to popular demand went on for several months until December 1979 or thereabouts. The circus troupe of Indian origin was quite popular not only in India, but other parts of Asia as well, having started from Bulanshahr in Uttar Pradesh in the late 1950s. All I can recall of it is enjoying it with our parents one evening quietly seated under a sprawling tent with vague recollections of some sort of breathtaking trapeze act and a caged lion whose arrival on the stage was met with a hushed gasp by the audience.

The Army Tatoos, stunning displays of military skill we also enjoyed as any child would. Held at the Sugathadasa Stadium and commencing around 1978, these shows of valour attracted a great number of people from all walks of life, spectators both young and old who would revel at the sight of the ‘war shows’, a sort of raid or attack with a lot of action and daredevil

motorcycle stunts among other incredible feats performed by our service members.

These tattoos continued for a few years, but were later discontinued, no doubt due to the escalating conflict with Tiger terrorists in the north and east of the country, being revived only after the defeat of terrorism thirty years later. The curious word *tattoo* used for this sort of show has an interesting history. It seems to have its origins from the Dutch word *taptoe* 'beat of drum' or may well be a corruption of an old Dutch command *Doe der to tap toe* 'turn off the taps' issued by a drummer ordering innkeepers in war zones to cease selling liquor to soldiers so that they could return to their quarters by nightfall somewhat still in their senses in preparation for battle the following day. The call seems to have evolved into an army musical show before being beefed up with bold displays of military might to become what it is today-a popular spectacle for the general public.

Among the few sports events we had those days were the motorcycle races held at Katukurunda, an abandoned World War II airstrip not far from Kalutara which had been converted into a motor racing circuit. This circuit meet venue with its many bends ideal for motor racing had been discovered many years before by an avid racer Andrew Mirando. The Ceylon Motor Cycle Club he formed was soon into organizing races here, not just for motor cycles, but also for cars where man and machine merged as one in the race to be ace. It naturally attracted young blood like our uncles Suranjan and Chandana.

It was at one such grand event held in early 1981 with its line up of over 30 racing events that uncle Chandana participated with his Suzuki 200 cc in no less than three events. And there we were amidst the maddening crowd. As the riders roared past with their high pitched screams and the crowds cheered, mother would cry out "*There's Chutti Uncle!*", all to no avail as we had great difficulty making him out at that distance. At any rate he was not a man who stood out from the crowd, small made as he was, even on his machine.

Then there was the Navam Perahera, a colourful procession in honour of the founder of Buddhism, Gautama Buddha that cavorted past our house towards the Beira Lake on the night of the full moon in the month of February. The Perahera, conceived by Galboda Gnanissara who was fondly known as Podi Hamuduruvo or 'Little monk' was held for the first time in 1979 when we were about seven years old and thereafter became a yearly event organized by the Gangarama Temple in Hunupitiya. The vaudevillian parade which featured traditional Sinhalese entertainers drawn from far-flung rural areas, would with time rival the famous Esala Perahera of Kandy that had gone on for centuries, ever since the days of the Kandyan Kings.

Accha House and the neighbouring houses peopled by our kith and kin faced a broad throughfare that lay in the path of the procession as it made its way to the picturesque Beira lake to its north. This was General's Lake Road, perhaps an extension of the red sandy Lake Road that once skirted the placid waters of the lake and took its name from one General Lawrence who had his bungalow there.

It did not take our folk long to evolve a tradition whereby we could watch the colourful proceedings in comfort seated on chairs, oblivious to the plight of thousands of others who had begun to throng in from late evening and had to stand, sometimes for hours, to watch the procession that would come their way like a gargantuan millipede, from head to tail. Our elders would sequester the pavement area closer to the kerbs in front of our houses with chairs when the night drew nigh, while we little ones, restless as we were, preferred to watch the spectacle standing or seated on a low rampart-like wall built in the front of our house as a form of protection much like the face mask of an American football player.

The parade would soon roll down our street, a train of man and beast, some real, some unreal as if drawn from another world, one after the other, marching past in waves in almost endless succession; a hotchpotch of the sacrosanct rites of an ancient oriental faith promiscuously blended with an ever so

surreal menagerie of monstrosities fit only for a Victorian peep show; a kaleidoscope throbbing with life in all its hues and shades; a tapestry tumbling into life and rumbling with a roar; an ever so unreal hallucination after an acid trip; call it what you will, no words suffice to describe this great pagan pantomime.

It would commence with the *kasakarayo*, the whiplashers, soundly walloping the road with their long whips which not only gave out a thunderous din but also sometimes seemed to emit sparks of fire upon hitting the tar; it was they who cleared the way for the rest of the procession, the torchbearers who flared up the night with their crude flaming torches, fire jugglers who twirled and swirled fire to form a blazing vortex; majestic, gaily caparisoned tuskers prodded on by their mahouts, stilt-walkers known as *boru-kakul-karayo* or false-legged ones who strode the road with pomp and who towering so high up seemed to us little ones like Gullivar's Brobgingnagans, and *yakku*, furry, dark-brown monsters somewhat like long-snouted sloth bears that seemed as if they had just popped out from some mediaeval bestiary, a rather fearsome sight, especially at night.

Other shows then were few and far between though there were also some regular events we attended, but very rarely. One such was the St.Margareth's Day Fair held once a year as part of the Bishop's College Calendar. The fair was held, as it still is, at St.Margareth's Convent along St.Michael's Road, Colpetty, not far from Bishop's College and was one of the few links that still connected the school to the Sisters of Saint Margaret of East Grinstead, England, in whose care it had remained for many decades until as late as the 1950s.

In those days the fair had for sale a variety of items from books and foodstuffs to little celluloid dolls dressed in fancy costumes and hand-made cloth dolls ingeniously turned out by Miss Margareth Dias, the Matron of Bishop's College. It is said that the good old matron used to collect the bright red seeds of the *Madatiya* (Coralwood tree) then strewn all over the front garden of the college to use as boot button eyes for her soft toys. The lady is also said to have been an expert in making bonbons.

Another regular feature of the fair then as now was the merry-go-round. The only occasion I recall visiting this eventide fair was when we were around five years old while still studying at the Bishop's College Nursery, though all I could remember of the visit was being given these lovely red, deliciously sweet marzipans which we fancied were real strawberries.

CHAPTER 12

Bang Bang !

There are some things in life that come with a lot of noise and when the din has died down are hardly if ever heard of afterwards. Uncle Nazir's pet project, *Bang Bang* was just that, gone almost as soon as it had come, as if from a smoking gun.

Conceived in the aftermath of the free economy ushered in by the UNP regime in 1977, this grandiose building project in the Pettah, the commercial hub of Colombo was the first of its kind, offering the shoppers of the time (early 1980s) what shopping malls like Liberty Plaza and Majestic City offer people today, a non-stop shopping experience under one roof.

The brains behind the project, uncle Nazir, was a self-made man with a head for business. Well-groomed with a sturdy build, fair complexion, moustache and a mole over his left eyebrow, he seemed to have what men call the *Midas Touch* where everything one touches turns into gold, sometimes to one's detriment as well. Having amassed a fortune in the cloths trade, importing reels of expensive cloth from Japan and elsewhere ostensibly for producing and exporting garments at a time when imports were restricted by the left-leaning government of Sirimavo Bandaranaike and selling them to local manufacturers on the sly, he was a millionaire by the tender age of thirty or so and soon set his sights on putting his new found wealth to good use. And what better way of accomplishing this than by means of something solid and tangible, a lasting monument to one's entrepreneurial genius and indeed to one's ego; what better indeed than a large imposing building which men would behold with awe and talk about for decades, nay centuries.

It was probably his frequent business visits to Japan and other parts of the Far East with its grand and glitzy buildings that inspired uncle Nazir to think big. Within a few years, he not only conceived and planned the building of his dreams, but also

executed it to perfection, so much so indeed that no other modern building could match it in terms of design, function and elegance when it was built in 1979. It was modern as modern could be then and in many respects well ahead of its time as far as the country was concerned.

Officially called Capricorn Towers, it stood tall, like a modern-day castle despite being built on just fifty perches of land that had earlier housed the Colombo Fire Brigade. It was idyllically placed, like a fortress, in a peninsula of land, rather V-shaped, between Reclamation Road and Bankshall Street in the Pettah facing the Khan Clock Tower. The façade of the four-storeyed complex, standing tall above the rest of the buildings in the environs was in itself quite impressive, not to mention its colourful innards, totalling about a hundred cells, which were a hive of activity. Still it was nothing compared to what was originally planned, a 12-storeyed edifice with a revolving restaurant on the topmost floor. Uncle Nazir was a man with big ideas that were far ahead of his times.

At the time, it seemed to us more than just a mall, call it a mini city, for it had it all with countless shops occupying as many as three spacious floors selling a vast array of imported items from toys and books to the latest gadgets the material world had to offer. It also had a little restaurant, *Cap's Corner*, run by uncle Nazir's lady friend Noor Mubarak. Those who stepped inside often found it hard to break away as if entrapped in a spider's web, for it was all so inviting. Not only could one shop in air-conditioned comfort, but also move from floor to floor by means of a state-of-the-art escalator, perhaps the first in the country, from the large open central area.

Bang Bang was like a new world to us kids, beginning with the sleek black and yellow escalator which we would step onto with great expectations, as if on a one-way joy ride to paradise. It was all so captivating; the well stocked shops so delightful to behold, each one of them a gigantic treasure trove for us little ones with plenty of toy guns, plastic soldiers and books of various descriptions that never failed to fascinate us. We were

mesmerised with this pearly white or bluish grey aquarium with glass face, peering through which we could behold a plethora of water life in diverse forms including not just ornamental fish, but also clams and little crustaceans.

We never made a show of it that we were the bigwig's nephews, even to the shop folk who thought of our presence more as a nuisance since we often handled toys and browsed through books without buying them. Fascinated as we were with the stuff, we simply did not have the money to pay for it. The pocket money we were given hardly sufficed for an ice cream cone or two or to play a few coin-operated arcade video games such as *Galaxian*, zapping alien invaders with a laser canon, to which one parlour was wholly dedicated. The only substantial item I recall buying despite several visits to the place was a set of light yellow toy cowboys on horses which came with a colourful cardboard house.

We were at least fortunate to have access to the building; there were some who were not blessed even with this privilege, for the street urchins were kept away by a security guard posted at the entrance. I can still recall his attempts, some vainly, to keep the ragamuffins out, for they often came in a pack, enabling a few of their number to make a dash past the entrance into a world of glitter and glamour.

Those who ran the show could not care for their likes, for looks mattered in a business like this. Dirty-looking boys seen prowling about the building might convey a bad image of the business to better-off shoppers and even repel them, notwithstanding the annoyance caused to the poor fellows who would no doubt have enjoyed the ambience of the place as any of us. But image mattered and those at the helm spared no pains to boost it, often at great cost. Bang Bang's ads on television went with the sound track Chitty *Chitty Bang Bang, Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* after the 1968 musical film of the same name which featured a revolutionary flying car devised by eccentric inventor Caractacus Potts and which was named as such after

the noise its engine made- *Chitty Bang Bang, Chitty Chitty Bang Bang…*

Bang Bang also made it in the news such as when a leading weekend newspaper reported during the Sinhala New Year season when the place bristled with shoppers, how a sharp-eyed guard had detected a man who slipped past a sales girl by slipping on a pair of trousers over his pair of jeans. The paper quoted the guard as saying: "*The man went in wearing blue jeans and then I saw it had suddenly turned brown*".

However Bang Bang's fortunes were not to last long, for like many other big-time booming businesses in the city, it sank into decline with the depressing post-1983 climate, losing most of its tenants who brought it its revenue, and eventually its shine and luster that once added so much glamour to the heart of Colombo City. Within as little as ten years since its roaring entry into the big city, it had become but a shadow of its former self with a lackluster exterior and a rather dark and gloomy interior, a far cry from the days that once were. In later times people would attribute its downfall to the fact that its owner had erected a large mural near the entrance with the Arabic Words *Bismillah* (In the Name of God) not horizontally in the Arabic fashion reading from right to left, but vertically Jap style, an act which some seriously contended would have invited the Divine Wrath.

With time, uncle Nazir would become increasingly reclusive, presiding over the once grand building like a feudal baron in a palace fast falling into ruin and taking a suite in it as his home. All this while his parents and siblings quietly lived in the house that was actually his - the Umma House of our childhood. He eventually returned home when his parents had passed away and his siblings had gone their separate ways, only to suffer bouts of memory loss. It took its toll on him, virtually turning him into a shell of his former self before he died of a heart attack and large bedsores on the buttocks while under the care of a sister.

CHAPTER 13

Cornel's comes to Town

With flashy supermarkets mushrooming in almost every nook and corner of the country today, it is odd that we did not have anything of the sort until about 1980. That is until Cornel's arrived on the scene. Set up by Cornel Perera, an enterprising entrepreneur around 1981, a couple of years after the opening up of the economy in 1977 by the J.R.Jayawardene Government, Cornel's brought home the virtues of a free economy, a much needed relief for a nation that had for seven long years from 1970 to 1977 - which encompassed a good part of our early childhood - groaned under the burden of a closed economy where imports were discouraged or even banned.

To cap it was Cornel's, a one-of-a-kind western-style supermarket that took the city by storm. Built on a fine piece of land near Station Road, Colpetty, it soon became 'the place' for Colombo's fashionable elite to shop amidst plush surroundings in air-conditioned comfort. Little wonder mother made it her favourite haunt, and ours as well. In the evenings after a busy day, she would often shop there, taking us along with her, a welcome change from the hustle and bustle of Colpetty Market, the downtown municipal market between Galle Road and Serandib Road near the Liberty Cinema. Built in the mid-1970s on the site of an older marketplace, Colpetty market, later called Colpetty Supermarket was a long block of building with plenty of open space inside inspired by Le Corbusier's *Villa Savoye*. However, it did not have the polish the newcomer had, with greengrocers and butcher shops spreadeagled on the ground floor, a fish mart on the second floor and a handful of grocery shops lining the third floor fronted by a promenade with ocean liner railing that gave a splendid view of the hubbub below.

Cornel's was airy, spacious and well illuminated. It was pearly white and bright as day even at night. Here one could find almost anything from kitchen to bathroom, all spread out over

one large floor and under one roof. Well stocked it was with all the consumables, the eatables and drinkables that even today make modern life such a convenience.

And not just for humans as we were to discover one fine day. That was when mother having seen some grub that looked much like the cereal biscuits known as *Weetabix* we loved having for breakfast, and that too at a ridiculously low price, snapped up a good many packs and sent them hurtling into the trolley, drooling that they were really worth it, only without the fancy packing the imported stuff came in, for these were packed in transparent polythene or cellophane. Having flung in as many as she could to her heart's content, she moved forward and suddenly stopped in her tracks, for she could now read what it really was, for a piece of paper now boldly proclaimed that it was PET FOOD, perhaps some dry dog food possibly dehydrated by the look of it or a dog biscuit made of oat meal. She hurriedly put them back into place. Feeding her kids with dog food was too much for her. She was in no mood even to spare a thought for Laika for whom such fare would have been a welcome change from its usual diet of beef bones and the occasional mouse it made a morsel of once in a while.

Happily Cornel's catered mainly to the needs of humans. Many were the imported items that found their way to its shelves, so neatly arranged that it stood in stark contrast to the merchandise stacked in the shops and boutiques we were so familiar with until then. The items here were quite novel to us, so different from the usual stuff we were used to having back then such as the MD jams, Elephant House soft drinks, Plaza tinned fish and potato chips that came in little packets embellished with a picture of a moustachioed man against an orange background that we often had at the movies. But here were butters and cheeses and tinned fruit and canned meats. Spreads like *Meadow Lee* in their well illustrated plastic tubs and cheese wedges that came in different colours and flavours captured our fancy like no other goodies would. So did a type of Japanese kiddies gel toothpaste that came in a bright white plastic tube

adorned with colourful little figures of animals, so different from the bland looking tubes of locally produced Signal toothpaste with its germ-fighting red stripes we were used to. We coaxed mother to buy a few and though usually averse to brushing our teeth at night, we now gleefully polished our enamel with the exotic stuff. Besides their exotic character and fancy packing foreign goods seemed to give more importance to children and this trait we valued. To be given importance or paid attention is after all only human and even little kids appreciate it.

Mother sometimes felt that we took our xenophilia or love for all things foreign a bit too far and once cooked up a canard that much of the imported goods that found their way to our markets were really substandard items that the Western companies manufacturing them dumped in our part of the world, those of the finest quality being retained for sale in their own markets. This dampened our xenophilia a bit, but not for long as we did not find any hard evidence to back the claim. The foreign goods, especially the foodstuffs we consumed certainly did not prove to be inferior in any way. Nay, they were or seemed superior to the local product in more ways than one. Indeed, it was mainly due to the influx of foreign goods that domestic industry, which had for long taken things for granted, offering mediocre products to local consumers, improved their standards in the face of stiff competition.

The closed economy era of our early childhood was now gone for good; a discredited experiment in human deprivation conjured up by a wishful band of people known as 'Socialists' it was never to raise its ugly head again. The world was now at our doorstep, knocking on the door and the basketful of goodies it brought was too tantalizing to resist, fine stuff only money, not power or connections, could buy; a fair deal for everybody big and small- and Cornel's had it all!

CHAPTER 14

Santa Claus comes home

In our early years at Accha House we had a strange nocturnal visitor breaking into our house to leave a bagful of goodies the night before Christmas Day – or so we thought – till the cat got out of the bag. It might sound rather strange that a Muslim family living in a largely Buddhist environment had Santa Claus visiting them. But the fact is that mother did not want us missing out on this uniquely Western, or rather Anglo-American tradition usually associated with Christian families. I guess it also served a practical purpose, for mother had shrewdly connected Santa Claus' coming with this character known as Wee Willie Winkie who figures in the nursery rhyme:

Wee Willie Winkie runs through the town
Upstairs and downstairs in his night gown
Tapping at the window, crying at the lock
Are the children in their bed, for it's past ten o clock

Mother had slightly twisted the story to have us believe that Wee Willie Winkie inquired whether children were in their beds by eight o clock, and if not, would report the matter to Santa who would indeed be very very cross! This was no doubt a ruse to get us to bed early. So we would be quietly tucked into bed by eight, attired in the comfortable bedwear mother used to sew us with the old treadle Singer sewing machine that sat in a corner of the dining room, flimsy pyjamas made of patterned cotton with elastic ribbon at the waist for keeping it in place, and equally flimsy shirts of the same material that could be buttoned in front with metal press studs, light wear so easy to slip into and nod off soundly without a care for the world unlike the kilt-like sarongs loosely wound round the waist most local boys of our age would have gotten used to, blissfully unaware that it

could loosen in their sleep and expose their privities to vulgar female gaze.

The ruse certainly worked for a couple of years till we got used to staying awake a bit late to watch television programmes like *Baa Baa Black Sheep* that was telecast around 9.00 pm. And so it was that from about the ages of five to ten years, we would, agog with excitement, eagerly await the coming of Santa. Mother had us believe that the jolly old fellow silently crept into the house in the dead of night with a sackful of gifts for us kids. We wondered how he got in, perhaps through the roof, or maybe the sooty chimney in the kitchen at the rear of the house. What we were most curious about were the gifts he would bring us. So curious indeed that I can still recall one night how restless I was on this large giant size bed we all shared, pricking my ear to catch a sound of Santa, perhaps tiptoeing softly across the room with his sackful of toys perched on his back to tuck them under the bed. We were supposed to be sleeping snugly in bed, or else Santa would be cross. But I could not as much as catch a rustle of the fellow stealthily at his job despite the thousands of houses he was supposed to be covering in a single night!

As we woke up next morning, lo and behold, our eyes would fall on the brown paper bags stuffed with the presents Santa had brought us, placed at the head of the bed or neatly tucked under it. These were usually toys like spinning tops and Christmas crackers which we called *bon bons*, cardboard tubes wrapped in decorated paper resembling oversized sweet wrappers which had to be pulled by two people whereupon it exploded with a bang revealing some hidden trinket like a tiny silver gun. And not surprisingly, there were story books. We wondered why Santa would leave us books, especially story books. Those given us for Christmas were Enid Blyton's books with colourful hard covers but rather dull cream-white pages inside with a lot of words and quite a few sketches telling the exploits of characters such as the Three Golliwogs and Pip the little pixie. Mother, who had to put up with our negative remarks on Santa's choice, would stress the importance of books. This itself should have

sufficed to reveal who Santa really was, but for some reason we did not get it. We had this weird feeling that mother was somehow communicating with Santa and telling him her preferences rather than ours.

It was then that we conceived the idea of writing a Xmas wishlist to Santa, inspired by a *Dennis the Menace Christmas Number* which reproduced a letter addressed to Santa by the little brat, describing in sketches and notes what he expected for Christmas – an elephant, a real live pony and a submarine so he could get in the bathtub without getting wet. Our requests were understandably more down-to-earth. The list we penned into a letter, addressing it to Santa in the North Pole and posted it in the red pillar box right in front of our house. What became of it I cannot say, except that even then, Santa's presents that came our way were not always to our liking.

Our most memorable Christmases were spent at Accha House with our cousins Rajiv, Kumeshi and Mirukshi. It was during their very first visit to Accha House while on vacation from Kenya in the December of 1977 that aunt Sunethra gifted us these dainty little stickers with Christmas themes she had purchased in Nairobi. The colourful vinyl stickers, which included Santa, Reindeer and snowmen were all puffed up with large googly eyes formed of semi-globular transparent plastic against a white backdrop within which were little black balls like mustard seeds that moved hither and thither.

In the days leading to Christmas Eve, our cousins were told that Santa would descend into the house, bearing gifts, either through the skylight in the corner of our room or through the little room to its left. They were quite apprehensive that Santa would only leave us, the Hussein boys, gifts as naturally we would be the only kids he would set his eyes upon as he descended, so much so that mother had to console them, especially naughty Kumeshi, that Santa could not forget anybody. Indeed, the next day, our cousins too had their sacks of gifts. One I distinctly remember that Mirukshi got was this little plastic apple bank from which a worm popped out to grab

a coin placed upon a button and making away with it to deposit it inside. Months later I noticed the same toy displayed for sale at Malee Book Centre.

We did not know it then, but most children our age did not have Santa visiting them, but we were too busy believing in him to take notice, that is until one fine day when our Kenyan cousins made their third visit to the country in the early 1980s. We were discussing among ourselves what to write to Santa, when cousin Rajiv, the spoilsport he was, broke the news – there was no Santa Claus! This we could not dismiss lightly as our skeptical cousin was a year or two older than us and having greater overseas exposure had grown all the more wiser, quickly outgrowing the days he had actually believed in Santa, a belief he shared with us during earlier Christmas Eves we spent together at Accha House. We too had by now faintly begun to suspect that Santa was mere fantasy and now there was no need to beguile ourselves any more. We were around 11 years old and it was high time we grew up.

The truth is that the real Santa was no kindly old fellow. The figure who would eventually evolve into Santa Claus was Saint Nicholas, a 4th century Bishop of Myra, in what is now Turkey. A rather mean fellow, he went so far as to slap a fellow bishop, the good old Arius of Alexandria, on the face at the Council of Nicaea for teaching that Christ was a created being instead of one eternally with the Father and the Holy Spirit, thus paving the way for the bloody persecution of fellow Christians and others who did not concur with the ridiculous idea that God was Three in One- Father, Son and Holy Ghost; a far cry from a true Christian saint, and certainly no inspiration for kids. The Saint who would become Santa was disrobed of his Bishop's habit, deported to the North Pole and divested of his darker side to capture the imagination of innocent young minds.

Today's Santa Claus is after all nothing but an Americanized version of an already mellowed Dutch *Sinter Klaas* introduced by migrants from Holland who kept him despite the Protestant reformation of Martin Luther that did away with the veneration of Saints including Old Nick and his alter ego Santa Claus. The Coca Cola Company played a major role in redressing him, when in 1931 it got Artist Haddon Sundblom to come up with a character who could better appeal to children. And so was born the Santa of today – a product of gaudy commercialism and a far cry from the days of the three Magi who brought gifts for the babe in the manger, thus begining the tradition of gift giving.

However Santa was not universally accepted as Christmas gift-giver in Europe, which was a function often delegated to females, so that in Germany we still have *Christkind*, an angelic messenger from Jesus in the form of a beautiful fair-haired girl with a shining crown of candles; in Italy *La Befana*, a kindly old hag and in Russia *Babouschka*, a matronly grandmotherly figure, certainly a better choice than the portly bushy-bearded old man who is even known to scare little girls out of their wits with his loud guffaw of *ho.ho*...

CHAPTER 15

Playing with fire

December 31, the night ushering the New Year was celebrated by our household and the neighbouring houses in grand style with fireworks of various descriptions occupying a prominent place in the celebrations. True, these did not come in the variety they did in the fifties when fireworks like *Golden Rains*, *Silver Fountains*, *Mines & Stars*, *Fire Balloons* and *Jolli Bombs* could be procured from places like Fireworks Palace in Pettah, but still they came in a considerable variety even thirty years later, for there were besides the ordinary *Firecrackers*, *Sky Rockets*, *Roman Candles* and *Catharine's Wheels* all set for an orgy of fire - A feast for the eyes of ordinary folk and porn for the eyes of pyros.

Grandpa who lived away from the family in Galle Face Courts, was in principle against fireworks. "*It is like burning money*" he would say, and I couldn't but agree with him now. He nevertheless saw to it that a large quantity of fireworks of various descriptions was delivered to Accha House a day or two before the grand night. He simply could not help but provide the household with the works, or else he risked alienating his brood, particularly his more restless son Chandana who obviously did not share his old man's view that lighting fireworks amounted to burning money. He certainly couldn't, for he was a regular smoker of premium cigarettes like *Bristol* and *Gold Leaf* which more or less amounted to the same thing, the little money he made doing odd jobs going up in smoke.

The arsenal sat prettily on the dining table till the big night came, when it was taken outdoors to wreak havoc on the otherwise clean environment and disturb the peace of the night. Our uncles, particularly Chandana whom we called 'Chutti Uncle' were the main perpetrators of this incendiary racket, especially with the *ratigna*, firecrackers or squibs with a fuse which when lit would explode with a loud noise. The two most

popular brands then were *Alidon* and *Hanuman* which came in flat paper packets or circular paper boxes.

Also joining in the fun were many of mother's cousins from the neighbouring houses; grandaunt Indra's older boys Athula and Anil and granduncle Piyasena's boys Harendra and Piyal, not to mention granduncle Sumanadasa's son Gihan who eagerly looked forward to opportunities like this to express himself best- with a bang. The womenfolk, who stuck closer to their homes on account of the noise, hardly figured in the action, simply enjoying the proceedings from a distance.

The young fellows took their stand on both sides of the street, turning it into a carnival of fire with noisy *Firecrackers* with fuses kissing one another so that they exploded in tandem like rounds of machine gun fire; sleek *skyrockets* that made their way to the heavens with a swish, only to burst high up and light up the night sky; *Roman Candles*, cylindrical bars like dynamite sticks with a fuse which spewed out glowing balls of fire; and *Catharine's Wheels*, spiral things resting on a pin, which when lit, revolved madly, spinning hither and thither like a crab on fire. We kids, while inching closer to the theatre of action, were still afraid to light crackers as a result of the scary stories of burn victims mother had told us and contented ourselves with *Wire Sparklers* that one held with the hand, lighting it at the top so that it effloresced, sprinkling bright starry sparks like a flower of fire that broke into a shower of golden rain before it hit the ground.

The fun was over within an hour or so, leaving in its wake the heavy sulfurous odour of gunpowder and thousands of tatters of paper from the exploding fireworks that now littered the deserted street. We would quietly rummage through the paper rubble hoping to stumble upon a few unexploded squibs from whose bowels we would extract the gunpowder for our very own pyrotechnics. But this we would save for another day- for tonight we had seen enough!

CHAPTER 16

Fasts, Feasts and Festivals

The moon plays a big role in Muslim religious life, determining when we fast and when we feast at our festivals. This is because the Islamic calendar is a lunar one with 12 moons from new moon to full moon making a year, simple enough even to a very primitive mind.

There is one hitch though, that is, there are no fixed seasons like we find in the solar calendar so that a given lunar month may fall on a summer in a particular year and on a winter after several more years. As a result, even the events associated with them are not fixed, but rather rotate throughout the year, based as it is upon the sighting of the crescent or new moon at night.

Islamdom has only two festivals, both based on the lunar calendar, the Ramazan festival and the Hajj festival. The former celebrates the culmination of the Ramazan fast and the latter the conclusion of the Hajj pilgrimage, both of these being duties binding on every Muslim man and woman, just as much as the Shahadah or Declaration of Faith, the Salat or Prayer and the Zakat or Alms Tax, all of which constitute what are known as the Five Pillars of Islam.

The moon-long fast in the Islamic month of Ramazan when Muslims have to abstain from food, drink and sex is no easy task for the worldly minded, but once one's mind and body is attuned to it from one's very young days, it doesn't prove to be so difficult after all. It increases piety, inculcates patience, instills discipline, stimulates empathy with the poor and leads to good health – not a bad prospect after all.

Like most Muslim children we were taught to fast from our very young days, at about the age of seven or so. Our parents would wake us up in the wee hours before dawn broke to partake of a meal known as *sahar* or *savar*. I still wonder how they managed to get us up at that time; perhaps an alarm clock did the trick. In the olden days though, before we were born, there

were fakeer mendicants with hurricane lanterns who would do the rounds in local towns, knocking on the doors and shouting a mumbo jumbo "Otto Bawa Otto" to wake up the faithful for the last meal before the fast, a tradition still found in certain parts of the Arab world where a wake-up call man known as *Misarahati* appearing as if mysteriously in the dead of night and shortly before the break of dawn, and holding a lamp,would sing and beat his little drum to wake up people, sometimes even calling out their names; a *Wee Willie Winkie* of sorts, only with the roles reversed, for he woke up people, not ensured that they were asleep.

We would not have anything to eat or drink till dusk set in, when we would break our fast, usually with dates and water in the tradition of our beloved Prophet, though after this we freely indulged in some well deserved delicacies like *samosas*, triangular pastries filled with minced beef and *gulab jamoons*, ball-shaped cakes soaked in sweet syrup, washed down with *faluda*, a refreshing drink made with milk and rose syrup. This last was almost out of the world; nectar, elixir, ambrosia, all in one, so relieving to a parched tongue.

My favourite were the *gulab jamoons*, an item of Indian origin we got from *Bombay Sweet House* in Colpetty. So much so that once when our Islam teacher at Mahanama College Sitty Miss inquired what we had for our pre-dawn meal or dinner I blurted out 'gulab jamoons' without giving it much thought. Quite taken aback she advised me that we ought to take something more substantial. "*You must take rice!*" she told me matter of factly. I wouldn't ever forget that piece of sagely counsel, or that shocked look on her face, perhaps imagining us spoilt brats greedily stuffing our little bellies with these *gulab jamoons*, slurping and burping till we could take no more.

Some of our fasts we broke at home and some we broke at father's family home Umma House to which we resorted to once in a while. The folk there had it as good as us or even better, given grandma *Umma's* culinary skills, including that invigorating gruel known as *kanji* she used to make with rice,

coconut milk and garlic with a generous quantity of beef bones and flesh thrown in for good measure. This regimen would go on for a month, or rather a moon of about 28 or 29 days before it would all end with the Ramazan festival the very next day.

On that day we would resort to Umma House clad in our finery, new clothes mother had sewn for us, and instinctively cluster round a large table that groaned with goodies of all descriptions. Liberally spread out on the table that day were a variety of sweetmeats Umma had herself prepared, so numerous that I am not even able to recall what they were except that they included *sanja*, a firm jelly made of seaweed cut into square or diamond shapes and coloured red or green, *sooji*, a soft yellow confection made of semolina, margarine and sugar and *ambarella dosi*, a juicy brownish fruit preserve made by boiling hogplum in sugar syrup.

The luncheon that followed in the afternoon that day comprised of an exceedingly rich and delectable rice dish known as *buriyani* of grandma's own making, ably assisted by her faithful accomplice, an elderly Muslim woman from Slave Island we called Nona Sacchi. What went into it was of course no secret. The rice, usually the long-grained *basmathi*, was cooked in a very large aluminium vessel in the kitchen along with ghee or clarified butter, perfumed with rose water and coloured yellow, varying from grain to grain, from a deep yellow, almost orange to a lighter yellow. It was spiced with various condiments and embellished with chunks of beef or mutton. The meal was served on a platter upon a large rectangular table in the inner hall with its usual accompaniments of chicken curry, mixed pea, cashewnut and liver curry, mint sambol and slices of pineapple.

In keeping with local Muslim custom, it were the males who ate first. The master of the house, uncle Nazir, would be seated with his kith and kin, sidekicks and stooges around the long table as if in a sumptuous banquet the likes of which we saw only in our Asterix comics when the Gauls feasted after the return of their hero, only that it was without the wild boar. We

kids were always or almost always given a place in the table at the very first serving as uncle Nazir loved having us around. The womenfolk would have their meals after the men had partaken of theirs. It was the law of the lion here. The aromatic rice and meat meal we would indulge in to our fill, and as if that were not enough, would be served at the end of it, a cup of *vattalappam*, a soft brown pudding studded with little pores that oozed with sweet syrup which grandmother had prepared earlier in the day by steaming in ceramic or aluminium bowls a mixture of coconut milk, beaten eggs, palm sugar and cardamoms. Later in the day, before we took leave to return home, some of our elders, grandma and uncle Nazir particularly, would force into our hands notes of money which they called *perunaal salli* (festival money) to do with it as we wished.

The fact however is that living in a largely non-Muslim tropical isle, we kids missed out on much of the revelry and merriment that characterizes the Ramazan festival and even the moon-long evenings and nights after breaking the fast seen in Islamic countries, particularly in the Arab world where it is considered the most joyful of months with happy families picnicking in green areas like parks and zoos when breaking their fast, a custom that has only recently emerged in our country when whole families would resort to scenic spots like the Galle Face Green to break their fast picnic style, but one which we never saw in our young days.

As part of the festivities in these countries which unlike ours has evolved over time, getting merrier and merrier as people partook of the cheer of the good season, one finds the streets and shops gaily decorated with brightly lit lights often in the form of crescent and star, lucent lanterns of white and myriad colours and even golden and silver tinsel decorations, again of star and crescent which is widely considered the symbol of Islam ever since the days of the Ottoman Turks. And when it all crescendos in the day of the festival, little children would be gifted with beautifully decorated gift bags of toys and candy or money to spend time at amusement parks, while towards the evening and

night, people in festive mood would gather to enjoy communal meals with cookies for the little ones filled with nuts and coated with sugar, musical plays and even fireworks, all of which dwarf the Christmas celebrations of the West. But all this we in our little country missed.

The Prophet of Islam, despite his abstemious lifestyle, was no killjoy and always had the happiness of people and especially of children in mind, so much so that one day when an over-zealous companion found some little girls singing in the Prophet's house and cried out: "*Musical instruments of Satan in the house of the Messenger of God!*", the Prophet rebuked him "*Leave them alone, Abu Bakr, every nation has a festival, and this is our festival*". This was somebody from whom even Oliver Cromwell and his roundheads - who in their puritanical fervour banned Christmas celebrations in England - could have learnt from, at least for the sake of the children.

The Hajj festival was celebrated much like the Ramazan feast except that it was not celebrated as grandly and involved the sacrifice of a goat or sometimes a bull, a ritual going back to the days of the patriarch Abraham. The sacrifice we were told was reminiscent of the times when Abraham, the friend of God and forbear of the Arabs was told in a dream to sacrifice his son Ishmael. If that were the Will of God, then it should be done said the brave boy, when his father told him about his dream. As Abraham was about to sacrifice his son, a ram appeared as if from nowhere and Abraham was told to sacrifice it instead of his beloved son. God had indeed been merciful to Abraham and his son who had passed the test the Almighty wished to try them with, the test of devotion to God even at the cost of parental love. The boy, Ishmael, whom Abraham had fathered through an equally strong-willed Egyptian woman named Hagar would go on to sire a great nation, the Arabs from amongst whom the final messenger of God to mankind, Muhammad, would emerge. Little wonder then that it was a cause for celebration.

In the morning of that festive day, we would come across the sacrificial animal, usually a billy goat, in the front garden of Umma House tethered with a rope tied to a tree or a stake in the ground and fed on leaves which it ceaselessly munched as if it had nothing else to do. It just seemed as if it was meant for the table. Before long it would be conveyed to the backyard of the house to be slaughtered by the butcher in a ritual known as *Qurbaan*.

We kids would watch the sacrifice wide-eyed from the kitchen window that opened out to the backyard and could see the blood from the goat spurting out as if in a spray, almost like a fountain of deep red water, only thicker and moving hither and thither as the animal momentarly struggled to give out its last gasps of life. The cut at the carotid artery which supplied blood from the heart to the head which is an indispensable part of the ritual had triggered the spray and though it would continue, the brain of the animal would have by this time been deprived of blood, sending it into a state of permanent anaesthesia. The carcass would be skinned and cut up into chunks of meat to be cooked for the household and distributed to kindred and needy. This was a day the poor looked forward to, not least because of the chunks of fresh meat that would come their way.

Late that evening or the following day, a heavy shower of rain known as the *Haj mala* 'Rain of the Hajj' would fall from the heavens, cleansing the earth of the blood of the sacrificial animal - little doubt a Sign from God that He was pleased with the sacrifice.

CHAPTER 17

The Festival of the Sun

Almost every nation has its New Year or at any rate some festive season which they celebrate with much fanfare. The Persians had their *Nauroz*, the Romans their *Saturnalia* and the Pagan Norsemen their *Yule*. The Sinhalese have from time immemorial also had a day of their own which is still celebrated – the *Alut Avurudda* simply meaning 'New Year'.

The Sinhala New Year which falls in mid-April marks the transition of the sun from the constellation of *Meena* (Pisces) to that of *Mesa* (Aries) and seems to have had its origins in some sort of ancient agricultural festival in honour of the sun as giver of light and life. The *Soorya* or Sun was after all regarded as a divinity by the ancient Aryans of North India, a belief they would have passed on to the Sinhalese, an offshoot of the Aryans who settled in Sri Lanka in Pre-Christian times.

The New Year at Accha House like in all Sinhalese Buddhist households was celebrated annually with a communal meal of milk-rice and sweetmeats, though not as grandly as in the rural villages where it is celebrated with much jollity even to this day. It certainly could not come anywhere near the Muslim festivals celebrated at Umma House with their rich repasts of rice and sweets and gifts of money for us kids. Rather it was a very simple affair, reflecting the usually austere lifestyle of Sinhalese Buddhists in general. On the morning of the big day, a full length banana leaf obtained from a patch of banana trees in our backyard would be placed upon the floor a little away from the large dining table. Our grandmother *Accha* and aunts would place upon it square pieces of *Kiribat* or Milk-rice, a white rice cake made by boiling rice in coconut milk, soft brown oil cakes known as *Kevum* and crispy yellow rounded biscuits known as

Kokis, not to mention a bunch of yellow-skinned bananas, either the sweeter Kolikuttu or the sour Ambul which was taken from the banana trees in our backyard.

These delicacies we would indulge in with great relish, especially the oil cakes known as *Kevum*, so sweet and tender that it could easily rank as the best sweetmeat the usually austere Sinhalese ever produced in their long history. Indeed so finely made were they, even in the olden days, that the Hollanders who found their way to the island over three centuries ago inquired whether not they grew on trees, supposing it beyond the art of man to make such dainties. It is remarkable nevertheless that its makers should have bestowed upon it the rather unassuming name of *Kevum*, simply meaning 'eatables'.

These dainties were prepared at home in the days leading to the New Year by women especially summoned for the purpose. These old dames who wore the traditional *redde-hette* - wraps for their waists and bodices for their bosoms - were experts in the culinary art of their ancient race. They would take their place in the corridor leading to the kitchen near the steps that led outside and seated on low stools would commence their task. A primitive firplace would be formed of firewood with bricks on three sides to support a concave pan filled with coconut oil. Into it they would deftly pour a dripping batter made of rice flour, coconut milk and treacle obtained from the kitul palm, letting it fry while at the same time forming a portion of it into a protrusion much like a *konde* or hair bun the like one often sees in Sinhalese village women by means of an ekel (midrib of the coconut leaf). These *kevum* we found hard to resist even many days later as they still retained their sweetness and tenderness, so unlike the oil cakes one finds today.

Also prepared at home were *kokis*, crisp yellow biscuits in the form of a *roda* or wheel made by dipping a special metal mould with wooden handle into a batter of rice flour, coconut milk and turmeric, and frying these in oil. This unlike the decidedly native *kevum* seems to have been a colonial introduction as it had its origins in the Dutch *koekjes* meaning 'biscuit' or more

properly ‘little cake’, the same term that gave American English the word *cookies* introduced by the Dutch settlers of the New World.

Also sometimes figuring on that day was a *broeder*, a delectable cake of Dutch origin like a little mountain with fluted pathways which Accha did her best to procure for the occasion. Other items such as *Atiraha*, brown disc-shaped cakes fried in oil and *Mun-kevum*, diamond-shaped sweets filled with a sweetened ground green gram filling also found their way home from the neighbours, but none of it captured my fancy like the *Asmi*, a vermicelli-like white cake somewhat like a crescent sweetened with sugar syrup coloured a light red.

We usually stayed home that day except for our regular New Year’s visit to grandfather’s apatment at Galle Face Courts which we eagerly looked forward to, especially since the generous old man would present us each with sheaves of betel leaves with a Hundred Rupees Note to spice it and an extra One Rupee coin ‘for luck’ as he put it. This was a princely sum of money back then.

The generous gift notwithstanding, we being Muslims, would not fall at his feet to prostrate and worship him as was the Sinhala Buddhist custom for kids to do their elders as a show of respect, but he seems never to have minded it. A widely read man, he probably knew that one could reasonably not expect Muslims, even little kids, to bow down to anyone except the One True God they worshipped.

We for our part dreaded the prospect of falling prostrate before anybody, thinking of it as a rather weird and uncivilized practice. I can still recall in my very young days, breaking into tears on a first day of school at Mahanama College, upon seeing my Buddhist classmates kow-towing before their teacher. I could simply not bring myself to do it, not because of any pride I may have had, but because it seemed so odd. This in itself was strange given my upbringing in a largely Sinhala-Buddhist household; stranger still is the fact that I cannot recall any occasion of anybody in that household ever falling before

another, for even when grandfather did pay an occasional visit, all his grown-up children did was to stand up as a mark of respect as he strode in to the main hall like a general inspecting his troops; but not to go down on all fours, the consequences perhaps of a slightly dysfunctional Sinhalese Buddhist family that did not have a man about the house to ensure that tradition was maintained.

If they indeed did crouch before their old man, at least on New Year's Day when it could be most expected, I cannot say for certain, for we usually visited grandfather that day accompanied only by our parents who drove us there every New Year's morning in their Volkswagen Beetle. Whether such visits away from the rest were deliberately intended to shield us from the unsavoury proceedings that day I cannot say.

CHAPTER 18

English as she was spake

Though the language of our home, or rather our family (for the rest of the household at Accha House habitually spoke in Sinhala) was English, it was certainly not the Queen's language, but rather our 'mother tongue', a slightly twisted language taught us by mother.

In our lingo 'nice' meant 'beautiful', 'rogue' meant 'thief' and 'back' meant 'buttocks'. The word we used for our little penises 'gadgets' was however no slight variation from its original meaning like the others and so complete was its use in the sense mother bestowed on it that this was the only word for the male genitals we used throughout our Accha House days even when we were in our teens.

Despite our having the gadgets, a small part of our lexicon was clearly feminine such as when we used *hanky* for handkerchief and *panty* for underpants, sissy talk passed on to us by mother or acquired in our nursery days at Bishop's College, a largely female affair that only admitted sweet little boys who would n't molest the girls.

We also used quite a few vernacular terms in our everyday speech, especially for things that went into our stomachs and out of it including *paan* for 'bread', *parippu* for 'lentils', *chu* for 'urine' and *kakka* for 'stools'. Sinhala grammar also influenced our speech to some extent. We used to address our uncles and aunts by prefixing their names to these kinship terms rather than suffixing them as they do in the West. Uncle Lalith we addressed as *Lala Uncle* and aunt Chandani as *Chandani Aunty*. These terms we also extended to cover an earlier generation and so it was that granduncle Piyasena simply came to be known as *Piyasena Uncle* and Grandaunt Chandra *Laly Aunty*. Grandaunt Bhadra we called *Garden Aunty* after her sprawling garden and Grandaunt Indra *Baba Aunty* after the many *babas* or children she had, all of whose names like ours began with the letter *A–*

Athula, Anil, Ashanti and Anushal to match their surname of Ambawatte. Indeed almost every grown-up was either an uncle or aunty. Our parents' auction assistant Zameen we called *Zameen Aunty* and the German lady who regularly visited our cabanas at Kosgoda *Gertrude Aunty*. In school however there was no unclying or auntying. It was simply 'Sir' for a male teacher and 'Miss' for a female teacher, even if she happened to be married. These English terms of address commonly used in local vernacular schools were probably a relict of colonial rule, for even today in offices, one's superior is addressed as *Sir*, or if in the case of a female, irrespective of marital status, as *Miss* by their minions.

We also coined some peculiar usages which only we knew – a sort of rogues' language. A beautiful girl who caught the fancy of the three of us we called *Famie*, short for *famous girl*. And *famous* she was - at least amongst us. There was something about her that suggested she was a Muslim, including the fact that she was always chaperoned by an old lady who wore her saree in local Muslim fashion. The fair maid stood out from the other schoolgirls we often came across while walking to and from school. Not only did this beauty, perhaps just stepping into her teens, have an agreeable rosy white complexion and finely chiseled features, but also wore her hair loose reaching to the shoulders like a tulip turned upside down, a style which we for some reason called "Anne style" and greatly esteemed as 'civilised', especially since most of the schoolgirls at the time wore their hair twisted into pigtails which we simply loathed, not because of any Islamic aversion to swine, but because we deemed it rather gross, or to put it in our words 'barbaric'.

We would often look at her in the sly, stealing a glance of her as we plodded down Flower Terrace heading towards home and as she herself ambled to her home or lodge down the same road, perhaps from Bishop's College by the look of her uniform which I vaguely recall had a purple tie, chaperoned by the old lady. Though our paths often crossed, we never talked or smiled at her. We were too shy for that sort of thing. Upon her

approach, we would excitedly whisper to one another "*Famie is coming, Famie is coming!*". She probably noticed our infatuation for her from our surreptitious glances and all too suspicious mannerisms which were so hard to hide when we almost came face to face with her; which girl wouldn't?

Calling people names came naturally to us even in our nursery days. One evening while playing outside *Accha House* we noticed this long-haired bloke casually walking across the road and crowed out loud "*aunty uncle, aunty uncle!*", prompting grandma to rush out to stop the heckling forthwith. It probably had something to do with our background.My parents never addressed one another by their personal names, but called each other 'Luvy', a corruption of that well known four letter word that to this day has shy lovers blushing to say. Whenever father was vexed with mother, he would blurt out "W*oman and a half*" What it meant I am still at a loss to say though I suspect there was something misogynist about it.

Father's folk including his brothers and cousins also had this bad habit of calling people by odd names such as when they referred to my brother Asgar as '*Bombay looking, Calcutta going*'. We often heard the expression whenever we spent time at Umma House and could not figure what it really meant. It was later that we learnt that it was a circumlocutory reference to Asgar's squint which was eventually corrected by the skilled hands of one Dr.Wijeyanayagam. But it was really only after we had a good grasp of Indian geography that the wit of it all struck us- *Bombay looking, Calcutta going!*

CHAPTER 19

What's on the table ?

We were a well fed family and were blessed to be so. Mother quoting Napolean used to say "*An army marches on its stomach*" to drill the importance of food into our little martial minds. Though no qualified nutritionist, she very well knew what a balanced meal should look like. She was a culinary expert who had taught cake making to young women.

Father, the strict disciplinarian he was, was a bit more reserved, at least in principle and would quote what the Prophet of Islam had to say about eating when he very wisely declared "*It is sufficient for the son of Adam to eat enough to keep him alive. But if he must do more than that, then one-third for his food, one-third for his drink and one-third for his air*". Wise counsel no doubt and one impressed on us from a very early age as we hardly if ever over-indulged. This was in stark contrast to some families used to force feeding their children to obesity. On the contrary we were quite lean, prompting our chubby paternal grandmother whom we called *umma* to fuss over us and grumble that we were *melinji* (thin). That's because she was used to seeing plump children who had been overfed or rather forcefed as many Muslim kids were back then.

We had three square meals a day despite father's quoting a saying probably picked up from one of his health conscious Teutonic friends: '*Eat a good breakfast, share your lunch with a friend and give your dinner to your enemy*". We were concerned about our health all right, but our night meal we simply had to have and so conveniently skipped the part on dinner. This sort of thing was alright for hefty Germans who could easily afford to fast after a heavy meal of bockwurst and beer, but certainly not for us growing up kids.

A light breakfast we would take early in the morning before rushing to school. Sometimes for breakfast we had what we called *sugar-butter-paan*, bread liberally daubed with butter and

sprinkled with sugar. Eggs also figured prominently, being eaten with a slice or two of buttered bread. This was usually in the form of a soft-boiled egg which we called *half-boiled egg* taken with a dash of salt and pepper or scrambled eggs made by beating eggs and cooking it in butter or oil to form a soft, light yellow meal that digested well. Despite speaking English at home, we called it by a curious Sinhala name taught us by mother, *kukul petav* (chicks), perhaps on account of its unusual appearance which she may have likened to little chicks.

Bread we also took with circular slices of the long green-skinned *anamaalu* plantain, a brown treacle-like caramel syrup called *Golden Syrup* and jams of various kinds manufactured by MD, the Government Marketing Department, like the yellowish *Golden Melon Jam* made of Pumpkin and the whitish *Silver Melon Jam* made of Ash Pumpkin. Sometimes we also had that newly arrived brownish spread prepared from yeast extract, *Vegemite*, preferring it to the traditional *Marmite* uncle Suranjan often had for breakfast. We also had *Nutella*, that scrumptious chocolate and hazelnut spread, but only occasionally. Cheese also figured in our breakfasts once in a while and particularly fascinating were these circular cardboard packs containing around 10 to 12 pieces of cheese wedges, each of these containing a different variety such as a speciality cheese with little blue green veins and unfortunately another with ham or pork mixed with it which we threw away.

Another item that mother often made us for breakfast was *Bombay toast*, a form of French toast prepared by dunking slices of bread in a mixture of milk and eggs and heating it in a pan with butter or margarine. This item, soft and mottled brown all over made a delicious as well as nutritious meal.

Among other breakfast meals we relished were the processed cereals that found their way here from the West - *Quaker* oats, which, boiled in milk, formed a wholesome porridge; *Weetabix* oval whole grain wheat biscuits, which, softened in warm milk, made a delicious gruel and *Keloggs* corn flakes which we

soaked in lukewarm milk before shoveling them down our throats.

During school intervals, we usually had the sandwiches tucked into our lunch boxes by mother and this we would wash down with deliciously sweet rose-flavoured milk she specially prepared for us, pouring it into stout little Thermos flasks adorned with colour images of Marvel Superheroes like Captain America, Iron Man and Vision against a sky blue backdrop. Sometimes we would resort to the school canteen when mother, too busy to pack a meal, gave us a few coins to do as we pleased. The tuckshop at Bishop's College where we schooled in our nursery days sold a variety of shorteats like *patties* - as curry puffs of a semi-circular shape are known locally - and *Chinese rolls*. A patty or Chinese roll I believe was 25 cents or so at the time which is not surprising given that a loaf of bread cost only 75 cents back then. There were also *ice palam*, coloured ice popsicals in the form of triangular bars that could simply be pushed out of their cardboard casings with the finger.

The canteen at Mahanama College which we attended later, though better stocked was a dark, dingy, dimly lit place that seemed to be more concerned about saving on the light bills than doing business. We nevertheless patronized it once in a while in the days mother was too busy to pack a couple of beef or cheese sandwiches into our lunchboxes. It sold among other things *maalu-paan* (triangular fish buns), *jam-paan* (semi-circular bread sweetened in the insides with a pink-coloured jam and topped with sugar) and *kimbul banis* (a long piece of sweetened bread topped with sugar that somewhat resembled a crocodile, hence its popular name meaning 'crocodile bun'), a rather plebeian item that as its lesser known name of *viyaanaa* suggests, has its origins in Vienna, the Austrian capital that is still famous for its classy *viennoiseries* (Things of Vienna) especially the type of crescent-shaped breakfast bread known as *kipferl* or crescent which it closely resembles.

One day I slipped a *maalu-paan* I had purchased in my lunchbox and forgot to have it that day. The weekend passed before I opened it one fine day at school. I was startled, for wriggling their way through and crawling out of the bun were these revolting little whitish maggots and an unbearably nauseating stench that went straight for my nostrils.

However it did n't take maggots for some to squirm at the sight of the goodies in my lunch box, such as when I once offered a Muslim classmate, a lad from Slave Island, a beef sandwich mother had prepared. He took a look at it and recoiled in disgust, taking the rim of fat around the piece of boiled beef to be pork and refused to have any of it. So wary was the bumpkin of our westernized ways that he really thought we gorged ourselves on the flesh of pig which, needless to say, is strictly forbidden to us good Muslims.

In the weekends and holidays, we would generally have around 10.00 or 10.30 am what we called *drinka*, juice made of bottled or packeted fruit powders such as *Tang*, *Darling* or *Colmans*. If not, it would be home-made ice lollies which mother prepared by pouring rose-flavoured milk into special popsical moulds that came in a set of six or so.

What we took for lunch was simple rice and curry. This was usually communal as we had the same meal as the rest of the household, partaking of it from a large table in the dining room with the rest of the family members such as grandma, *Accha* and our aunts Nandani and Chandani, shortly after returning from school.

Mother often rolled boiled rice packed with meat and veggies into little boluses using squashed potato to glue it all together. She would pop these into our little mouths like a mother bird feeding her little ones and all we had to do was say *ah!* With time we learned to use our hands to form our little morsels, but it never tasted as good as the way mother used to make them. We eventually devised some ingenious ways of eating our rice and curry such as stuffing it into *poppadams* which unlike those of today often expanded when fried to form something like a

brown flying saucer. Sometimes we had what we called *egg rice*, a savoury rice meal mother used to prepare by adding to the boiled rice, scrambled eggs cooked in butter, onions and curry leaves. This appetizing meal we often had with French fries.

Potatoes of all vegetables figured prominently in our diet, as a simple vegetable curry cooked in a copious quantity of turmeric that stained the gravy yellow, or in its French fried state which we simply called chips or as a binding agent for our rice balls. But there came a time I would munch the spuds with caution. That was after a visit to the family home of a lady we called Zameen aunty, our parents' auction assistant. The house which was situated near Sir John Kotalawela's Kandawala Estate (now a defence academy) in Ratmalana had a little farm attached to it where neatly wound around wooden stakes or trellises grew creepers that produced everything from warty-looking bitter gourds to large rounded pumpkins. Strangely what I came to associate most with the place was potatoes, not that it had any, but only because I was gripped by a story mother and Zameen aunty had been discussing while strolling about in the area. It was about a local family that had been fatally poisoned by some sort of yam.

I somehow got away with the idea that the culprit was a potato, especially since the word used to describe it was *ala*, a Sinhala word for yam in general but which we specifically used for the potato. The lethal grub being discussed was probably the *niyangala* (Gloriosa superba), an extremely poisonous yam though to my little mind it immediately conjured up pictures of potatoes which I knew to be innocuous, but now thought could become poisonous on occasion. In the months and years that followed I would take no chances when nibbling the spuds, avoiding any that did not seem right, especially those that gave out a rather sickly taste.

There were only a few precautions we as a Muslim family had to take. Being a largely conservative Sinhalese Buddhist household, pork was never taken and this agreed with our

Islamic values. Beef mother purchased from the row of Muslim butchers' shops in the ground floor of Colpetty Municipal Market. Tucked away in a little corner to the right was a poultry shop, *Mohamed Hassan's Poultry Mart*, with a little room behind where live fowl were slaughtered soon after mother placed the order, ensuring they were fresh for the table. In later times came *Bahira's* whole frozen chicken and there were times mother resorted to this expedient due to its convenience. However there was nothing to beat the fresh fowl meat, which could then be had for only 30 Rupees or so a kilo. Mother often purchased fish from the *Ceyfish* outlet at Colpetty market manned by a fellow who had a long shark-like nose whom I called *Mora* (Shark). There was a time when Ceyfish sold frozen packets of white fish fillets which mother used to sauté and serve us for lunch. Less frequented though was the fish mart upstairs which sold a variety of seafood.

Soya meat, or as it was known for short *TVP* (Textured Vegetable Protein) also made its entry at the time. This we loved hot and spicy with a lot of chilli the way it was prepared by uncle Chandana. Yet another exotic relish came by way of a bottle of *diyahakuru*, a reddish brown preparation of fish blood tasting somewhat like anchovy sauce uncle Hyder procured us from the Maldives, a veritable 'rice puller' to put it in the words of father.

There were only two occasions I recall when my siblings and I ever took meats that were not considered *halal*. One was in our very young days when aunt Sunethra who had but recently arrived from Kenya served us each a strange-looking meaty thing that looked very much like our little penises, to go with our usual lunch of rice and curry. The grub was new to us since nobody in our family had ever taken these until then, though our aunt found them rather irresistible. I had hardly taken a bite or two, when someone announced that *Ghany* (as they called father) had arrived, prompting our aunt who had so generously put it on our plate, to quickly take it away. I did not understand then why she had suddenly turned Turk, but from the agitated tone of the crier who had called out *Ghany evilla, Ghany evilla*

(Ghany has come, Ghany has come) it had to be something father did not like us having. I missed it though, for it tasted so delicious and it was only many, many years later that I would taste it again, when Bahira started producing halal sausages. The ones we had just a nibble or two were very likely the non-halal ones manufactured by Elephant House.

Another was when mother took us for brunch at Green Cabin Café after a visit to 555 Showrooms, a spin-off from our usual auctions located along Galle Road, Colpetty which sold all manner of things. The Café which had originally been established as a branch of the more famous Pagoda Tea Rooms of Chatam Street, Fort, to serve egghoppers and stringhoppers, had by then started to offer other items on its menu, including mince meat pies. Mother had ordered a few and we were soon enjoying them when father suddenly dashed in -God knows from where- to angrily shout at mother and sweep his hand across the table, displacing a little dish or glass which I caught before it hit the ground. The message was clear. No more buying meat items from places that did not have halal credentials. Though the item in question was beef, father was unsure whether the meat was obtained from a bull that had been slaughtered only after God's Holy Name had been mentioned over it. Mother should have been thankful that at least he was less scrupulous than her own family whose patriarch W.H.Hendrick never took beef or pork or mutton, only fish and an occasional chicken from Pilawoos in the Pettah to go with the roti he had for dinner. Although the old man could not brook the thought of taking animal life for food, he probably found it hard to resist the delicious *Chicken Palandy* this famous Muslim restaurant turned out. Rumour had it that its owner had himself invented the dish to perpetuate his name as he did not have a son to take after him.

At teatime, usually around 4.30 or 5.00 pm, we had this habit of dipping buttered bread or Marie biscuits in our milk tea which gave out a great taste as it blended well with the brew, the cured dark brown leaves for which came from the only tea makers we

knew then, Liptons and Brooke Bonds. Sometimes we would have more substantial fare prepared by mother such as slices of banana loaf which was like bread but richer and creamier as it was made with a batter of flour, sugar, eggs and mashed bananas, or rolled pancakes filled with a juicy mix of scraped coconut and jaggery or sugar.

Dinner unlike lunch was usually not the same the rest of the household had, for mother always believed in feeding us something special for supper. Thus while Accha and most of he brood would content themselves with some lentil curry or the gravy left over from lunch which they took with bread, mother would turn out more tantalizing dishes like a scrumptious meat and vegetable pie with a hard brown crust encasing a savoury mix of beef, potato, carrots and beans or fried beef or mashed potatoes, fish and chips or Chinese rolls coated all over with powdered bread crumbs.

Our culinary preferences then were distinctly Western and I can still recall how we had a high esteem for a type of fish that had this 'civilized' sounding name of *Red Mullet* in contrast to the fish we knew by vernacular names like *Tora* (Seer) and *Kelavalla* (Tuna). We got mother to prepare one for dinner, only to find that it did not taste as good as we had thought. Little did we know then that it was a distinctly local fish going by the name of *Gal-Maluva* (Rock Fish). It was in the same vein that we had mother prepare for us soy beans cooked in tomato sauce, relishing it as if it were a tin of *Heinz* baked beans. Despite our exotic tastes, mother often tried to impress on us that eastern fare was much more nutritious in some ways such as when she dwelled on how the miserly Nizam of Hyderabad subsisted on lentils all his life. Lentils, which we called by its vernacular name of *parippu*, was, after all, a rich source of protein. But living on it for a lifetime; that we found hard to swallow.

She also had us believe that the leafy vegetable we called *niviti* was the same as the iron-rich spinach, which *Popeye*, one of our favourite cartoon characters, swallowed to get the strength he needed to bash the baddies. What she did not say was that it was

an altogether different species, though in English it has generally been known as *Ceylon spinach*, sufficient excuse for her to pass it down our throats as real spinach. She was also obsessed with the supposed virtues of *dambala* or winged bean, after learning from somewhere that it was the '*food of the future'*. Her fondness for the bean was probably fuelled by media reports of the time that claimed that it was a 'new miracle plant' poised for the opening of '*a protein revolution in the twenty first century*', whatever that meant.

Dessert, both for lunch and dinner was the norm and was either a pudding or cake or ice cream or any other item that would satisfy a sweet tooth. These were home made except perhaps for the occasional ice cream from Elephant House. Even ice cream was sometimes made at home in thin trays and coloured light green, tasting even better than the commercial stuff. Puddings mother made often, and this included rose-or almond-flavoured semolina pudding, soft caramel pudding with scalloped edges that sat atop a deliciously sweet brownish or amber-coloured syrup and another cream white, pink or light green fluff pudding with a gelatinous layer at the bottom embedded with slivers of canned mango – a treat one could never ever forget!

Among the other dainties she prepared were *cream buns,* soft buns with a sweet white cream that filled its centre; *chocolate éclairs* little finger-shaped dainties topped with chocolate and filled with chocolate cream and *cheese cakes*, pastry cakes whose lower portion was filled with a dollop of strawberry jam. Cakes she made best, including a first year b'day cake she made for her twin boys decorated with swans and chicks and a large candle in the centre and a three year b'day cake she made for her cousin Anil which was shaped like a bunny after his petname *Baniya*. The one I best remember was one topped with a colourful mery-go-round made of light metal on to which were suspended little horses fashioned out of icing sugar.

If mother was good at western fare, it was our paternal grandma, *Umma*, who excelled in eastern and more particularly traditional Muslim cuisine. She had what they called '*the hand*',

that rare ability to make a hearty meal out of whatever she touched. Even a soft-boiled egg with its bright yellow yolk surrounded by a sea of snow-white albumen steeped in her thick and spicy brown beef gravy was a treat one could savour for the rest of one's life. She excelled in making *buriyani*, a rich rice dish she always prepared to celebrate the Islamic festivals of Ramazan and Hajj. This she would prepare in a large metal cooking vessel using fine basmathi rice to which she added ghee, some meat such as beef or mutton, potatoes, yellow colouring and a liberal sprinkling of rose water that gave it the aroma it was famous for.

This Rice dish we had with a dry assorted curry made of beef liver, cashewnuts and green peas, a sour red brown pickle made with onions and dates and a light green mint sambol. These taken together could revive even the most jaded of appetites. Also quite tantalizing were her *vattalappam* puddings which she prepared by steaming in ceramic or aluminium bowls a mixture of beaten eggs, coconut milk, palm sugar and cardamoms. The resulting soft brown pudding with little pores inside oozing with a deliciously sweet honey-like liquid was a dessert one could always relish, even after a heavy meal. She also prepared what she called *sooji*, a very soft, almost fluffy, yellow pudding made of semolina, sugar, margarine and yellow colouring which was usually served cut into squares. The sweet, a hot favourite of ours, would literally melt in our mouths, so that we just could n't have enough of it. It often happened that when we visited her in the mornings, she would give each of us a cup of '*egg coffee*' by breaking a raw egg and adding it to a mug of milk coffee peppered with ground cardamoms before stirring it well while still hot. It had such a rich taste, being thick and creamy.

Little wonder then, that father, though living in a largely Sinhalese household, had scant regard for the culinary skills of his wife's folk. He compared and contrasted Umma's and Accha's cooking with relish, swearing that his mother-in-law's grub was not a patch on his mother's heavenly provender. The difference was in the pains taken to turn out a good meal, he

explained. Now that was some food for thought, though had Accha come to know of it she would probably have not thought too much of it. The Sinhalese are by nature an austere people; their Muslim compatriots a bit too indulging.

Eating out was a rare occurrence, except when the family would go out for dinner after a busy day at the auctions to *Mayfair* or *Majestic hotel* in the heart of Bambalapitiya, and then it was often a rice dish like a *buriyani*. The waiter would bring extras like a dish of beef curry, but father would warn against having any of it, even as much as the gravy, as the entire thing could be billed. In later times, it was *Raheema Hotel* on Thurston Road that became the preferred spot to eat out.

The family also went vegetarian once in a while and this was usually at the *Indo-Ceylon café* along Galle Road in Colpetty junction towards the seaside. There was also this *Saiva* joint in Flower Road which we kids sometimes resorted to, accompanied by Joseph, our Indian Tamil auction help, when the auction sales were being held at the GFS in Green Path. One morning, having consumed some hot stuff there, huffing and puffing and heads reeling, we had the temerity to complain to mother that the food had been spiked with 'drugs' much to her amusement. We had obviously taken a bit too much chilli that day, probably hidden in the *bondas*, large boluses filled with spiced potatoes. Generally vegetarian fare was wholesome, with items like *tosai*, a thick puffy pancake, *idiappam*, stringy circular cakes and *vadai*, a savoury doughnut, which were taken with ample quantities of *sambaar*, a mess of vegetables, and a sambol.

Father would also take the family out to dinner at this Malay eatery down Malay Street in Slave Island where we would have cylindrical rice cakes known as *pittu* with its traditional accompaniments of *barbat*, honeycomb tripe curry and coconut milk. The meal, which we would indulge in with great relish, was served us by a small-made, hunchbacked character good enough for a Barnum freak show. In later times, father, after taking us to the grounds to race against one another in the

evenings, would take us to this joint where we would be served with hot beef soup oozing with oil. The big bone that came with the dish of soup had this yellowish marrow which we got at by sucking or scooping it out with the handle of a spoon.

More frequent were our visits to *Perera & Sons*, then located along Galle Road, Colpetty near the Walkers' petrol station at the turn to St.Michael's Road. This was when mother took us shopping to Colpetty supermarket in the evenings, which was usually a walk from home, quite a distance for our little feet. The place was quite a large one, unlike the P & S outlets we come across today, an outcome of the company's goal of reaching out far and wide in keeping with its motto of '*Your Neighbourhood Baker*'. The P&S spot we patronized was an imposing place, considered rather up-market, frequented by Colombo's elite. As one entered, on its left hand side, were glass showcases displaying their range of products in all its mouth-watering variety. We were fascinated by these thin square pieces of cake with a checked pattern of four squares in two colours and with a deliciously sweet yet firm frosting delicately wrapping its corners; matches, which comprised of two pieces of flaky rectangular puff pastry sandwiching a generous dollop of cream and strawberry jam was another favourite which went down well not only with us, but with our sweet-toothed paternal grandfather, *vappa*, who would amble over to the spot just to bring one home to have all for himself. Further inside, we would enter a little corner *The Melting Pot* with seats on stands where they dispensed iced coffee and fish buns over the counter. These fish buns served in thin white tissue came with a scrumptious sauce, so good indeed that I can still savour that taste more than three decades later, so warm, moist and soft on the teeth. The spot was known among the kids of an earlier generation not so much for its sweets and savouries, but for its ice lollies, its popsicles, creamsicles and chocsicles.

Another spot we often patronized while shopping in Colpetty was *Bombay Sweet House,* a confectionary business in Turret Road set up by a family of sweetmakers of Indian origin. The

sweet spot had opened up Colombo to Candyworld way back in the 1960s with its dainty beads of golden *boondi*, juicy coils of amber *jalebi* and variety of colourful *muscats*, an image of which along with a picture of a smily girl adorned their sweet boxes stacked one atop another in glass-fronted cupboards. Here we would sip a glass of that deliciously refreshing rosy beverage, *faluda*, so well known among the Muslims of our country, a drink so sweet that one could imagine the houris in paradise clamouring for it.

Yet another spot we resorted to was *Maliban Kreme House* on the seaside of Galle Road, Colpetty, especially after our evening visits to Dr.Lakshman Weerasena, a portly general practitioner who was more like a family doctor. The Kreme House was only a brief walk away from the good doctor's clinic and here we would have some really great milk shakes, a palliative after a tetanus shot or a wound dressing which was not uncommon in those naughty days. A sort of kiosk on the right sold these slabs of *Zellers chocolate fudge* we loved. Before long they disappeared, never to make a comeback as some good things do.

Then there were the famous *Alerics* ice cream trucks parked between the Galle Face Green and the Galle Road which dispensed crunchy cones topped with vanilla ice cream which we always had whenever we visited the green in the evenings. They never sold it in the shops and if we wanted to have ice cream for dessert it was either from *Elephant House* or *Bonns*, a short-lived yet very creamy brand that was quite popular with city folk in the early 1980s.

Also unforgettable were the crispy potato chips that came in neat little packets adorned with the figure of a moustachioed man against an orange background which we often had at the movies, long before the imported stuff like Pringles took its place. Itinerant small time vendors also plied their trade in the pavements of the city and would often pass by Accha House announcing their wares. One fellow who carried a wicker basket offered packets of soft, yellow cashewnuts boiled in a solution of water, turmeric and salt. It came packed in some sort of green

leaf bound with natural fibre. A packet cost a Rupee or two at most.

Also a common sight in those days were these men carrying metal boxes full of *Bombai Muttai*, stringy creamy white candy floss, which could be purchased for a few cents. The item, produced by Muslims of Indian origin meant 'Bombay Sweet'. Such people were then a common sight. When mother was a little girl she and her sisters had eagerly awaited the coming of a similar but rarer character, a Malay man from Slave Island with a kerchief on his head carrying a tray of *Sanja* of various shapes. The man would advertise his wares in front of Accha House shouting out *Sanja Sanja!*. These were seaweed jelly mixed with milk and set in little bowls that took its name from the Chinese *Chan-Chow*.

We were also fond of commercial mass-produced sweets which often came with a surprise inside. We were once given these little packs of bubble gum gifted by a prospective in-law of uncle Chandana shortly before his wedding. It came with these decalcomania cards of dinosaurs which could be ironed onto clothes. We did n't have the patience for that. We simply ironed them onto a thin white cardboard obtained from shirt packaging and kept it as a picture. There was also this brand of Japanese bubble gum called *Lotte* we bought while shopping in Colpetty supermarket which came packed with colourful vinyl stickers of various characters.

There was the prouder stuff that did not need any inducements, but nevertheless captured our fancy, like *Rowntree's Smarties*, dainty little chocolate discs with a crisp sugar shell that came in an assortment of colours. The colourful cylindrical cardboard packet capped with a plastic lid they came in was an attraction in itself as the tubes, emptied of their contents, could be used to store coins and other trivia, though more creative kids could make from it anything from space rockets to castles.

Local confections we often indulged in included *Kandos* Chocolates which came in slabs or bars, hard disc-shaped *Star*

toffees that had to be sucked boisterously till they got smaller and smaller before eventually vanishing and the softer and sweeter rectangular *Delta* toffees that almost melted in the mouth. Another kind of toffee we had those days was this crude, cylindrical thing with a sharp malty taste unlike the caramelly toffees manufactured by the big timers. These came wrapped in flimsy tissue or wax paper and were called *Bulto*, which uncle Suranjan nicknamed little brother Altaf with, probably because he looked that sweet.

There were also the bounties nature had bestowed us, like the golden yellow drupes of the Jakfruit, so sweet and succulent that one could swallow the slimy stuff without knowing how many one had really gulped, the only indication being the light brown seeds one removed from the drupes before indulging in the delicacy.

Fruits freshly plucked off trees we relished, like the pretty bunches of hog plums we brought down from a large tree in the backyard of Umma House using pole and hook. We simply loved the ripe golden fruits of this Polynesian tree which we called *ambarella*. It gave a nice tangy taste, though as one nibbled closer to the spiny seed, a sort of gum sometimes oozed out.

A little away from Accha House, near the lane from Turret Road where we played cricket and next to Mr.Rajakaruna's house stood a Jamfruit tree whose ripe red berries we plucked with our nimble fingers. I reckoned that the fruit was called *Jam* because its juicy pulp was as sweet as jam. It really takes its local name from the *Jamaican Cherry*.

Then there were the pumpkin pips we plucked out from the bowels of the yellow-fleshed pumpkins Accha used to cook. These were somewhat like the sunflower seeds taken as a snack in countries like the US. Breaking open the drop-shaped rind, we found a starchy white substance which we popped on to the tips of our tongues to savour the taste.

But it was little brother Altaf who showed the greatest zeal for gastronomic exploits, such as when he greedily espied what he

thought was a piece of cheese. *Yummy*, he thought to himself and quickly took a bite off it, only to find that it was not as tasty as he had thought. In fact, it was rather caustic. Not surprisingly -It was a bar of cream-coloured Sunlight or Sovereign soap, the type used for washing clothes. *So much for greedy guts!*

Mother with a three-tiered cake of her making.
She was a cookery teacher

The twins cutting their first b'day cake made by mother
ornate with chicks and swans

Poultry Mart, Colpetty Supermarket. The same place from which mother procured halal chicken

Fish stall at Colpetty Supermarket. Another spot to which mother resorted for fish

CHAPTER 20

Books Maketh a Man

Books, it is said, maketh a man. Mother certainly knew their value in shaping young minds and had this knack for selecting the right books for us at the right age. I have no regrets, for both my twin brother Asgar and I became authors in our own right.

We literally grew up with books, keenly poring over the pages for hours and hours. The only creatures that would have matched our taste for books at the time would be hungry termites, which left to their devices could devour a good book in a matter of days. Fortunately, we did not have any of the vandals approaching Accha House. The bibliophiles probably knew better than to take us on.

The main bookshops we patronized were Lake House Bookshop, Gunasena's or KVG's in Colombo Fort, Malee Book Centre in Colpetty and on occasion the musty second-hand bookstalls lining Mc.Callum Road (D.R.Wijewardane Mawatha) in Maradana that hoarded an assortment of books of almost every vintage. Our collection of books grew year by year so that by the time we were 12 or so, we had no less than 200 titles in what we called 'Our Library', a wooden bookcase with three or four shelves that stood in our parents' office, in a section nearer the main hall, separated by a curtain.

Our love for books began quite early, and though these were in our earliest more or less fairy tales like *Cinderella*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* they little doubt influenced our moral values and understanding of the struggle between good and evil. Indeed, many of the types of characters we find depicted in these tales so painstakingly recorded for us by the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault, we meet even today, the do-gooders and the mischief-makers. True, they are more often in black and white than in grey, but still they reflect human nature to a good extent,

certainly enough to help us judge what kind of people the world is made up of.

Our Islamic faith would eventually take its place and still we would meet with some of the characters we had known in our fairy tales in a somewhat different form, such as the angels known as *malaika*, winged messengers of God created from light bidden to do good to man and who somewhat resembled the flying fairies of the stories we read; and the evil women known as *naffasa* who blew on knots as a form of witchcraft, the devil's handmaidens from whose mischief the Qur'an tells men to seek refuge, and who, again, resembled another type of fairy tale character, the wicked witches, green skinned crones with hooked noses notorious for weaving magic spells. Curiously, much of the imagery of the fairytale books then, depicting as they did medieval European culture, closely resembled Islamic habit than they did modern Western fashion, like the head geared or red bearded men, dwarfs, kings and others, whose likes one may still come across in the elderly henna-bearded Muslim men seen walking the streets even today or the modestly clad women with long robes and hooded heads, queens and even common women, who so closely resembled Muslim women attired in traditional headscarves.

Other than the fairy tale stories, the earliest story book we had, when we were about four years old, was *The Wealthy Hippo* by Froebel Kan. The story stressed the virtues of faithfulness through a lovely little moral tale woven around Mr.Hippo's visit to Animal Valley. Another early book we had was M.J.Arnalot's *The Balloon Seller* which told of Billy's attempts to sell balloons to Crower the Cock who proposed a swap for a cap which would never fit him (little doubt on account of his large red cockscomb which was depicted larger than usual for us kids to get the idea). A couple of Enid Blyton's story books also figured in our collection, including in our very early years this delightful hardcover book on *The Three Golliwogs*, showing the threesome Golly, Woggie and Nigger in front of a pretty little cottage with yellow walls, blue gate and

honeysuckle growing all over it. These dark woolly-haired characters, often up to some mischief or other, would in the years to come, be phased out amidst concerns that they gave Negroes a bad name, *The Three Bold Pixies* taking their place in the era of political correctness. Needless to say, the name of one of these characters, Nigger, is actually a pejorative term for blacks.

We also had a few books featuring Jim Henson's famous muppets of Sesame Street fame, among others the *Sesame Street 123 Story Book* and the *Sesame Street ABC Story Book*, not to mention one titled *See no Evil, Hear no Evil, Smell no Evil* which came with as many as eight fragrance labels for one to scratch and sniff, its cover featuring Oscar, the green monster in the garbage bin happily commenting *This book really smells, heh, heh.* The *ABC Story Book* contained a good many interesting picture stories based on the different letters of the alphabet, as for instance, *'An A Story'* which shows Queen Agatha summoning the knights of her kingdom and telling them that she loved all things beginning with A, and that whoever could bring her something beginning with the letter A would be handsomely rewarded. Sir Bird, rushing to the Royal Zoo, and passing many things beginning with the letter A finally succeeds in bringing her an alligator with whom she falls in love, she herself being an alligator. She rewards Big Bird with a lifetime's supply of birdseed and makes him Ambassador to Antarctica! *The 123 Story Book* was as fascinating, such as the story for No.6 called *Six Monsters in the Restaurant*, which depicted six very hungry monsters visiting a restaurant; when the waiter gives them a table with six chairs, and taking a notebook, asks them "*Ok, now….what do you want to eat ?*", they all shout *Table!!!!!!*

One of the most memorable was of course our Richard Scarry's *Best Story Book Ever* with 82 wonderful Round-the-year stories and poems. It contained among other stories *Pierre the Paris Policeman*, *Pip Pip goes to London*, *Good Night, Little Bear*, *Mr.Hedgehog's Christmas present* and *Is this the House*

of Mistress Mouse? It had a number of interesting features. One, on Animals, had humorous captions accompanying the pictures. One captioned '*Some animals are beautiful'*, showed a hideous looking warthog holding a mirror on to its face; another titled '*Some animals hate to take baths*' showed three little pigs hiding while mother pig waited with soap in hand to get them into the tub; yet another that read '*Some animals live in houses*' depicted a worm in an apple house and a spuds bug in a potato house.

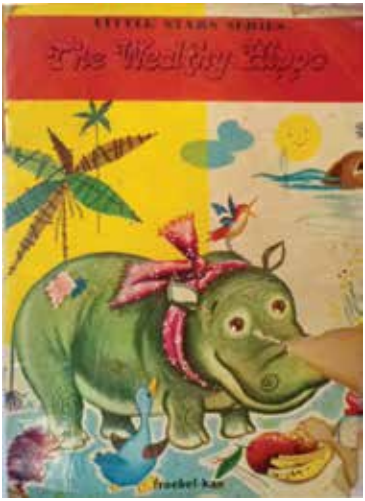
We also had a few small square-shaped paperbacks, including Dean & Son's *Tim the Airman* and Jane Pilgrim's *Blackberry Farm* and *The Adventures of Walter*. Sandle Books' *The Magic Pen*, *Animals Holiday* and *The Sheriff of Texanville* were even smaller than these. Somewhat later, when we were around eight years old, came the fascinating Little Golden Book series with its characteristic golden border at the spine, which included among others, stories like *Peter and the Wolf*, *The Gingerbread Man*, *The Pink Panther in the Haunted House*, *Tom and Jerry in the Mini Olympics* and *Donald Duck in America on Parade*. Still later times, when we around twelve or so, saw us with the classics, not the originals, but the abridged versions Ladybird had condensed for children such as *Swiss Family Robinson*, *The Three Musketeers*, *A Tale of Two Cities* and *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth*.

The fact however is that by this time, we had outgrown fictional stories and could n't be bothered with the more serious genre. It was the factual stuff that now interested us for the simple reason that we could do things with them.This included the *How and Why Wonder Books* on a plethora of subjects, including among others, Birds, Butterflies and Moths, Coins, Dinosaurs, Dogs, Electricity, Exploration and Discoveries, Horses, Kings and Queens, Reptiles and Amphibians, Rocks and Minerals, First World War and World War II; *Ladybird* Books on Ants, Aeroplane, Arms and Armour, Coins, Stamp Collecting, Exploring Space, Flight, Inventions, Islands, Rocks and Minerals, Rockets, Spiders, Stamps, Trains and Nature's Roundabout; *Just Look* books on Aeroplanes and Balloons,

Houses, Trees and Prehistoric Animals; Dean & Son's *Quiz Me* Books on Coins, Dinosaurs and Planes and Pilots; and Hamlyn's *Insight* Books on Ships and Aircraft. Among other favourites were our *Piccolo Picture Book of Flags*, *Purnell's Aeroplanes*, *Macdonald's Superbook of Cars* and *Blandford's Mini Guide on Rocks and Minerals*.

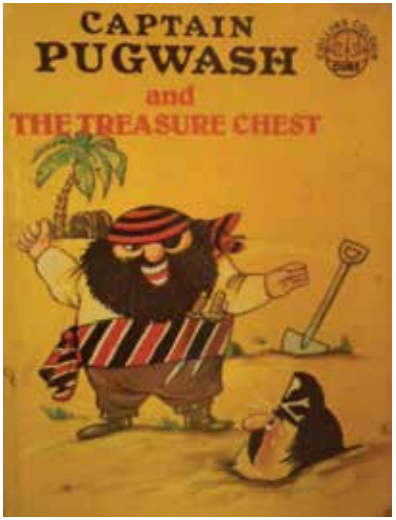
We were besotted with dinosaurs and had no less than four books about them including a large one with outlines of the creatures and sketches of the surroundings. It came with a set of colourful vinyl stickers of the dinos that had to be pasted on the outlines. These we divided into 'good fellows' and 'bad fellows'. The *good fellows* were the clumsy plant-eaters like that gentle giant, Brontosaurus while the *bad fellows* were the ravenously fierce meat-eaters fitted with sharp craggy teeth for maximum flesh-ripping and bone-crushing action like that scary-looking fellow, Tyranosaurus Rex! Some others like the three-horned Triceratops or the heavily-armoured Stegosaurus we could not judge and therefore avoided labeling them. We also had a number of comic books including a good many Marvel Comics dealing with superheroes like Captain America, Spider Man and the Incredible Hulk and even supergroups like the Avengers, Invaders and Defenders, and a few Harvey Comics including Sad Sack, a hilarious comic on the life of a low ranking private in the army, Richie Rich, the Poor Little Rich Boy and Caspar the Friendly Ghost. We had most of the *Tintin* series by Herge and much of the *Asterix* series by Goscinny and Uderzo. Though set in different eras, both these works had one thing in common- A young hero, a loyal friend and a faithful little dog.

The Tintin series, about a young Belgian Reporter's heroics in many parts of the world like America and fictional countries like Syldavia captured our fancy like no other, influencing both me and my twin brother Asgar in choosing journalism as a career later in life.

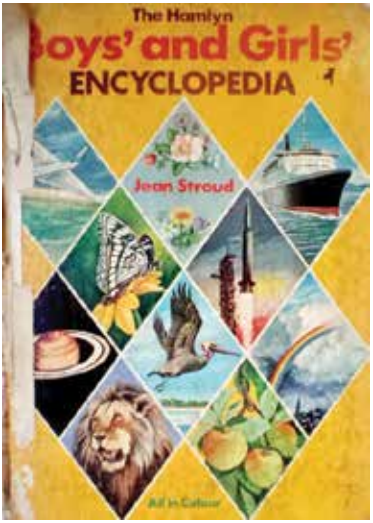


The Wealthy Hippo,
our earliest storybook

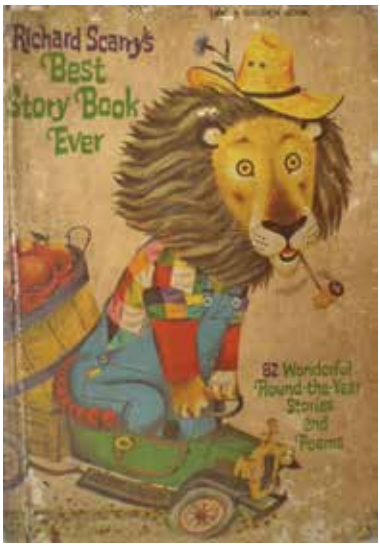
Our little Magic Pen book
by Sandles



Captain Pugwash storybook
still in good condition

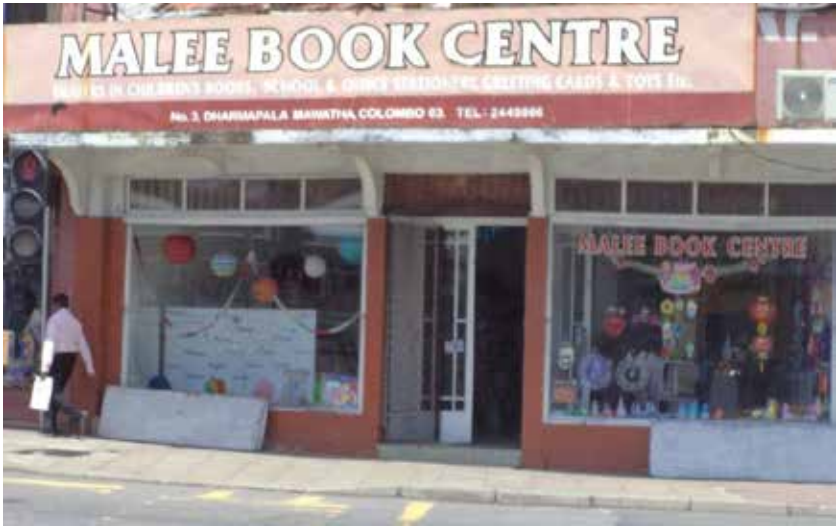


Our Hamlyn Boys and Girls
Encyclopedia



Our Richard Scarry's Best Story Book

Our Baloon Seller storybook. A little playmate book



Malee Book Centre with its large Pilkington windows. This was a favourite haunt of ours specialising in Ladybird books and Marvel comics. It was founded by Swarnamalee Jayasundara in the early 70s on the site of Royal Saloon run by her mother.

CHAPTER 21

Super heroes !

All kids have their fantasies, and we had ours. This came in the form of super heroes, super human beings of various descriptions who fought against the forces of evil, and sometimes even against one another.

Whether adults like it or not, children are fascinated by superheroes, not only because of the exciting action these colourful characters bring to their lives, but more subtly the psychological empowerment it gives them, growing up, as it were, in the shadow of elders towering over them, making them look rather like dwarfs, diminutive and insignificant. Children can not only relate to such superheroes, but may also seek to realize them in one's self. Childish delusions, no doubt, but one that certainly peps them up psychologically. Kids too develop a culture of their own when exposed to such influences.

The superheroes we knew belonged to two universes, so to say, the Marvel and DC universes. DC Comics featuring superheroes like Superman, Batman, Robin and Wonder Woman, was the less favoured one, not only because the range was much less than those of Marvel, but also because they did not reach us as glossy books the way Marvel did. Among the few I recall were the bilingual (English and Sinhala) Superman comics published by Wijeya Publications in collaboration with DC Comics Inc.New York.

The Marvel universe with its myriad of colourful characters such as *Captain America*, *Iron Man*, *Incredible Hulk* and *Vision* was by far our favourite. So obsessed were we with our Marvel heroes that we even assumed their identities, and as our range grew, each one of us took on multiple identities. Thus Asgar became that raging green monster, *Hulk*, I that red-faced Android *Vision* and Altaf the *Silver Surfer*, a gleaming metallic figure who surfed through space on a cosmic-board from the planet Zenn-La. We often debated which of them was the

stronger, though I do not remember ever getting into fisticuffs to prove the point.

These comics produced by Stan Lee appeared as colourful comic books with flimsy but glossy covers. We would avidly follow the exploits of our heroes thrashing their foes within its thirty or so pages interspersed by advertisements advertising all manner of things from spud guns and toy soldiers to x-ray specs, werewolf masks and venus fly traps. The superheroes and even super villains had this rather bad habit of bragging about their powers in speech bubbles while bashing their foes, to impress readers of the extraordinary powers they had. Our super hero craze began sometime in the late 1970s when cousin Rajiv, during one of his family visits, gave us a copy of *The Black Panther* probably picked up in Kenya where he was living with his family. This 1979 comic told the story of an African tribal prince T' Challa, the hero of the story and of his Wakanda tribe who suffered at the hands of a warmonger named Klaw. The villain was after a rare mineral named Vibranium resting in a sacred mound in Wakanda and used it to transform himself into a being of pure solidified sound, while a sonic device fixed to his right hand could turn sound into physical mass. A black gang who had got hold of it created an elephant – a scary looking African Elephant judging by its large ears – formed of solidified sound to fight our hero, now the Black Panther, dolling it up with wings and claws to finish the job.

A couple of months later we spotted similar comics at Malee Book Centre, a well known bookshop at the turn from Turret Road to Galle Road at Colpetty junction as well as at Liberty Pharmacy, a drug store near the cinema of the same name. Soon we were down with the 'Super Bug', following our heroes like Iron man, Spider man and Captain America fighting the dark forces. However none of these captured our imagination as the super teams did, like *The Invaders*, *The Avengers* and *The Fantastic Four*. The Invaders' exploits, set in the World War II era were particularly fascinating. This band of superheroes comprised a core trio of *Captain America*, the virtual leader of

the group whose blue, red and white costume with large star and stripes took after the star-spangled banner; the *Sub-Mariner*, a bare-bodied athletic figure with pointy ears and winged feet clad in nothing but green pants who best fought under water; and the *Torch*, a faceless flaming figure who could put fire to good use. They were joined by others such as the blond British bombshell *Spitfire* and *Miss America*, a petite brunette who seemed to be more of a victim than heroine. They shared one thing in common though, for they all shared a desire to defeat Nazi Germany. One particular Invaders comic I recall featured a blue armour-clad titan with a cross on his chest known as *Iron Cross*; another, a Nazi vampire called *Baron Blood* and yet another a blue-skinned Atlantean named *U-Man* and a lovely but lethal Japanese woman named *Lady Lotus*, all sworn enemies of the Invaders.

Then there were the Avengers who belonged to a more modern era. The group too had as one of its main heroes, *Captain America*, who the story goes had been in suspended animation following his World War II days and had been revived only recently to continue his struggle against evil. He was joined by *Iron Man, Vision, Wasp, the Beast, Scarlet Witch, Wonder Man* and *Ms.Marvel*, though the line-up was not consistent throughout and changed over time. They had as their base the Avengers Mansion which was served by the Butler Jarvis.

The most memorable such comic was their fight against '*The elements of doom*' set in a Russian research facility where some personnel had gone amok, converting people into different chemical elements that had a life of their own, these in turn joining the group to convert yet others. The story captured our fancy given our obsession with chemicals at the time. What was so captivating were the descriptions of the various properties of these elements given by the living elements themselves. Thus Phosphorous, upon exploding himself to down the blue hued Beast brags of himself: "*An element which in its normal state explodes spontaneously on contact with the air…. Whereas in*

my hands the reaction is controlled!". When the Falcon who had joined the Avengers on the assignment thrashes a light green monster, he emits this gaseous stuff with his hands while exclaiming "*Chlorine is a very deadly gas!*". There was so much to learn from these comics of an earlier period, unlike the ones one commonly comes across nowadays. There were of course a few which were rather fantastic, even by today's standards, like the Avengers' struggle against the Absorbing Man who could become anything he touched.

For some reason, Marvel Comics ceased being sold locally and with it our interest in it waned when we were about twelve or so. Thankfully we did not take the craze into our teen years or adulthood as some did, or else we would have likely ended up a very confused lot. This is because with time, the Marvel universe would become increasingly complex, a far cry from the simple superheroes we knew. Alter-egos such as Bruce Banner becoming Hulk and being unaware of their other self were acceptable to us as kids, but basing stories on alternative universes where the same superheroes are said to exist in different universes, simply to justify contradictions in storylines goes against logic.

We never really lost our childish fascination for our heroes, and even in adulthood enjoyed watching Marvel movies as a trio with our kids whenever they showed in local cinemas like *Captain America* which screened at Liberty Cinema and *The Avengers* at Majestic City, as if some part of our superheroic past still lived in us. Interestingly, the storylines in the movies differ considerably from that of the comic books themselves such as the manner in which Captain America is enlisted into the Avengers initiative. Perhaps another instance of an alternative universe!

CHAPTER 22

Chemical Cocktail

Chemicals were nothing strange to my mother's folk. They peddled in it and thrived in it and their fortunes were built on it. The family business, W.H.Hendrick & Sons established by mother's paternal grandfather was a thriving business in the Pettah, then the commercial heart of Colombo. The company was set up in the inter-war years as a supplier of herbal medicines and imported cake ingredients such as raisins, wheat flour and food flavours. It eventually moved into the chemical trade which became its core business. Being based in Bankshall Street in the heart of the Pettah made good business sense for an import-based enterprise. The Street took its name from the vernacular word *bangasala* or storehouses. True to its name, it was one vast row of stores, Hendricks being no exception until it moved its stores to Bandaranayake Mawatha in Hulftsdorp where the present Camway Plaza now stands.

The company was managed by W.H.Hendrick and his five sons, though after his demise it passed into the hands of his second son Bodhidasa, based, it is said on his mother's last wishes. However, even before this, some of the Hendrick Bros had gone their separate ways to carve a niche for themselves in the chemical trade, among them my grandfather W.H.Buddhadasa who went on to join Ceylon Chemical Supliers in Wolfendahl Street, Pettah. Even the family home – The Hague, was not altogether free of the folly, for in the backyard of the house were two colossal metal pans that were used to refine saltpetre. The crude unpurified stuff which would have been imported, or sourced perhaps from the incrustations of some caves in the central hills formed by bat droppings, was melted in these large receptacles placed over a fire fuelled by firewood. A pole or two would be inserted into the nitre broth before being withdrawn, with the purer stuff clinging on to the pole. Left aside for some time, it would crystallize, forming

flakes which were scraped off and sold to fireworks manufacturers as saltpetre, an active ingredient in gunpowder.

We kids took it a bit further. We were obsessed with it, dabbled with it and once almost set our house on fire! One of my earliest memories of our chemical heritage was this huge calendar of W.H.Hendricks with the word *Chemicals* figuring in it hung prominently in the dining room which faced our bedroom. I was around six at the time, and being an avid reader, then as now, used to pronounce the *ch* of chemical like the *ch* sound in *church*. Even later, after I was corrected by mother I could not help but wonder why it had to be pronounced as *kemical* when all the other words starting with *ch* were pronounced differently. Our home language, English, was a most lawless one and had to be spake as it was heard, not read. Such lessons we learnt early in life.

Our fascination with chemicals was however not an outcome of the family business; we hardly had any exposure to it save for the large drab calendar it produced annually adorning the walls of our house year after year – a sight so familiar that we did not think too much of it. Rather the craze began when father presented us with a chemistry set manufactured by Thomas Salter. The kit contained about twenty chemicals in little transparent plastic containers marked with red labels including white crystalline Sodium Thiosulphate, bluish crystals of Copper Sulphate, green Ferrous Sulphate crystals and dull black Iron fillings. It also came with two little red racks with perforations to keep them in. What else it came with I cannot remember, suffice to say that it was sufficient to catalyse our interest in a brave new world of funny stuff. Within a short while, we were busy coming up with ideas to acquire more and more of the stuff to keep and experiment with. We did not have far to look; two doors away, at No.191 lived granduncle Piyasena, a son of W.H.Hendrick who had ventured out on his own to start a modest chemical business in the rear portion of his house.

We were soon collecting the names of new chemicals to add to our collection, like looking up father's *Henley's Twentieth Century Formulas*, a vintage tome, yellowed with age and so brittle that it often crumbled into pieces whenever we leafed through its pages carelessly. Within its eight hundred pages or so were numerous formulae for manufacturing all manner of things; a veritable treasure trove of one-time industrial secrets from adhesives and explosives to paints, preservatives and photography. Culling a few names off it, we would pay granduncle Piyasena a visit in the evenings with the little list. He obliged us for free or a paltry payment. After all, we were regular customers.

Young as we were, we were almost literally turned on by the sights and smells of the old man's chemical collection, not to mention the other wares such as test tubes and litmus paper he dealt in. We had a particular fascination for incendiary or fulminating stuff, and among our earliest acquisitions were silver-grey Magnesium ribbon which burnt with a bright white light; later times saw us acquiring substances like Iodine, whose purple-grey crystals gave out a purplish vapour when heated and Ammonium Dichromate, orange-coloured crystals that fulminated like a fiery volcano when lit. We also had a penchant for liquids with strong noxious odours, like Ammonia, a whiff of which when inhaled virtually knocked one out with its sharp overpowering odour that stifled one's breath; or Amyl alcohol which exhaled a pleasant banana aroma; or this yellowish liquid that bore a name like Ammonium Sulphide and smelled like rotten eggs or as if somebody nearby had just passed wind, the kind of thing that would have been better off in a stink bomb.

These chemicals, numbering nearly a hundred at its peak, we stored in containers of various shapes and sizes. These were generally recycled glass bottles like the glass injection vials with grey rubber stoppers into which we shoved in the solids or the larger brown hairtonic bottles with black plastic cap like a chef's hat into which we poured in the liquids, so that the collection looked like a mini apothecary. We labeled the bottles by pasting

little pieces of paper penned with the name of the chemical or its formula such as HCL for Hydrochloric acid with a piece of *sellotape*. Acids like Nitric, Sulphuric and Hydrochloric, which we were given only after promising we would not dabble with them, we carefully stowed away, only to be seen and admired in their brown glass bottles. We even bottled ordinary table salt, passing it off as Sodium Chloride.

We also tapped granduncle Justin, grandma's younger brother who worked as a watcher at the stores of W.H.Hendrick's in Srimath Bandaranayake Mawatha, Hulftsdorp, run by Piyasena's elder brother Bodhidasa and his son Lakshman. The man supplied us with Caustic Soda which we used to produce Hydrogen by dissolving it in water and adding pieces of Aluminium to power our lighter-than-air balloons, and light yellow Sulphur rolls which we loved to pulverize and burn so that it gave out a blue flame and emitted strong sulfurous fumes. We often wished we could put it to better use, especially to manufacture gunpowder, after reading somewhere that all it took to manufacture the explosive was Sulphur, Charcoal and Saltpetre. We had Sulphur, and Charcoal too was freely available; the only thing that was lacking was Saltpetre or Pottassium Nitrate to give it the pep. Try as we did to lay our hands on the stuff, we could not get it, perhaps because our suppliers knew better what we were up to.

But we did have the raw materials for a more potent explosive, Nitroglycerine – Nitric acid, Sulphuric acid and Glycerine, enough to blow the house to kingdom come. The sad part is though we knew the liquid explosive comprised of these three things, we did not know how to set about it. We knew the power of the explosive though, for a James Bond cartoon strip that appeared in *The Sun* newspaper of the time – late 1983- showed a woman warning Bond not to step any closer as she displayed a test tube of what she claimed was Nitroglycerine. Later a house was shown exploding because of it.

We had our share of fun with our little collection. One we really enjoyed doing was placing a smidgin of purple Condys

(Pottassium Permanganate) crystals on to a wad of cotton wool and pouring over it a few drops of Glycerine. Within less than a minute, the stuff would smoke, giving out a rather sweet smell, before bursting into flames. Three substances commonly used in medicine being turned into an explosive in a short spell of time, much like a time bomb; we were certainly privileged to be privy to this rare piece of knowledge picked up from granduncle Justin who in turn had learnt about it from one Aryadasa, a distant kinsman and storekeeper at W.H.Hendrick's chemical stores. It is this sort of thing that pyromaniacs would be burning to get their hands on, to make a secret of their trade. Fortunately we did not belong to this category of people who needed a blaze to turn them on. A little conflagration every now and then sufficed to keep us content.

We did try out a few genuine experiments though, inspired little doubt by the vain attempts of the alchemists of old who sought to transmute baser metals into gold. One such was an attempt undertaken in all seriousness to produce phosphorous by piddling into a jam jar filled with sand in which we had buried the silver linings of dried sprats. We figured that in a couple of days, we would be able to produce a glowing substance, and when we thought the time was right, conveyed it to the darkest spot known to us, the servant's bathroom at the rear of the house, to see for ourselves. We certainly did not notice that glow we anticipated but took it in good spirits like the alchemists of yore. We also attempted to produce an alcohol from the yellow pulp of the *varaka*, the ripe drupe of the Jackfruit by bottling a bit and burying it underground. Worse was to come with the *sepia*, the dark purplish ink taken from the cuttlefish which we stored in a test tube in the hope of isolating something or other, only to find a week or two later a couple of white maggots wriggling about, which is strange given that I had sealed the glass tube with a rubber stopper.

One of our simpler, more practical experiments turned out to be a real bloomer. Our parents were away at the auctions and so was the rest of the household, except for granduncle Justin. We

were experimenting with this Bunsen burner we had just improvised with a long steel tube filled with petrol and a crumb of charcoal for a wick. We were thrilled when it lit nicely, but not for long. One of us – don't remember who - accidentally tipped it over, displacing the piece of charcoal and spreading the burning petrol over the square blue table we had so callously placed it on. The tongues of flames leapt up in fits of fury as if to throttle us and it took us several blazing minutes to quench it, but not before it had taken a good chunk off the tabletop's blue rubbery coating, leaving an ugly scar about the size of a plate encrusted with a hideous black at its rims.

We could not keep the fiery ordeal a secret for long, for granduncle Justin had witnessed the ordeal. When father arrived a while afterwards to stretch his limbs out or take a catnap, he was more jumpy than usual and bellowed *Ghany, Ghany, look what these boys have done, they set the table on fire!* Father, visibly annoyed, gave us each a knock on the head to bring us to our senses and that was the end of the matter. No trial of any sort and no questions asked. We could heave a sigh of relief that our happy chemical days were not yet over. We needed some time to psychologically recover from the mishap and a major consolation came from the life story of that famous American inventor Thomas Alva Edison about whom we had read in a book in the Children's Section of the Colombo Public Library. The story went that the young Edison was so enamoured of chemicals that he set up a small lab in the baggage car of a train he had been given as a paper boy around the age of 12. He ended up setting the car on fire, a result of one of his experiments. The conductor was so irked that he struck the young lad on the head and kicked him off the train. We were in great company after all!

CHAPTER 23

In the Army

We Hussein boys were known by some wags as *The Three Musketeers*, and not without reason, for we were a fairly bellicose bunch, a gun-totting trio constantly battling perennially appearing imaginary foes, which made it all the more exciting as there were as many as we could conjure up - *the more the merrier!*

Our earliest exposure to the army came in the form of toy soldiers, miniature plastic figurines of finely sculpted soldiers on pedestals which were very common those days. These came in two sizes, the larger ones about 5 cm in height and the smaller ones about 3 cm. They came in diverse colours which we assigned to different nations; green for the Yankees; grey for the Jerries; yellow for the Tommies and light brown for the Japs. Though a natural enough choice based on the uniforms of the World War II armies, we were mistaken in at least one set, for the yellow soldiers we took to be Brits were very likely meant to represent the German troops of the Afrika Korps that fought so heroically in battles like El Alamein.

The wanton warmongers we were, we took immense pleasure lining up the dummies in battle array and pitting them against one another, using our little hands to move them on to kill and die. Also contributing to the war effort were plastic vehicles such as a yellow tank we took to be British and green jeeps we considered American. A die-cast Dinky Ferret armoured Car and Matchbox branded miniature metal military vehicles such as a personnel carrier, armoured jeep and rolamatic armoured car that conveyed a soldier with binoculars doing a 360 degree turn as the wheels moved, provided additional support. Stage support came in forms like a groovy, grey, plastic makeshift fort with interlocking parts. Somewhat later, when we had mastered chemical warfare, we used to carpet a wooden cake board with purple Condys crystals, upon which we would place toy

soldiers. We sure made short work of them, bombarding them from high with hydrogen peroxide, liberally dropping the clear, water-like liquid from a dropper. The falling drops would burst with a whiff upon contact with the crystals, throwing down the hapless soldiers. The knockout gas was actually a combination of steam and oxygen, but so vigorous was the reaction of the liquid acting on the crystals that it threw the soldiers off balance. Looking back, I'm glad we did n't take it any further, or who knows, we might have ended up being enlisted into the chemical corps of some over-anxious despot, one of whom shared our surname.

We also loved the war films to which our parents dragged us once in a blue moon, the earliest being the 1977 Joseph Levine production *A Bridge too far* that showed at a local cinema such as Liberty, Majestic or Savoy. One scene I distinctly remember even to this day was the victorious German Commander offering his British captives *schokolade* – chocolate! Another was the machine gunning of parachuting troopers before they could make landfall. It seemed so unfair. Like sitting ducks they were, but in the air. However we were too restless to content ourselves with letting these fleeting moments in celluloid pass by. We wanted to be in the action as well.

Soon we were putting on military fatigues complete with gun holsters and black gumboots. Asgar and I being twins wore identical dark green T-shirts and had mother stitch us light green pyjamas to which we added other accoutrements like belt with pouch and three silver bullets, walkie talkie, water bottle and holster complete with gun, all in supple green plastic except the gun which was also green, but harder than the rest. These came as gift packs which we noticed peering through the large Pilkington show window of Malee Book Centre in Colpetty and lost no time getting mother to buy. Altaf had a light blue shirt and somewhat darker marine blue trousers, his head capped with a still darker blue, almost black, beret. He was supposed to be in the Air Force, armed with a hardy blue plastic machine gun that shot soft red plastic bullets.

There were also occasions when we went back to the grand old days of the Roman Empire. The Romans were not depicted in a favourable light in a set of comics we had, Asterix the Gaul, but they certainly were in our Holy Book, the Qur'an which has a chapter named after them, *Al Room* or 'The Romans'. It prophesied the victory of the Christian Romans over the Persians, adding that the believers would rejoice on that day. The prophecy was fulfilled.

However it was not religious sympathy but their ornate metal and tunic martial garb that made us throw in our lot with the Roman legions. It all started with a Ladybird book on 'Arms and Armour' which showed a Roman legionary looking swell with his rectangular metal shield. This work of art we strove to craft using hard cardboard. In the centre of it we fixed with glue a bit of hemispherical plastic and blazoned it blue. To go with it we wrought a short sword of wood to imitate the Roman weapon as best we could. For the Lorica armour that fitted as metal strips around the legionary's chest, we devised a coat of cream-coloured straps of vulvanised rubber, and the helmet too we made of the same gear, with a plastic bowl gently tucked beneath it to fit into our skulls so dear. Such were the times we were sometimes lost in when our childish fantasies got the better of us.

Guns we loved as all boys do. These were imported popguns turned out of plastic that came in various shapes and sizes, very likely from countries like Hong Kong. Some shot red plastic bullets quite empty in the centre, and others, plastic darts crafted out of ridged shafts tipped with light red rubber suckers that held on to the object shot at by a simple suction process. The hollows of the plastic bullets we sometimes filled with sand before pulling the trigger. On one occasion we tried the stunt on our great-grandfather *pappa*. Giving no indication what was to come, one of us stole up towards the old man and shot him point blank. "*Myra, Myra!*" he cried out at the top of his voice to his daughter and she rushed to her father's defence chiding us incessantly. She probably thought we would grow up to be

assassins having no qualms even taking down helpless old men. More cautious we were with the ones with the red rubber suckers as we were told this horrid tale of a little fellow who had been shot at with it. It had got stuck in his eye and when they tried to remove it, pop came out his eyeball with it. A tall tale spun by mother no doubt.

Later times saw the advent of what we called *cap guns*, little toy guns based on the flintlock principle which had at its upper end towards the handle, a metal plate or frizzen to which we would attach *caps*, blots of shock-sensitive explosive material cosily wrapped in red paper. No sooner had the trigger been pulled than a bolt or hammer placed in front of the plate snapped forward, striking the plate and exploding the cap. Another, more refined type that came somewhat later was a similar gun with a hammer to which was attached the caps that came in little red plastic casings. When the hammer snapped forward upon the pull of the trigger, it would strike the plate or frizzen that faced it, exploding the cap. We also loved these little plastic rockets into whose warheads one could slip in *paper caps* and hurl them on to a wall or some solid surface, upon hitting which they would give out a loud bang.

But one operation we took a bit too far. That was when we attempted to torpedo a young guest. Asgar and I had fallen out with granduncle Justin's daughter Anushi, and to get even we hatched this daring plan to strike terror into her heart by fixing a firecracker to the underside of our skating board and sending it her way. As we lit the fuse and took aim, hurtling it towards her, she darted, obviously having suspected our devious intentions from our hushed tones and sinister looks which we could not mask as easily as the squib.

Bang - or *Da Dong* as our intended victim would have said - it exploded smack in the centre of the front hall, drawing its inmates like an implosion, their shell-shocked countenances and the verbal barrage that followed sufficing to impress upon us that this time we had taken our war a bit too far.

Army boys at the gates of Accha House
The little fellow in the middle is in the Air Force

At the beachhead fronting the traumdorf, Sihina Beach Villlage

All that remains of our army toys. Matchbox Stoat, Personnel Carrier and Swamp Rat, green plastic tanks and yellow plastic toy soldier we took to be a Brit

CHAPTER 24

Little little things

Many are the little, little things kids do. Some are forgotten over time and some linger on in one's mind. Little things they may be, but they matter a lot to little ones, opening up the world to them in ways one can never imagine.

In our earlier years, it were things turned out of paper origami-style - flying paper planes and sailing paper boats - that we liked. Over time we switched to the hardier manufactured stuff, little plastic dumdum rockets with a metal pin containing caps that exploded upon impact when flung on to the ground and miniature metallic boats which when lit at the wick placed in its centre and placed in a pool of water would propel forward for a short while before coming to a halt with a splutter or two.

In still later years, bored with the existing gadgets, we tried our hands at rocketry, devising mini-missiles that unhappily did not take off as we hoped they would. These were slim cylindrical things with pointed heads made from pens and filled with gunpowder retrieved from firecrackers purchased from the stalls at Colpetty junction or recovered from unexploded squibs that lay scattered among the paper debris just after the New Year. Breaking open the firecrackers known as *ratigna* which looked like little white rats with their tail-like fuse, we would extract from their innards the silver powder. Though no difficult task, it was nevertheless a costly affair as it took many squibs to yield a fair quantity of powder. It was a pity we did not pursue the lead we got from aunt Faizoona during a visit to Matara when she revealed a rumour then current that inside some hidden storeroom in the bowels of the Galle Fort were kegs of gunpowder left behind by the Dutch when they abandoned the Fort. Though enticing enough, the story she followed it with - that some men who had ventured in to the magazine with matches or candles had been blown to smithereens - forestalled any ideas we may have had of foraying into any hidden chamber

of the fort, that is, if it did have a few as was rumoured. We had a few fans nevertheless, including some young Tamil men who lived in an annex near granduncle Sumanadasa's house who would go to the extent of calling one another just to watch our pyrotechnic antics.

We also produced something like hot air balloons taught us by granduncle Justin, though these were not a patch on the high-flying taffeta bags flown by the Montgolfier Brothers. This we did by forcing in chunks of Caustic Soda into a bottle with a small mouth, adding to it water to dissolve it, on top of which we would drop little pieces of aluminium obtained from discarded junk, cigarette foil wrappers or the whitish low denomination coins that were then circulating to catalyse a reaction that would in a few minutes produce hydrogen gas. The balloon we would fix to the mouth of the bottle which would soon start spewing out the hot gas, expanding the balloon just as if one were blowing it. These balloons, filled as they were with the lighter-than-air hydrogen gas, would, once tied at the orifice, tend to go upwards rather than be drawn down by gravity or pushed about by the wind. When released inside the house they would scurry to hug the ceiling as if clinging on to dear life. They did n't have to really, for we would n't harm a fly.

Shadow play formed a welcome diversion at Accha House in times of blackouts when little white wax candles whose flames waved with the wind took the place of our steadier light bulbs. My favourite was forming the shadow puppet of a camel by placing between the candlelight and the wall my hand with the fingers bent horizontally except for the thumb that went up to form the ear and the little finger that moved downwards in imitation of the beast's wide open mouth. We also tried our luck at 'magic shows', especially after little brother Altaf received a book titled something like *Magic for Kids* for his birthday which was celebrated at aunt Fairoze's place at Stratford Avenue in Kirulapone along with that of her daughter Fazreena as both of them shared the same mid-September b'day. The book whose cover was adorned with a picture of a boy and

girl dressed in black capes and top hats against a white background, contained a number of sweep of a hand, wave of a wand type magic tricks little kids could engage in - certainly not of the sinister kind the dark arts are concocted of, but rather the more innocuous sort grounded in scientific phenomena.

One of these was lifting a cube of ice by tipping an end of a string on it and tossing a dab of table salt over it, after which it could be lifted up with the string fastened tightly to the ice. The trick worked on a simple scientific principle, namely the fact that salt melts ice by lowering its freezing point; the melting water flows off the cube and flushes some of the salt away while the lower salt concentration on the top raises the freezing point again so that the water refreezes, trapping the string and bonding it to the ice in the process. In later times mother gifted us a magic set that worked by way of deception. One was the disappearing coin trick which involved this rectangular pink-coloured device with an indent for a coin. The coin-usually a local 50 cents piece-was placed in it and a subtle jiggle let it slip into another slot deep inside unknown to the beholder, who would be led to believe that the coin had mysteriously disappeared. Another flick the other way would retrieve the coin much to his or her astonishment.

In later times when we had acquired a little chemical knowledge I devised this ‘magic show’ which involved the use of Phenolphthalein, a PH indicator that is normally colourless, but turns purple when an alkaline substance is added to it. First I would place at the bottom of a test tube, a bit of Caustic Soda solution imperceptible to the eye and displaying the tube as a clean one, would add to it from another test tube the colourless Phenolphtalein solution, when lo and behold, it would instantaneously turn purple. I would again pour the purplish solution to another test tube, this time laced with an acid, whereupon it would immediately return to its original colourless form.

Among the other fads we indulged in was writing in 'invisible ink' which was sold by vendors in little glass bottles outside school. We would apply the colourless aqueous solution to a piece of paper by means of an ekel taken from the midrib of the coconut leaf or similar pointed object and let it dry till absolutely nothing could be seen; but as soon as we held it over a heat source such as candle flame, lo and behold, it would reveal, as if by magic, the hidden characters in dark brown.

The liquid was probably a mild acid, for we would discover shortly afterwards that the trick worked equally well with lime juice which, when heated, oxidized in the air, turning a dark brown. One cannot also easily forget the 'magic wax', a yellowish waxy substance sold outside the school gates which had only to be rubbed onto a piece of paper, which when applied on to some printed material such as a comic strip and scratched, would copy it like a mirror image. We often tried it on the regular picture stories like J.D.Lawrence' *007* or Avenell & Romero's *Axa* that appeared in newspapers such as the Sun and also on movie notices advertised in the papers.

CHAPTER 25

All Game

We three merry fellows loved play. We had home for a playpen and one another for constant playmates. Classroom type formal study we looked upon with scorn as there was so much one could do than being cooped up in a room and being drilled on subjects one was not interested in.

Our school environment little doubt contributed to the attitude, plucked out as we were from that fairy playground called Bishop's in our tender years and unceremoniously dumped into Mahanama College, a conservative Sinhala Buddhist affair, to have our secondary education Almost everything about the school was drab and boring, from the daily assemblies in the mornings where the boys of all ages had to line up to chant Buddhist stanzas - during which Muslims like us kept silent - and listen to a principal who simply loved to hear his own voice. So utterly boring was the entire culture of the school that it even rubbed off on its extra-curricular activities. Even the Boy Scouts we joined for a few weeks was monotonous as ever with the lady teacher in charge more interested in getting the boys to line up and hold their hands out to see for herself if they had trimmed their nails than instructing them on how to pitch a tent or make a camp fire.

Little wonder we looked upon our entry to Stafford College, an English medium school located in the plush Cinnamon Gardens Ward of Colombo, from the Eighth Grade, as a welcome change. We were schooled in this country manor like building with a lovely porch that led to a creaky old flight of wooden steps with the air of a haunted house such as one finds in the movies, so different from the imposing yet faceless building that stands in its stead today. Boys in white trousers and girls in blue pinafores added further colour to school life. And they all spoke our language.

Here was a place where study and play went hand in glove, sometimes even beyond reasonable limits, such as in English literature class. That was when we were reading *Wuthering Heights.* A naughty classmate named Shane seated next to me drew a sketch he titled *Adam's Apple*. It showed the father of man reaching out for the forbidden fruit tantalizingly dangling from a bough of a tree which oddly enough happened to be the testicle of a monkey sitting atop it. The teacher Ms.Fonseka was so aghast on discovering the sacrilegious scrap of paper that she almost lost her head. *Cheeee…* she started and yelled and screeched at the poor fellow like a banshee, a combined brew of anger and shame contorting her face in full view of the class, for she was a tall graceful woman. The culprit looked on sheepishly as she berated him mercilessly. The prankster later went on to join a musical band his brother Aldrin founded called *Cardinal's Outburst*!

We were first introduced to ball games by mother's cousin Gihan who lived next door and once took the liberty to visit us little fellows when our parents were away. We were about five years old then. He showed off these lovely little balls and asked whether we would like to play a game. We jumped at the idea and had soon learnt to play marbles. These were the larger cat's eye marbles that came in various colours embedded in a ball of solid glass that were so popular with the kids of the seventies.

Cricket, father's favourite sport, which he tried to foist on us, was a different ball game altogether. Indeed so infatuated was he with the game that he named us after cricketers, me being named after that dashing cricketer from the subcontinent Asif Iqbal. Though we liked playing softball cricket with our friends, we certainly did not share his keenness for the organized game with leather ball grown-ups used to play. Even today I fail to see why grown-up men should, in front of thousands of cheering spectators including women, go chasing after a ball if they already had a couple. It is understandable if Hitler loved it as he is said to have had only one. As a well known song sung by British Tommies to the tune of the Colonel Bogey March went:

Hitler has only got one ball
Goering has two but very small
Himmler's is somewhat similar
But poor Goebbels has no balls at all

Father thought otherwise. He dragged us to regular cricket classes in the hope that at least one of us would emerge a top gun. Needless to say, the grueling practices in the sultry afternoons, with the sun beating down on one like a cop's baton was no fun. Batting and bowling practices came only once in a while since all had to do their turn, while on the field it was still worse when all that was expected of us was fielding like numbskulls under the blistering sun. We were far too hyperactive for this kind of thing and it told in our negative attitude towards the game.

Father got us the finest coaches of the day. First it was Dooland Buultjens, a seasoned cricketer and top umpire at the Nomad's Grounds opposite Victoria Park where the Nelum Pokuna Arts Centre now stands; then it was Muttiah Devaraj, father's good friend and one-time cricket captain of Zahira College at the Oval Grounds, now more commonly known as P.Saravanamuttu Stadium; and thereafter it was Ranil Abeynaike, a first class Ceylon Cricketer, at the Sinhalese Sports Club. So utterly boring were these practice sessions that I don't remember much about them, but for a few interesting incidents that for some reason clung on to my memory. Our Nomads days stand out for two incidents I recall to this day. One was when our coach, an oft-swearing, balding, mustachioed Burgher gentleman named Buultjens inquired on our first day of practice whether we were wearing underpants or *ball guards*, those unmanly V-shaped plastic props fit only for pussies batsmen were supposed to wear to guard their balls. Despite our replying in the affirmative, he did not take our word for it and coming over pulled our shorts forward from the topmost elastic

band to satisfy himself that we were indeed equipped with the gear. We sure were and he took our word from that day onwards.

Another was when we lost our cricketing gear. Father was furious. That was too much for him to bear. While driving us home he stopped at a cane shop in Slave Island and having returned home he rushed in before any of us and stationed himself at the doorway. As we came in he gave us each a whack on our butts. It was the first occasion he ever caned us. It was also the last.

Softball cricket we played in the evenings with bats and rubber balls that came in a variety of colours, usually red. Anushal, mother's cousin who was almost our age and who lived next door joined the three of us, making a foursome and so there we were playing the game, either in his spacious front garden or in the lane behind our house that opened out to Turret Road, much to the annoyance of our neighbours like the fair but irritable Doctor Cader and Tissa, the tall, bald caretaker of the Carmen Gunasekera Montessori. The ball sometimes went over to their well-kept gardens and we would clamber over the boundary wall to retrieve it, often disturbing the foliage. Sometimes when the good doctor irked by our constant annoyance refused to toss the ball over, we would burst out loud:

Doctor Cader, the Proctor's father
Doctor Cader, the Proctors father

Tissa too found us to be a constant thorn, but only because he had the added burden of tossing the ball over to us. Though his garden was well kept, the ball often found its way to the dense clumps of yellow bamboos closer to the lane which, like his bald head, did not need much tending.

Being of a bellicose spirit, we also took to more aggressive combat sport, from which father too got a kick. First it was *karate.* We were only about six or seven years when we enrolled in Grandmaster Bonnie Roberts classes conducted at the Girls Friendly Society where father also had his auctions. Our trainer,

a whiskered, ruddy looking man from the eastern town of Kalmunai was a good martial artist in the best Japanese tradition and we would often hear the floorboards of the hall resonate with a thud as grown-ups were thrown about. We would have too, had not our parents put a stop to it within a a couple of months, fearing perhaps that one black-belted brat in the brood might get too hot to handle.

A couple of years later father caught the boxing bug and passed it on to us, especially to Asgar and me, who being of the same age, could, equipped with boxing gloves, afford to trade punches without any scruples. A favourite punch father loved was what he called the 'upper cut', a vertical rising punch to the opponent's chin. We could not go on pummeling one another indefinitely and so father got us a great punching bag, which suspended from above, would swing to and fro, while we let go, punching it left, right and centre. It probably brought back fond memories of his teen years when he and his friend Nihal Cassian Ranjith were gifted with a couple of old boxing gloves by Anton John, a short dark fellow who lived down Nelson Lane, Colpetty. The two would spar at their friend Tilakasiri's garden at Carmel Road nearby and when they got tired they would use a yellow sandbag.

Father was so besotted with the sport that it seemed at one time even to supersede his love for cricket. His favourite boxing hero was Muhammad Ali, the heavyweight champion from Louisville, Kentucky who had become a Muslim and even given up his earlier name of Cassius Clay for a more Muslim sounding name. He often used to describe how Ali would tire his opponent by his fancy footwork before delivering the knockout for which he used the slogan *fly like a butterfly and sting like a bee*. Although father was no avid reader, I remember this compendious yellow-jacketed book, a pictorial history of boxing profusely illustrated sitting near the head of his bed. It traced the bloody beginnings of the sport from pugilism, its now obsolete predecessor where the contestants fought one another bare-knuckled without boxing gloves to cushion the impact.

Father, the fitness freak he was, or perhaps because he missed out on the horse races he loved so much, also took us outdoors to run against one another, presenting the winner a trifling gift of money or sometimes a mere pat on the head. If in the mornings, this was at the Galle Face Green, which was then even less green than today. He would get the three of us into his car and drive us to the spot. We would take up our positions towards the northern end nearer the old English cannons, keeping close to the promenade, and upon father's hand signal, would run as fast as we could southward toward him.

These were not very long runs as we had to see father's upraised hand quickly moving downwards before we could take off. Had he placed himself at the starting point and said *get ready, set, go!* he would not have been able to see the winner. He had to be physically present at the finishing line, which was where he was, he himself being the finishing line, so to say. If in the evenings it was at the sports ground at independence Square which unlike Galle Face had a circular track and meant longer runs. It was in the course of one such race that I was suddenly seized with a burst of energy somewhat midway, which came like a rush of wind. Within a matter of seconds it drove me to victory. Father was thrilled and when I told him how I felt like *Six Million Dollar Man* when I got that sudden boost he remarked that I had something called *stamina*, whatever that meant.

Father could not content himself with our outracing one another. Competition was most welcome and it came in the form of mother's cousin Chamira who visited during the holidays. A village lad who had grown up in Matara, he romped to victory, only to be handsomely rewarded with cash by father. He once brought home a tin of condensed milk, *tin-kiri*, with which mother treated us all to a delicious pudding of her own making like the old song goes:

You find the milk and I'll find the flour
And we'll have a pudding in half an hour

We also devised a number of warlike outdoor games. During our Oval days when we were coached by father's good friend and Schoolmate, Muttiah Devaraj, we would, at the end of the practice or during a break or two, go over to the surrounding area overrun with weeds. There we would pluck these stalks of wild fountain grass that terminated in a cluster of prickly little balls that stuck on to one's clothing like a leech. Returning home with a considerable stockpile, we would tarry until evening when we would use them as darts in a game of hot pursuit around the neighbourhood, where hiding or lying in ambush in the dark, or simply facing off in a frontal attack, we would hurl the darts at one another, the victor being he who flung the first dart that stuck on to his opponent's clothing.

Another game we played was by forming our fingers into a catapault. That was by placing on the tips of thumb and forefinger a couple of rubber bands, one linked to the other by a knot. With it we would shoot little V-shaped projectiles made by folding square or rectangular pieces of cardboard and bending these into two. They went quite a distance and hurt when they hit.

We also enjoyed playing board games with dice and counters whenever we had resident visitors at Accha House such as mother's little cousins Chammi and Anushi. There was *Snakes & Ladders*, *Ludo* and a somewhat similar board game called *Super Track* which came with our *Superman Giant Games Book,* an old bumper issue containing a story about Superman thrashing a hobo and a few board games that probably dated back to the 1960s but had somehow fallen to our hands perhaps as a result of the auctions. The game called for four players representing Superman, his close friend Jimmy Olsen and his arch foes, the baldheads Luthor and Brainiac.

At Umma House it was usually cards played with uncle Fazly and aunt Shanaz, the younger and more playful members of our paternal Ghany clan. The game they taught us was called *War*, which went down well with our bellicose spirit. It involved

shuffling the pack of cards and distributing it around between two to four players, each of whom would reveal the topmost card in his stack, the player with the highest value taking it all and adding these to his lot.

If at least two of the cards being the highest were of equal value, the players would go to ‘war’, each laying down four cards and the one with the highest aggregate taking the rest for himself, it being understood that besides the usual numbers of 1 to 10, Jack was 11, Queen 12, King 13 and Ace 14. The game was played till a player collected all the cards to win the war.

CHAPTER 26

The Magic Tube

Television was introduced to the country only in April 1979 by private entrepreneur Shan Wickremasinghe who set up ITN. Within a couple of years a state-run television corporation Rupavahini also entered the scene, supported by the Japanese who helped set up a transmission station here to sell their TV sets that enjoyed a wide demand worldwide. It was not long before Jap tellies, both in monochrome and colour, such as Unic, Sony, Sanyo and National found their way to the country. No sooner than they made their debut here, father rushed to purchase a set, giving Accha House the distinction of being one of the very first households in the country to have a telly at the time.

Prior to this, our main form of visual entertainment were the occasional movies like *Towering Inferno*, *North Sea Hijack*, *Star Wars* and *A Bridge too Far* that showed at cinemas like Liberty in Colpetty, Majestic in Bambalapitiya and Savoy in Wellawatte. Fortunately for us, our parents were still movie buffs in spite of seeing the 1973 American horror movie *The Exorcist* at a local cinema such as the Savoy in the late 1970s. The film, which told the story of a little girl possessed by a demon named *Pazoozoo*, so scared the daylights out of them that they slept that night with the lights on. We were lucky it did not spoil the fun for us.

Our only other source of visual enjoyment were the film reels of silent movies like *Charlie Chaplin* father used to play from an old projector on to a wall of our bedroom after having switched off the lights. Huddled together on our bumper bed we would enjoy the somewhat grainy vintage images from a bygone era. But television was something novel. It had both visual and

audio components and gave us a totally new experience. Little wonder it was called *The Magic Tube* at the time. It would eventually come to be known as *The Idiot Box* by a more concerned older generation worried about their children's TV addiction. But back then nobody gave it much thought.

Although initially confined to a solitary broadcaster or channel going by the name of *Independent Television Network*, it was not before long, by about early 1982 that another channel by the name of *Rupavahini* came into existence. Both of them enjoyed a monopoly in the domestic telecasting business throughout our childhood and early teens. The television times then as now were well thought of, though in the early stages they lasted only three hours from 6.00-9.00 pm before airing from 5.00 pm and going on till 11.00 pm a couple of years later. Cartoons and educational programmes meant for children were telecast in the evenings around 5.00-7.00 pm, followed by the more adventurous stuff that would appeal to teenagers and young adults around 7.00-8.00 pm followed again by the more adult-oriented stuff from 8.00 to 9.00 pm and beyond.

The first TV set we had was a monochrome black & white box which gave out rather grainy images and which in later times was replaced by a larger and clearer colour set. Interestingly some of the earliest English programmes dished out to us were stale old stuff including black & white series' like *Mister Ed* and *McHale's Navy* aired in the West several years earlier. The earliest kids show was the popular American children's TV series *Sesame Street* with its opening theme of "*Can you tell me how to get to Sesame Street*" and its host of unforgettable muppet characters like Ernie, Bert, Rover, Oscar, Snuffy, Big Bird and The Count. Another kids' series we loved was *Worzel Gummidge*, a British programme about the antics of a living scarecrow named Worzel and his lady love, a snobbish lifesize doll named Aunt Sally.

Then there were the cartoons telecast in the evenings around 5.00 pm almost seven days a week. Among the earliest such cartoons were *The Flintstones*, about a couple that lived in the

Stone Age with dinos for pets and vehicles, and *Fang Face*, about a chap who becomes a wolf-like creature upon seeing the moon or a picture of it, followed later by the Russian production *You Just Wait* about a mischievous wolf constantly chasing after a hare he could never make a meal of. Others that came later included *Hans Christian Anderson Fairy Tales*, *Woody Woodpecker*, *Road Runner*, *Scooby Doo*, *He Man* and the *Popeye Show*, the last of which always ended with a moral lesson for us kids. We also loved *Dostara Hondahita*, Dr.Doolittle dubbed into Sinhala by Titus Totawatte, so well done indeed that we could not believe that the original was in English. Even the songs such as *Be kiyala be* (Can't say Can't) were so captivating that I would remember its tune and lyrics even more than thirty years later.

It was the Beatles cartoon series that had the greatest impact on us as it introduced us to the joys of music. Not that we had not heard music before, but this was something new. It had within a few weeks of its appearance given us a bout of what we would later learn was something called *Beatlemania* that first appeared in the mid-1960s and affected millions of young people in the West. The bug we caught was as bad as it almost knocked us out of our senses for a couple of years, making us behave rather like young lunatics, bursting into song for no apparent reason and striving to imitate as far as possible the fab four who were the cause of the pandemic in the first place.

Curiously some of the earliest programmes telecast on local TV then were outdated by a decade or two, but still held their own with viewers, who, exposed to this kind of thing only recently, thought of them as something novel. For instance, *The Lone Ranger*, a cowboy type series featuring a masked Zorro-like character who fights injustice in the old American West with his American Indian companion Tonto had been telecast in the US almost three decades earlier, in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Both *Mr. Ed* about a talking horse, and *Mc.Hale's Navy* about the misadventures of a wacky PT boat crew in the Pacific during World War II led by Lieutenant Commander Quinton

Mc.Hale were aired in the US in the early 1960s. *Baa Baa Black Sheep*, the story of a misfit squadron of fighter pilots in the South Pacific led by Pappy Boyington during the Second World War was more recent as it had aired in the US in the late 1970s, bringing it closer to the time we watched it.

Within a short spell of time, science fiction series also made their appearance, especially those dealing with space or time travel. One such was *The Time Tunnel*, aired in the US in the mid-1960s but which reached us only in the early 1980s. It told the story of a time machine, part of Operation Tic Toc which could send people back in time. *Star trek*, another American production, told the tale of the crew of the Starship Enterprise led by Captain James Kirk whose mission was to 'Boldly go where no man has gone before'. Though an old series, having been aired in the US in the late 1960s, we found it quite fascinating.

More recent and needless to say in colour was *The Planet of the Apes,* though a trifle outdated as it was originally aired in the US in the mid-1970s. It told the frightening story of two astronauts who encounter a time warp and find themselves in a future earth dominated by intelligent apes who have enslaved humans. *V* aired in the US in 1983 which was also about the time we viewed it told the struggle of human resistance fighters against a race of aliens simply known as the Visitors who appear human, but are actually carnivorous reptilian extra-terrestrials bent on subjugating the planet and harvesting humans as food. Those were the times when space travel was thought to be the future, but within less than a decade the hype had died down as earthlings realized that living in outer space was not such a fantastic thing after all and the much talked about space age became outdated before it could be made into better fare.

Little wonder later programmes tended to be more grounded in reality. Among those we enjoyed were *Six Million Dollar Man*, the exploits of a former astronaut Steve Austin who is severely injured in a plane crash and fitted with bionic implants that give him superhuman vision and running ability but comes

with a princely sum, hence his title; a spin-off *Bionic Woman*, had Jaime Sommers, Steve's lover, fitted with bionic parts following a parachuting accident as the heroine. Yet another interesting adventure series was *Night Rider*, about a high-tech modern-day knight named Michael Knight who fights crime with the help of an advanced and intelligent car.

Among other interesting programmes we loved watching despite their being telecast rather late in the night were *The Invisible Man* and *Mission Impossible*. There were also the more adult-oriented late night programmes like *Love Boat*, *Hawaii Five-O*, *Charlie's Angels* and *The Big Valley* which were watched by mother and occasionally by us.

Comedies were few then. This included *Diff'rent Strokes*, about two black boys taken in by a white millionaire Mr.Drummond and his daughter Kimberly; *The Jeffersons*, about a nouveau riche black couple George and Louis Jefferson, their sharp-tongued maid Florence and irksome British neighbour Harry Bentley; and *Mind Your Language*, a hilarious British comedy telling what happens when foreign students attend English classes conducted by one Mr.Jeremy Brown.

CHAPTER 27

Beatlemania!

It was in the 1960s that the Beatles, a British pop band from Liverpool comprising of John Lennon, Paul Mc.Cartney, George Harrison and Ringo Starr took the world by storm with their innovative music, giving rise to a phenomenon known as Beatlemania that had fans raving and screaming at the very sight of the fab four.

What was so unique about the Liverpudlian mopheads was that they did not confine themselves to a particular genre of music; be it rock n roll, pop ballad, folk country or exotic psychedelia, their songs had rhyme and rhythm, tune and tenor, vigour and vitality, indeed all the ingredients needed for cooking up a great song. Little wonder they still remain the best selling music band in history, a great accomplishment considering the fact that the height of their popularity was in the swinging sixties, nearly fifty years ago today. As uncle Firoze, himself a Beatles fan used to say, the music the foursome turned out was '*evergreen*'; in other words it could not be out of tune with the times whatever time that happened to be. He was right. In 2000 when an album titled 1 containing every Number 1 Beatles hit was released, it became the fastest selling album of all time.

That the songs of the Beatles outlasted their generation was tellingly seen even in our musical preferences, for we caught the Beatles bug long after the initial bout had struck an earlier generation and subsided at the turn of the 1960s when the group broke up and went their separate ways. The strain we caught could perhaps best be described as a case of latent Beatlemania, That was in the mid-1980s when local television telecast an animated series produced by Al Brodax featuring the Beatles as cartoon characters with their music occupying a prominent place. This was probably a spillover of the 1984 spell of Beatles

nostalgia that swept the west, a score after their first live performance in the US in 1964.

Not that we were strangers to music before the Beatles got us, but they had the greatest impact on us music wise, coming at a time when we had just stepped into our teens, In our earlier years it was ABBA, the popular Swedish band composed of Agnetha, Bjorn, Benny and Annifrid that charmed us with their lively music. Songs like *Chiquitita* sung by the ladies of the group telecast on local TV had mother so fixated on the screen that she even called out to us little ones to listen to the wonderful music. Both mother and Zameen aunty who assisted her at the auctions were devoted ABBA fans and their conversation often centered on ABBA, their lives and loves. And to think these were grown up women and not teenyboppers.

The TV series that gave us the bug was telecast by Rupavahini around 5.00 pm beginning from mid-1985 and lasted ten months. We were hooked on the series from day one and soon found out that the cartoon characters had been a group of real life singers back in the 1960s, even before we were born. It did not matter though, for to us, it was the tune that mattered, not the trend. And going by this count, old was gold. The series itself was quite an old one, having been telecast in the USA by ABC as far back as 1965 to 1969 when the Beatles were at their height. Interestingly it was not shown in the UK until the late 1980s, ostensibly because it was feared that the British public would not take to the accent too kindly as it was primarily meant for American audiences. We had no problem following the dialogues and we certainly enjoyed the songs. So much for British pig-headedness.

Each episode which ran for about half an hour comprised of one or two short animated stories featuring the adventures, or rather misadventures of the Beatles in different countries while trying to get away from the girls chasing them. The fab four were caricatured quite well, both in features and mannerisms which as could be expected for a children's series like this were grossly exaggerated with John being portrayed as cocky, Paul

as a smarty, George as a mediocrity and poor Ringo coming out as rather silly. Ringo who drummed for the Beatles was of course the most lovable of the lot.

The stories were interspersed with a Beatles song or two of relevance to the storyline and this to us was the most fascinating part. Among the songs were their early hits like *A Hard day's night*, *Can't buy me love*, *I should have known better*, *From me to you*, *Thank you girl*, *Eight days a week* and *Penny Lane*, all of which had catchy tunes. The Beatles had won our hearts and it was not long before we took on their parts. Asgar chose John, Altaf Paul and I Ringo. As for George, none of us would have the poor fellow.

Those were the days when vinyl records were still an antiquated luxury due to their high cost and compact discs had not even made their entry to the brave new world. It was the pre-recorded music cassettes with magnetic coated tape played on special cassette recorders that were the most used form of musical entertainment. True, these did not even come close to the records in terms of clarity, but they came cheap, around 30 Rupees or so, certainly at a price even little fellows like ourselves could afford with the money we managed to squeeze from our parents or received as gift money on festival days.

Among our earliest such cassettes were those with titles like *Rock N Roll Music* which had for its cover a sticker of the fab four wearing thick coats; We also had *The Beatles Ballads* where the foursome were shown figuring in a rather gaudy piece of artwork and *Abbey Road* showing the four, now quite mature in years walking a zebra crossing. What was so fascinating about the Beatles was the variety of songs they turned out, from the pleasantly soothing and poetic numbers like *Something*, *In my life* and *Till there was you* to the louder headier numbers like *Polythene Pam* and *Helter Skelter* which had overtones of heavy metal which was perhaps only just then emerging. There were also Western country type songs like *Don't pass me by* and experimental hybrid songs like *Norwegian Wood* that incorporated some fine sitar music. If there were ever a band

that could be described as Bohemian, that was the Beatles. Although we were initially into the fast catchy early tunes *like Rock N Roll music*, *Twist and Shout* and *I feel fine*, we soon began to cultivate a taste for the softer more melodious pop ballads such as *Yesterday*, *Mr.Moonlight*, *I'll follow the sun* and *Penny Lane*, partly due to their harmonious tunes and partly due to the ease of singing them.

These, along with other Beatles numbers with simple lyrics such as *Love me do*, *And I love her* and *Yellow Submarine* we would sing lustily in father's office after it had put down its shutters in the evening, as a threesome in unison and with as much gusto as we could manage while at the same time tapping our fingers and undersides of our wrists on some resonating surface to give it the jig, a cheap substitute for the beats Ringo turned out on his classic Ludwig. We could not bring ourselves to sing in the presence of others and guessed quite rightly that they would not think too much of it anyway, especially after uncle Hyder, irked by our new found obsession, sniggered that we were good at *seeennging*, mockingly elongating the word to impress on us that this was the last thing we were good at. There were other more profound numbers we dared not sing due to their complexity but were simply worth savouring, like *Across the Universe* and *The Long and Winding Road*, songs that could best be described as poetry in motion. These two haunting strains were from their swansong *Let it Be* album, the last they produced before they split up in 1970. Little wonder these had a certain maturity not seen in their earlier numbers.

We were of course sad to learn that the assassination of John Lennon in 1980 by Mark Chapman in New York had made the reunion of the Beatles all but impossible. The visit of the Bootleg Beatles, a Beatles tribute band sometime in the mid-1980s meant more as a nostalgia revue for an older generation, stirred us and we lost no time making our way to the Galle Face Green that night just to listen to the music from a distance. The band was playing near a leading hotel fronting the green and as we did not have the money to pay for the tickets nor dare ask

our parents to get them for us, we placed ourselves nearer the road between the green and the hotel, straining our ears to catch the music, whose strains we could faintly hear pealing through the air.

It was around this time or a while afterwards that we were seriously considering accommodating music produced by other bands as well, no easy decision for professed Beatlemaniacs. The reconsideration was prompted by listening to a *Stars on 45 Medley* cassette Altaf had brought home. The many Beatles songs in it were preceded by part of the Archies' hit song *Sugar Sugar*. Though initially we thought it was a Beatles number, it turned out not to be. But it was good. So we decided to officially open up to other bands so long as they could match the Beatles or outperform them. The fab four nevertheless remained the yardstick to judge good music and in this sense we were still Beatlemaniacs.

It was only then, in the later 1980s, that we began enjoying the contemporary hits telecast on popular English musical programmes like Fan Club and Bright & Breeezy including among others Paul Young's *Love of the Common People*, De Barge's *Rhythm of the Night* and Baltimora's *Tarzan B*oy. However we could never really outgrow our fondness for the Beatles who would remain our favourites even after we had left Accha House. But even back then, we realized that Sinhala pop music with its strong Lusitanian influence measured up to, or even sometimes excelled the music produced even by the Beatles, though we would not admit it. This was convincingly demonstrated when we played our Beatles cassettes in the inner hall while uncle Lalith simultaneously played his favorites, songs of well known Sinhala pop singers like Clarence Wijewardene, Annesley Malewana and Indrani Perera, in his little corner opposite our living room. While shuttling between the two areas, somewhere midway, we could clearly hear both, our Beatles' favorites and our uncle's Sinhala melodies. For some reason, songs like Annesley's *Gon Vassa* came out better in terms of voice and tune even to our rather biased ears, but we

would not admit it. This therefore should be taken in the sense of a confession.

An afterword. With John dead, the remaining Beatles who had gone their separate ways eventually banded together in 1995 to release what would go as a Beatles Single based on a song which had been recorded by Lennon in the late 70s and supported by vocals and instrumentals by Paul, George and Ringo. The song *Free as a bird* reached No.2 in the UK Charts, stopping short of the top spot. Nobody summed up the outcome better than uncle Firoze, himself a Beatles fan who said: "The Beatles are a legend, they should have *let it be* that way!"

CHAPTER 28

Bogeys and Phobias

The Bogeyman is not a new idea. It has been there for ages in societies where children faced danger from child abductors and abusers, proverbial wolves in sheep's clothing so to say.

Bogeys, though false constructions fed to young minds by concerned parents are not without foundation, for do we not read of real life instances of such monsters in the newspapers- psychotic child killers, kidnappers and paedophiles walking amongst us, stalking their hapless little victims and having their way with their prey. The big bad wolf's at large and the sheep better beware; even nursery tales capture this frightening reality, subtely impressing on young minds not to trust every grown-up that comes their way.

In Sri Lanka in particular there were rumours circulating in the late 1970s, 1978 in particular, and substantiated to some extent, of missing children being lured by material inducements to a life of depravity by a gang operating a ring of vice. Many children also disappeared mysteriously in the east coast town of Akkaraipattu which at one time earned the epithet of 'Town of the Vanishing Children' suspicion here falling on an organized child slavery ring. There were also unsubstantiated rumours of children being used as *bili* or human sacrifices to placate demons so that fortune-hunters could lay their lands on buried treasure.

That bogeys should have been foisted on us is therefore not surprising. We were warned from our very young days, perhaps as early as five or six years, not to get too close to strangers as they might turn out to be a species of evil people known as 'kidnappers'. These came in many forms or so we were made to believe. First, there were the bumpkin types known as *gonibillas* who snatched little children wherever they could, tossing them into their *gunny bags* and spiriting them away to their hideouts or whatever, the little ones never to be seen or heard of again.

Then there were the more professional types who used toffees laced with sleep-inducing drugs or chloroform to knock out their victims before heaving them into their vehicles. The unfortunate kids, we were told, would be spirited away to *karavala vadiyas*, camps or working quarters where dry salted fish was produced, located in remote islands off Sri Lanka's coasts whose whereabouts nobody knew, and forced to work like slaves under the blazing sun, producing the *karavala* or dry fish we ourselves took as a relish with our rice once in a while. Indeed, so terrible was the treatment meted out to them, so we were told, that if any fell ill they would conveniently be tossed into the sea, much like the pirates of old who forced their hapless victims to walk the plank into a watery grave.

The story was however not totally without foundation, for in late 1980 a joint naval-police operation was underway against 'island slave camps' said to have been in existence off the eastern and western coasts of the country. Rumours were then rife that boys in their teens were kept in these island camps and forced to work from dawn to dusk for big-time fishing operators; many of these boys, it was said, were kidnapped and taken to the slave camps while much younger, being forced to grow up in this fishy atmosphere.

The sea too mother looked upon as a potential danger and especially singled me out. A barber at a saloon we regularly patronized for our haircuts, Gabriel's on Turret Road opposite the Colpetty Municipal Market, darkly hinted that I was vulnerable to drowning as I had a *suliya* or whorl in my head. This, mother made me understand, meant that I should not venture too deep into the sea as at Kosgoda which we often resorted to during the holidays. The underlying belief then still common among superstitious Sinhalese folk was that a hair whorl increased one's chances of being sucked into a sea whorl, a whirlpool that formed in the water one frolicked in. Whether she actually believed in the superstition I cannot say. What I do know is that she had us believe it, me in particular.

Scarier still was the belief she put into our heads of the existence of sea-demons known as *diya-rakusas* who lived in the sea and emerging from out of the blues every now and then took down into their watery abode seabathers who happened to stray too far from the shore. This too reflected a well established Sinhalese belief in malevolent water spirits that haunted the waters, a belief which was reflected even in the aftermath of the death-dealing Tsunami disaster of more recent times which even the mainstream Sinhala media would refer to as a sacrifice claimed by the water demon in strains like *diya rakusa bili gani*.

Such bogeys needless to say did not last long, for the evidence of their mischief was nowhere to be seen or to be heard of in the serious conversations grown-ups had. They would eventually give way to phobias, those ghastly, sinister often inexplicable fears, some fleeting and others longer lasting, people experience in diverse, sometimes even seemingly ridiculous, forms. Some are scared of heights, *acrophobia*; others of darkness, *nyctophobia*; and yet others, of blood, *haemophobia*; chemicals, *chemophobia*; dolls, *pediophobia*; fire, *pyrophobia*; trees, *xylophobia* and even of spiders, *arachinophobia*.

The phobias I experienced as a child were rather unusual. They came like a phantasmagoria, one after the other, from about the age of seven till I reached my teens before being overshadowed by the nascent felings of youthful sexuality, pleasant as always and certainly sufficient to dispel any lurking fear that could morph into more monstrosities. First, there was *narcoticphobia*, the fear of addictive drugs; then *cancerphobia*, fear of that dreaded spreading disease cancer; *bubonicphobia*, fear of the then extinct but contagious bubonic plague and *sikhphobia*, fear of that turbaned Indian tribe known as Sikhs.

The earliest such phobia I experienced was the fear of narcotic drugs, especially heroin about which I had heard being discussed at school. The narcotic, believed to have been introduced to the country by way of Hippie culture in the Hikkaduwa coastal resort area was peddled by dealers in places like Slave Island and Khan Clock Tower in Pettah and had

earned great notoriety in the early 1980s. What seemed most scary about it were its addictive properties. Once hooked on it, it was for a lifetime I was made to believe, though in reality drugs need some time to get hold of a victim, as the withdrawal symptoms following the initial high increasingly tell on the victim making him or her crave for more of the stuff to feel normal.

The fear was also fuelled by the telecast of a Sinhala teledrama *Ran Kahavanu* (Gold Coins) which told the story of this dirty drug pedlar whose son, played by well known actor Kamal Addaraaracchi was himself a junkie. Indeed so pronounced was the fear that I would cringe upon hearing the word *kudoo*, a Sinhala word normally used for a powder, but more colloquially for narcotics, especially that white powder known as heroin which was increasingly becoming a menace in the country. This naturally made me prone to jokes, especially by mother's cousin Gihan who happened to be a neighbour living next door. The fellow, who was a few years older to me, would taunt me, screaming *kudoo* just to enjoy my reaction. Even grandmother, Accha, used to wonder what it was all about, and once in all seriousness asked whether not it was a reference to the collection of chemicals we had, to which the term *kudoo* might as easily apply, these too usually being in powder form.

I was also morbidly phobic of cancer, perhaps as much as or more than grandma who was hagridden with it. She thought of it as a new disease, *alut leda*, which seemed all the more scarier. Not that cancer was a new disease. It had been there for ages; but its rising incidence was a modern phenomenon attributed to various factors including exposure to carcinogens or cancer-causing chemicals- chemicals that are not too obvious as in tobacco smoke which could cause lung cancer and the lime used in betel chewing which could trigger oral cancer, not to mention the various chemicals that go into the manufacture of processed meats which could give rise to bowel and other cancers if taken in excess.

Those were the days that even newspapers sensationalized the disease, intended perhaps more to scare people than raise awareness. A weekend newspaper back in 1979 could thus describe the onset and spread of cancer in the following harrowing terms: "*It begins slowly, gently, almost, you look in the mirror anxiously to see if that funny little lump is showing. Satisfied that it is n't you turn away, not knowing that during the very fact of turning away, millions of little vicious cells are multiplying inside your body, which will in the course of time turn it into a mere husk, with the innards a rotting, nauseous mess. When you die, it will be in the shadowy twilight of heavy sedation given to blanket the agony of the rotting wounds and the maggots eating away at it, and with your mind and body screaming for release and the blessedness of freedom from pain*". To attenuate the pain of mind the article could cause to readers, the newspaper on the very same page carried a piece on 'Guided missiles to fight Cancer' on a new method of administering anti-cancer drugs to affected areas of the body while leaving normal tissue untouched. Whether it had the effect of easing one's anxiety after reading the first piece could well have formed the topic for another story.

Grandma's fear of our little chemical collection as potential carcinogens however did not rub off on me as these seemed such natural playthings- changing colours like a chameleon, giving out glows of light like the sun and spewing out smoke and fire like a volcanic eruption; innocuous stuff on the face of it. This view I would seriously reconsider as I matured into adulthood. It was the incurable nature of the disease and the fact that it could spread from one part of the body to other parts, which I imagined to be like the roots of a tree, that particularly scared me. A story told by father's auction assistant Zeenia who had succeeded Zameen Aunty about a woman in whom the disease started as a mere dot no larger than a mustard seed before spreading wildly till it killed her, didn't help to allay the fear but only made it worse, for even mustard seeds sufficed to send me

into deep thought, daymares, if I may say so, of the dreaded disease.

To make things worse, an old 1964 Sinhala film we watched on late night television with our paternal aunts during a visit to Brown's Hill, Matara, *Samiya birindage deviya* (The husband is the wife's god) which told the story of a cancer patient played by well known actor Dommie Jayawardene and his faithful wife played by popular actress Rukmani Devi, triggered another bout of cancerphobia. There was something so eerie about the monochrome film that it gave me the creeps from that very night I watched it; so much so indeed that in the weeks and months that followed, I would diligently try to avoid the sight of a chubby mustachioed man who bore an uncanny resemblance to Dommie while walking to school in the mornings.

Shaking off the dread took longer because something or other had to come my way to spark another bout of the phobia. Such as when I came across this sanitary pad lying on the payment near the turn from Flower Road to Turret Road thrown or dumped there by some wench which I almost trampled while walking home from school. The strange-looking pad soaked in blood I supposed was some sort of sponge used to clean up the blood of cancer patients after a critical operation, and this, needless to say, sparked a further spell of the phobia as if what I had already been through was not enough. The dread even affected my dietary habits such as when I gave up on ice cream sandwiches, a dollop of rose-coloured ice cream delicately poised between two crisp wafers sold by bicycled vendors during interval. That was after the Principal warned us at assembly that it contained saccharine, a coal tar derivative several hundred times sweeter than sugar and claimed in all seriousness that it could cause cancer.

Things eventually got better when a little book on science for kids mother got us, something like a Ladybird book, assured me that radiotherapy was being used to treat cancer. I took it to mean that the disease could be cured with modern medical breakthroughs. Not quite really, for as mother would point out,

to treat a disease did not necessarily mean that it could be completely cured, but rather kept at bay. Nevertheless it came as a relief and the phobia gradually subsided.

My spell of Bubonic phobia, though lasting for a shorter term, was triggered by watching the 1976 film *Cassendra Crossing* telecast on local TV. The story of a modern day outbreak of the plague on a transcontinental train with masked men in protective clothing using airtight coffins to seal the dead rekindled in me fears of yet another outbreak, the cause of the Black Death that swept through mediaeval Europe taking millions of lives. Though it subsided before long, there were occasions I would almost get goose-bumbs whenever I heard the word *mahamaariya*, which I took to be the Sinhala word for the plague, being discussed in the classroom.

I also had to contend with a short bout of filariaphobia, a fear of filariasis triggered by my learning of it at school. Rather than simply explaining that the mosquito borne disease could reduce one's legs to gnarled looking stumps, the lady teacher who was no doubt prone to stretch things a bit further, took great pains to explain to the boys that it could even affect their balls which would stretch and stretch, the scrotum eventually drooping to the ground. I really didn't need to see such a sight to be afflicted with fright. A couple of elephantine legs espied here and there did me the favour.

And then there was Sikhphobia, a hair-raising fear of that turbaned community of Injuns from Punjab which was triggered by a comment father once made when we were discussing the Sikh Ranjeet Singh who appeared in the British comedy *Mind Your Language*. The Sikh, played by Sri Lankan actor Albert Moses was often shown as a hot tempered fellow who often got into arguments with his Muslim classmate, the mild-mannered Ali, threateningly brandishing his *kirpan* or ceremonial dagger Sikh men are supposed to carry about in their persons. Shortly before we went to sleep, father remarked rather casually: "*Dirty fellows, when they take their knives out, they must draw blood!*". This was of course a reference to the common belief that once a

Sikh unsheathed his *kirpan*, it needed to taste blood. The remark sufficed to instill in me a fear of Sikhs as a bloodthirsty lot who could be after my blood if I as much as stepped on their feet. Fortunately there were not many Sikhs around. The only time I ever saw one was when mother took me to KVG De Silva's bookshop in Colombo Fort. That was when, crossing York Street, I espied this burly bearded fellow with a bluish turban at the other end of the crossing; I was seized with a dread and a strong desire to keep out of his sight, lest he do me harm with that dagger of his.

The fear did not last very long. Sikhs were only human after all. Besides, father who was unwittingly the cause of the phobia generally held Sikhs not in awe, but ridicule, even making them the butt of his jokes in his more waggish moments. He called Sikhs *Sardarjees* and related a story of how he once almost took them for a ride. That was when driving with a friend, he had come across a Sardarjee walking on the payment and offered him a lift, crying out "*Hey Sardarjee, come, come!*". Before he could get in, he took off, again halting the car ahead of him and beckoning him to hurry, and then took off again, leaving the poor fellow panting on the wayside. A wicked prank no doubt and maybe one told in jest, but one that also revealed the human side even of a fierce-looking Sikh who like the Jew has throughout history not been too kind to the Musalman. That I was much more prone to phobias than my siblings speaks much for my fertile imagination.

Grown-ups too had their fears, but these were more or less grounded in reality. One such occasion was when the American space station Skylab came crashing down to earth in July 1979, sparking concerns that it would fall on Sri Lanka which lay in its orbital range. My parents would discuss the matter with both amusement and apprehension. An advertisement taken by a local insurer even had the nerve to proclaim *Skylab. Why Worry. Insurance Corporation of Sri Lanka will give you adequate protection*. It seems that some took the news very seriously, perhaps even as much as the ancient Gauls whose only fear

according to one of our favourite comic books, Asterix, was that the sky would fall on their heads!

Skylab eventually did enter the earth, but not before disintegrating upon hitting the atmosphere into hundreds of fragments that were dispersed over a good portion of the Indian Ocean region and Australia where the debris even reached the gold mining town of Kalgoorlie. None of it found their way to our blessed little island, but had it, we would have probably seen a renewed spurt in treasure hunting with father joining in the rush, for even as much as a measly fragment of the space junk was worth a princely sum.

CHAPTER 29

Black July

Sri Lanka has had its black days, but it could not get any blacker than what took place within a couple of days in July 1983. It was in those few fateful days that unruly Sinhalese mobs, the froth and scum of this otherwise calm and forbearing nation, unleashed a barbarous pogrom against the minority Tamils, even worse than the *Kristalnacht* or Night of Broken Glass which Hitler and his blackshirts orchestrated against Germany's Jews in the 1930s. It would be, and remain, a dark blemish, an aberration, in the 2500 year history of this usually tolerant nation.

Trouble had been brewing for some time before the outbreak of the riots and its germs could be found in ancient Sinhalese literature such as the Mahavamsa, that great chronicle of the Sinhalese nation which faithfully recorded the many Dravidian invasions from South India that ravaged the island. The Tamil settlements in the north of the country including the Jaffna Peninsula is believed to be the outcome of such invaders who settled in these areas and even got down their kith and kin to migrate from the mainland in vast numbers.

Thus there had been some ill-feeling between the generally fairer-complexioned Aryan-speaking Sinhalese and the swarthier Dravidian-speaking Tamils from very early times, so unlike the case of the Muslims whose settlement in the island as Arab merchants was a largely peaceful affair and consequently did not invite the kind of animosity the Tamils were subject to.

Despite this ill feeling, one hardly if ever heard of innocent Tamil civilians being massacred until independence from the British in 1948 when with the stirrings of nationalism let loose by the likes of nationalist leader SWRD Bandaranaike and those of his ilk, hostility towards the Tamil civilian population crept in with intermittent violence including bloodshed against them taking place in the 1950s and 1970s. The demand for a separate

state for Tamils in the north and east of the island known as Eelam which was to be carved out of this little country, small as it was, by separatist politicians like Chelvanayagam and Amirthalingam fuelled the antagonism further, though the average man-on-the-street could not help but look upon the Eelamist antics in Western capitals with amusement and bewilderment. After all who would have thought that the demand for a Liliputian state could go so far. The burgeoning Eelamist movement, which was soon advocating violent struggle to achieve its aims, was unfortunately not taken too seriously even by the government of the day, such as when the Mayor of Jaffna Alfred Duraiappa was shot dead by Tamil militants as far back as 1975 or when CID detectives were assassinated in Mannar in 1978 by a shadowy group known as 'Liberation Tigers'.

Even the media did not take it too seriously. A cartoon in the Weekend newspaper of March 1979 by Mark Gerreyn titled 'The Voice in the Wilderness' had a black bird crying out 'EEEELLAM' and a man wondering whether it was the 'Devil-bird?'. This was obviously a pun on the Eelamists whose slogan of Eelam was compared to the cry of the Ulama or Devil Bird whose cry is believed by the Sinhalese to portend misfortune to those who hear it.

And then came July 23, 1983 when a patrol of 13 Sinhalese soldiers on an operation codenamed Four Four Bravo were ambushed and killed in Tinnevely, Jaffna with grenades and salvos of fire by a group of Tamil terrorists. Their corpses were brought to Colombo for burial the following day, it is said, in sealed coffins as the bodies were heavily mutilated. It did not take long for the tongues to start wagging, so much so that it even reached the ears of babes. I can still recall this classmate of mine at Mahanama College Colpetty rousing up his fellows with a rumour that the unlucky thirteen had been tortured and killed. There was also some talk at the time that the wife of a prominent Tamil separatist leader had gloated that she would one day wear slippers made of Sinhalese skin. If she had indeed,

she was very likely inspired by the Bitch of Belsen, Irma Grese, the Nazi camp commandant who had the skins of her victims made into attractive lampshades. But slippers of skin had a certain mischievous ring about it. It was very demeaning really, especially for a proud race like the Sinhalese.

The mischief-makers were soon at work rousing up the mob, the kind that moves with the pack, unleashing an orgy of violence on Black Sunday 24th July, slaughtering innocent Tamils in the streets, in their homes and in their businesses or workplaces, giving no quarter to any of their victims, men, women or even children. There could be no imploring for mercy, for this word that figures so prominently in the Buddha's teachings as *Maitri*, a central Buddhist tenet, was lost on the mob. They would not even leave room for any weeping; so complete was the carnage that there was no one to weep for the dead. They were all dead or too scared to cry as fear had benumbed them of even their very basic emotions. Had even the heavens shed its tears those dark gloomy days, many innocents would have been spared the scorching fire that found its way to nearly every Tamil home in the city. But nay, it was not to be.

Their fates were sealed when hoodlums and slumdogs of the worst order numbering several thousands, assembled at the Kanatte, the Borella Cemetery where the soldiers were to be buried with full military honours. Before long they went on a rampage at Borella junction by smashing a Tamil business known as Nagalingam Stores and were soon turning their fury on other Tamil shops, looting and torching them, and killing its owners and workers, not to mention others, including any innocent bystanders they suspected to be Tamil, they could lay hold of.

Black Sunday was followed by Bloody Monday. It was thought that the violence would have subsided and things return to normalcy by Monday July 25th, but it was not to be, for the violence continued unabated as the mobs ravaged Colombo and other major towns, combing the streets for Tamils to kill or burn alive. A Tamil-run boutique at the turn from Flower Road to

Green Path which we often patronised was set on fire by a mob that day, for the curfew imposed in the afternoon had come a bit too late after the worst was over. But still it helped control any further spiraling of the violence with the threat *Looters will be shot !* Within a short while, the army and police were in control of the streets and the violence slackened, never to raise its ugly head again.

A few days later, while plodding to school, we chanced upon the *mudalali*, the shopkeeper, a plump, pleasant-looking fellow, squatting in the payment opposite his burnt boutique with a mass of large orange-coloured, boob-like nuts by his side. The poor man had been reduced to selling king coconuts! At least he was fortunate to have gotten away with his life. He was one of the few lucky ones!

In the interim we heard harrowing stories of how innocent Tamils had been done to death. Some of them, we were told, were burnt alive with their families after being herded into their vehicles which were then doused with petrol and set on fire; others were attacked in their homes, with the high impenetrable gates of the more affluent being torn down with bulldozers. The poorer sections, like it often happens, were the most affected, being hacked to death or burnt alive in large numbers. Even Tamil detainees at the Welikada prison were not spared, being massacred by their fellow prisoners while prison guards looked on or turned a blind eye. It was even rumoured that suspected separatist leader Kuttimani had his eyes gouged out while others were barbarously done to death before being heaped in front of a Buddha statue as a *pooja* or sacrifice. It could perhaps appease the bloodthirsty devils some Sinhalese of the lower orders were used to propitiating in their exorcism rituals, but certainly not the great sage.

It was no hard task for the mobs to target Tamils. Tamils in general tend to be darker than the Sinhalese with distinguishing traits like high forehead and snub noses, not to mention the peculiar accent of the vernacular-educated who may find it difficult to pronounce initial soft sounds like *b* which they tend

to substitute with a *v*, so that even a simple Sinhala word like *baaldi* for 'bucket' they tend to pronounce as *vaaldi*, a shibboleth that seems to have been used to identify the victims as Tamils. Another means of identifying the victims seems to have been the voter lists the mobs were believed to have been armed with in order to target Tamil homes, which would suggest government complicity. Little doubt, the mob was well organized as they could even distinguish between Sinhalese-owned shops that housed Tamil businesses and Tamil-owned shops. In the case of the former, the goods were taken out and burned on the streets while in the case of the latter the buildings too went with the bonfire.

We even heard rumours that the government had given a blanket licence to kill and destroy, but not to loot, though very likely this was the work of a few miscreants holding top government positions like Cyril Mathew, a chauvinist of the darkest ilk who was later implicated in the riots. At the time the Police, perhaps to please the party bigwigs who did n't want their image tarnished, pointed the finger at the Marxist JVP who they argued roused the mob to create chaos and hasten a socialist revolution in the country.

A cartoon in the Sun newspaper in early July three weeks before the riots, again by Gerreyn, proved surprisingly portending. Hitler asks: "*The gas chambers are full, what's the next best?*". "*Private coaches my führer*" replies his aide. Though a pun on exploitative private coach drivers who overloaded people into their buses for monetary gain, when looking back one wonders whether not it was a portent of some sort. Although the official tally was 300 Tamils dead, the actual figure was probably ten times higher. A further 100,000 Tamils were rendered homeless. To add insult to injury, the President of the Repblic, J.R.Jayawardane in an address to the nation three days after Bloody Monday, put the blame squarely on the separatists for provoking the Sinhalese people and had not a word of sympathy for those innocent Tamils who had suffered so much at the hands of the mob. To put it in his words "*Because*

of this violence by the terrorists, the Sinhalese people themselves have reacted". Although the government did not know it then, it was the anti-Tamil pogroms in the Sinhalese-majority areas, and the killings in Jaffna of Tamil civilians by some unruly members of the the army in reprisal for the deaths of the unlucky thirteen that led to the outbreak of full-scale civil war between the government of Sri Lanka and Tamil separatist rebels.

Unfortunately neither our maternal or paternal clan could do much about it. Although mother's Sinhala Buddhist clan prided itself in its Aryan heritage, it was not altogether devoid of a Dravidian connection. Granduncle Bodhidasa had married a Tamil lady from Madras named Shrimati, daughter of business tycoon J.K.R.Chetty, thus fulfilling a prediction made by an astrologer when he was just four years old that he would marry one from across the seas- *muhudin etara*. When Bodhi got romantically involved with Shrimati while staying in the house of Chetty, a business associate of his father, it did not surprise the old man. His son Lakshman followed in his father's footsteps. Smitten by the charms of his cousin Hyma, Shrimati's niece, while studying in Madras, he married her, further consolidating his family's Dravidian links.

And then there was aunt Sunethra who married a Tamil from Manippay, Jaffna, uncle Karu. She had fallen for him when he was working at Chartered Architects Thurairaja Associates then housed at the Ambawattes next door. The boundary wall between the two houses then was shorter with few poppies and shoeflower growing in the sandy track on our side and no blue floral gate as we had known. After a brief romance the two got hitched in 1968. The couple had three children, mixed breeds like ourselves.

This lovely little family then in Kenya had plans to return to Sri Lanka to settle for good, but the riots changed all that. They stayed put and eventually settled in New Zealand, depriving the country of some really fine people and us of some of our very best childhood friends.

Fortunately, none of the Tamils we knew were harmed in any way. Joseph, our Tamil auction help from the upcountry escaped unscathed and continued to serve father with the unswerving loyalty he had always shown. Our neighbour, granduncle Sumanadasa whom we all called *Sudu Baappa* (White Uncle) had some Estate Tamils living in an annex in the rear portion of his house. These were *Botal-Pattara Karayas*, Bottle and Paper People involved in the recycling business, humble folk who themselves did not realize the important role they played in keeping the environment clean. Sudu Baappa made it very clear that his poor Tamils were not to be harmed in any way. He was known for a violent temperament if aroused, being often seen with bloodshot eyes and disheveled hair like a *Yaka* (Demon of Sinhalese pantomime) which even scared us. The message was clear, for here was a man who meant business. Nobody as much as laid a hand on his Tamils.

The days that followed saw many looted items sold openly on the streets of Colombo for dirt cheap prices. Mother herself could not resist the temptation and snatched up these cheap tins of cheese, not your usual pale yellow cheddar cheese, but a somewhat darker one with an orange tint to it, being sold in front of the Colpetty municipal market. Mahanama College in Colpetty, where I along with my siblings had our secondary education, was eventually converted into a refugee camp for those unfortunates who had lost their homes, one of 18 such relief camps in Colombo, among others being the Ratmalana Airport hanger, Gintupitiya Kovil, Good Shepherd Convent and St.Thomas College. A Sinhala medium school that prided itself on its Buddhist heritage, Mahanama College had been named after the 5th century author monk of that great Sinhalese chronicle, the Mahavamsa. It had a smattering of Muslim students, a good many from the Slave Island area with names like Doole, Riyaz and Imtiyaz, but hardly, if at all, any Tamils. Tamils unlike Muslims are jealously protective of their mother

tongue and have generally given a wide berth to Sinhala education, preferring to send their children to Tamil medium schools, and this was reflected in the student composition of our school.

When the displaced persons numbering over 12,000 had left and the school opened its gates for its usual course of activities sometime in late August or early September, I was standing near a tap from which we boys used to drink water at interval time and was about to take a few draughts of it with my palms held together when I heard some boys of about my age discussing a slimy substance that had formed on the little pool of water below the tap, perhaps some sort of moss or frog spawn embedded in its gelatinous mass. One of them had already made up his mind as to what it was. *Demala jaraava !* (Tamil filth) he spat out while the others looked on passively.

Little did he know that it was exactly this sort of attitude that would fuel the cause of Tamil separatism for another 25 years, bringing in its wake nothing but death and needless suffering. His people too would have a heavy price to pay for it. But little did he know it then, puffed up as he was, with the poison of racial pride his elders had pumped into his little head, just as the Tamil terrorists further north would brainwash their children to fight for a lost cause. A heavy price to pay – for a poison!

CHAPTER 30

All Creatures Big and Small

Accha House had its share of cats and dogs, but none had it so good as Laika, for long its sole canine resident. Laika was a droopy-looking, floppy-eared Beagle coated all over in brown and black who had been at Accha House as far as I could remember. It had been gifted as a pup to uncle Suranjan who named it Laika after the more famous canine of that name sent by the Russians into space way back in 1957. Unlike its more famous namesake, however, Laika had its feet firmly on the ground; and it was a male unlike the high-flying Russian bitch.

A shy, retiring sort, its usual lair was under a chair, while every once in a while it would get on to a chair below the grilled window in the hall fronting the road to have a peep at the outside world. That was about the time the municipality lined the middle of the road facing the house with cat's eyes, prospherescent glass gems that gave out a greenish glow at night which may explain why it so often stared at the road. These would, in a couple of years, disappear, but not so Laika's gaze. It often had such a doleful look that one would think it were in mourning.

Though a dreamy dog that simply loved to laze all day, it was a good hunter and was quick to offer its services to catch vermin whenever occasion arose, for Beagles despite their calm gentle disposition and short legs make great hounds, especially for hunting down hares. Accha would cry out whenever she spotted a mouse "*Catch, laika, catch!*" and it would quickly spring into action to bring its quarry to bay in the corner of a kitchen or bathroom, to reveal, neatly sandwiched between its jaws, a bloodied mouse dead perhaps from shock. It would however not touch the *hik-miyas* or musk shrews, a liitle mammal like a rat with a long snout that gave out a disagreeable smell wherever they went.

Laika was usually addressed in English by our largely Sinhala-speaking household. Those who are quick to judge my

Sinhalese kin might hastily conclude from this that they held the English language in such low esteem that they thought it fit only to address their dogs with. The fact is that the Sinhalese hold the English language in such high regard that they subconsciously believe that even dogs understand this 'international language'. This I am quite sure of, having lived in such a household and given some thought to the matter. Laika was among the dearest friends of the family and they would only address it in a language they fondly believed it would understand – the language of choice was clearly English!

To us Muslim members of the household, Laika's residence meant that no angels would be visiting us as Islamic belief held that angels did not visit homes where there were dogs. No one thought of asking that it be lodged outside the house in a kennel to let the angels in, not even father. Domestic peace also mattered after all. There was however one occasion when Laika became a bone of contention between the family members. That was when our Karu kinsfolk from Kenya were staying there during the December holidays. Laika, an otherwise passive fellow that would never bite unless provoked, had suddenly lunged at cousin Rajiv and bitten his hand until blood oozed out. He was rushed to hospital by uncle Karu who was told by the medical staff there that the dog might be mad and that they badly needed its head to determine whether it had rabies.

Understandably, this did not go well with the rest of the household, particularly uncle Suranjan who kept on saying that Rajiv had provoked it by pulling its tail. And so uncle Karu sat fuming in the hallway with a long face, fulminating that everybody was blaming the child and not the dog who had after all taken the first bite. "*This family is mad. They're more concerned about the dog than the child*" he was heard to mutter. The others would not budge; after all, it's a dog's life they reasoned. Thankfully the matter ended at that. Rajiv did not catch the dreaded disease and Laika was left alone.

This is not to say that Laika was not vicious. It was, at times. One afternoon, we were having lunch seated round our large

dining table and one of us tossed a piece of beef at a little kitten we were fondly bringing up at the time. Laika happened to be near and thinking that the kitten was after his meat, gave out a quick growl and swiftly sank its fangs into its tender throat. We looked on helplessly as the poor creature quivered and gave out its final gasps of life. Mother went on that there was nothing we could do about it, and true to her words, it was dead in less than a minute, lying in a pool of crimson blood.

The shy, retiring type it was, Laika never liked it outdoors and I can hardly remember an occasion when it went out, except to answer a call of nature when it would resort to the backyard. The threat of a dogcatcher catching it was therefore out of the question. There were rumours circulating at the time that mongrels were fast disappearing from the streets of Colpetty, the result it was said of Far Asian resident workers' exotic tastes. The disappearances were thought to be the work of South Korean workers busy putting up Liberty Plaza, a large shopping mall along Turret Road closer to the Colpetty Junction undertaken by construction giant Keang Nam. How far it was true could never really be established since nobody had actually caught the fellows in the act. At any rate Laika, a rather meaty fellow with a body somewhat like a sausage, was fortunate not to have ended up in a platter of a hungry mongol gnawing on its bones with canine relish It passed away around the mid-1980s after a brief illness, probably a result of old age. We buried it in the backyard or sandy stretch by the side of the house. Uncle Suranjan wept inconsolably like a little child comforted by his wife Priyanthi.

The cats that made Accha House their home were quite a number even before we Husseins entered the scene. There were two cats, Vadiya and Humbaya, perhaps part of a larger litter, that had made Chitrangi their home when Laika was yet a puppy. They were no more there when we Husseins arrived on the scene, though our coming seems to have attracted more cats to the house. Accha was not particularly fond of cats except for a solitary Persian uncle Lalith brought home. She would often

grumble that cats or *pooso* as she called them, made unlucky - to use her words *muspentoo* – noises. She was referring not so much to the usual *meows* our tame lady cats made when they were hungry, but the calls of the vagrant big-faced tom cats, who, perched on rooftops and other high places sometimes let out a weird, mournful howl which even a pen could not capture but went something like *eeeeee…oooooooo*, perhaps a mating call of some sort.

She would moan how nasty-smelling the crap they buried under the sand of the graveled square in our backyard was, while waxing eloquent on dog droppings which effortlessly dumped on the surface simply dried away. That cats were health freaks that washed their coats clean with their tongues and had even better toilet training than humans, going so far as to bury their bodily waste in subterranean graves they themselves hollowed out with their paws, was lost on her.

Those I remember best was a quartet of lively kittens with white coats speckled all over in black, so alike that hardly anybody could tell the difference, except for one, the runt of the litter whose coat was a bit fainter than the rest. We named them after that class of highly reactive chemical elements known as the halogens – Chlorine, Flourine, Bromine and Iodine. Those were the days we were deeply engrossed with our chemical collection and so the quads were given these rather elementary names. In fact we had two of their namesakes in our lab, Chlorine which came as a strong smeling white powder, stable stuff compared to the deadly yellowish-green windswept mists the Germans had unleashed at Ypres in the days of the Great War, and Iodine, grayish-looking crystals that gave out purple fumes when heated.

Iodine, whom we believed was the youngest, but only because it was smaller and paler-looking than the rest had another name the rest of the household called it, *Salmon*, as it had once got its head stuck in an empty tin of Plaza or Diamond brand mackerel or some other tinned fish (indifferently called salmon locally) while trying to lick the little bits and pieces inside. *What a*

frivolous name we thought and insisted on calling it by the more profound name we had originally bestowed upon it shortly after its birth, *Iodine*-– the last of the halogens.

Later times saw the arrival of a Persian kitten, a stately little moggie coated all over with fluffy white fur uncle Lalith received as a gift from a friend. Proud and placid like all Persians it could not endear itself to us, but got on well with our breadman, a fair, pleasant-looking fellow with a rimmed khaki hat who would arrive in front of the house on his bicycle laden with a large box containing loaves of crusty, freshly-baked bread and other goodies such as sponge cakes. That is, until one evening when it made away with a bun, after which there was no love lost between the two.

Accha House would have been home to a horde of rabbits if not for a sad incident before we Husseins entered the scene. Neighbour Dr.Zain Cader once gifted uncle Suranjan, then in his teens, a she-rabbit. His uncle Justin procured it a partner from a shop at Colpetty that sold rabbits for the table and within a year they were a happy family with little baby rabbits gamboling about. The lad could not enjoy their company for long as he caught a bad bout of diphtheria, leaving him hospitalized for three months. The physician who treated him blamed it on the rabbits, and the lad's uncle who had in the first place brought home the stud, was told to rid the house of the lot, He sold them in the market, though the lad was told they were abandoned near the War Memorial near Vihara Maha Devi Park on a patch bristling with scrub jungle.

When we were very young, father used to rear a couple of bantams in a coop in the backyard. We woke up one morning to find that a mongoose or palm cat, a nocturnal feline known to feed ravenously on fowl, had slipped through the mesh and killed a fowl or as we were told at the time "*sucked its blood out*". Birds we loved and the three of us used to improvise a bird house by boring a hole into a cardboard box and filling it with straw to attract the occasional bird that found its way into the house. No matter how much we tried, we could not get our

feathered friends, the *ge-kurullas* or house sparrows, to move in and eventually abandoned the scheme. As for butterflies, we had plenty of them breeding nearby in a shrub in the graveled side path closer to the arched doorway that led to the backyard. Here, hanging perilously from the tiny leaves or stems like little mangoes and looking rather like giant dewdrops glistening in the morning sun or diminutive fairytale lanterns coated all over with mother-of-pearl were these iridescent silvery chrysalises of some species of lepideptera, perhaps of the Common Crow Butterfly, judging from an illustration of butterfly pupae given in our *How and Why* book on *Butterflies and Moths*. The shrub, which was about two or three feet tall later failed to attract the creatures and was cut down by uncle Chandana.

Not so welcome were the myriads of red weaver ants known as *dimiyas* that had made the mango tree in our backyard their abode, forming its long leaves into *gotu*, spherical receptacles in which they would live and conveniently direct the affairs of their arboreal kingdom, sheltered as it were from sun and rain. Hordes of the Huns could be seen in our backyard, marching up trees and scaling the walls. We would send a strong stream of water, laser-like from a red and white plastic water spray to dislodge them as they scaled a wall or tree. No easy quarry, they would tenaciously grip the wall till the force of the jet of water, this time nearer and stronger, threw them off balance to plummet in free fall.

Snails were a common sight, though the only ones we ever saw were the African land snails saddled with brownish purple conical shells. These were fast breeders originating from East Africa. They had been introduced to the country only around 1900 before proliferating at the expense of native species like the tree snails. Asgar conceived the ingenious idea of building a home for the lazy louts with a wooden box. He fed the sluggards with chilli leaves after he learned that they were voracious eaters of the leaf. Before long the entire thing began to smell of crap as the bumpkins began emptying the contents of their gut all over their living quarters. It all ended on a sad note. We had just

returned home from a long trip and Asgar made a dash to the backyard to greet his crummy friends when he found the box overturned, the shells of the snails scattered all over. It was very likely the work of a ravenous red-eyed, coppery brown plumed Coucal or Crow-Pheasant which is known to voraciously gobble up the gastropods. It could n't have found a better meal, for African snails are a particularly nutritious source of meat, containing, it is said, as much protein as beef.

Cockroaches too we saw plenty, especially when Accha and her brood got into spring-cleaning mood, focusing all their energies on the row of multi-coloured cupboards that lined two sides of the pantry wall. The cupboards very generously gave refuge to rodents and roaches, pockmarked as they were with mouseholes and little apertures from which they could forage for scraps in the dead of night.

The racket would send the roaches scrambling for cover from grandma's broom or a cat that lurked nearby. These we did not bother with until one morning while clearing some old stuff near the dining room we noticed a little albino roach which we chucked into a glass bottle, only to find its whitish body gradually turning brown. It led us to conclude that all coackroaches were natural albinos and that it was exposure to light that gave them their dark colour. Little did we know then that what we had caught was a newly molted cockroach nymph which is usually white but darkens to the normal colour within a few hours, though I still wonder whether not exposure to light had something to do with it. Curiously enough, the fair-skinned members of the Burgher community are sometimes called in Sinhala *kerapottas* or cockroaches which seems to have originally applied to albinos who are sensitive to light.

Roaches were mild compared to the mosquitoes that every now and then plagued our house, exposed as it was to the outside world through the front and rear. The winged vampires often arrived after dusk and preferred to act under cover of darkness to accomplish their nefarious task. It was not just that irritating whir as they hovered about in flight or their insatiable lust for

blood that irked us, but more particularly their painfully itchy bite. We eventually declared war on the bloodsuckers though at the beginning Asgar and I were very selective in their killing, crumpling only those we actually caught going for our blood. With time this selective approach changed as we realized they were all the same. They needed the blood to propagate their species and we simply couldn't give them enough. Mosquitoes are about the only creatures in the animal world besides leeches, vampire bats and Jewish mohels that actually go for one's blood; compulsive bloodsuckers who cannot take no for an answer.

However there came a time when the pests left us alone for a week or two. That was after the great Malathion stink of late 1985, the result of an industrial accident. A fire had gutted the government Malathion stores at Mulleriyawa, causing some 5000 boxes of the substance to smoulder, which was only contained a day or two later by dumping large volumes of sand over them. The fumes even reached our house judging from the mercaptan odour that found its way to our noses, making us wonder what it was, only to find the following day that a Malathion store had caught fire. It did have its after effects though, since we hardly had any mosquitoes bothering us for the next couple of weeks. It seems the Malathion, an active ingredient in mosquito repellents had done the trick.

CHAPTER 31

Respect for Life

Although we had an Islamic upbringing amidst a largely Buddhist background, our respect for life seems not to have been a direct result of either, for as far as I could remember, it was a spontaneous development, or as I would later come to believe the outpourings of a Divinity whose All-encompassing Mercy is even reflected in the mercy His creatures show others, even to those not of their own kind.

True, Islamic teachings prohibit the taking of life save for the pot or to save one's skin, but it was never instilled in us as a formal religious teaching in our early years. There was no occasion to, for we did not see any unnecessary killing around us such as for sport, either by our parents or by father's Muslim kinsfolk or by mother's Buddhist kinsfolk amongst whom we lived.

That is, except for the solitary exception of uncle Lalith, who had not as yet stepped out of his teens. He took animal life with a pinch of salt or even less, such as when he gloated about dissecting frogs at college, or impaled ticks lurking in household furniture or burnt alive a hairy, rather scary-looking greenish or yellowish caterpillar he espied crawling along a mango tree in our backyard, conveying it all the way to the kitchen at the back of the house to shove it into a nest of red hot embers and smugly rest his gaze on it as it writhed and withered in the inferno.

The lad's actions would have been looked at with askance by any good Buddhist since Buddhism condemns the taking of life for any reason whatsoever which makes it even more stringent than Islam. Uncle Lalith was probably only a nominal Buddhist at the time, which explains why he became a Catholic so easily.

However, I must confess that there were those rare occasions in our very young days when we did take life, and that was when influenced by the only one who could have us do this sort of

thing, - none other than uncle Lalith whom we fondly called Lala uncle. That was when we got into this killing frenzy against the ticks that hid in the recesses of our chairs. The chairs, though framed with wood, had their backs and bottoms done with woven cane that formed a sort of mesh. The little holes through which the laces passed gave refuge to countless ticks who would every now and then come out to take a bite off our skins, especially in the area about the thighs. So uncle Lalith came up with this ingenious way of ridding the lot by heating a needle or safety pin in a candle flame and while still hot, thrusting it into the little holes before withdrawing it, often with a tick sticking on the point, impaled as it were. It did not bother us then, either because we were too young to understand the value of life, or else felt relieved to be free of tick bites, which coming like a sting on one's legs or buttocks was quite painful.

In a couple of years, we had come to respect animal life including vermin. We even disliked killing mosquitoes since for some peculiar reason they did not bite me or Asgar in our early years. They took a liking to our blood only much later, about the time we were circumcised at about the age of ten or so, after which none of us had any qualms about crushing the little vampires. They were after all after our blood. Little brother Altaf was however prone to mosquito bites and devised this ingenious way of ridding the environs of the blighters. He melted rigifoam in petrol and poured the gooey mix over the little water bodies the rains had formed in depressions in the cemented parts of our backyard or on to the tops of some metal drums that lay idle breeding mosquitoes. The flimsy but firm film that formed would swiftly spread like a transparent sheet over the little pools containing mosquito larvae and pupae, worm-like creatures commonly known as wrigglers and tumblers that every now and then somersaulted in their watery abode. They would, upon hitting the surface, get tangled in the mess and perish. Asgar and I would not brook it and would holler or clobber him if we caught him in the act. We even had a soft spot for mice and I remember once weeping during a trip

to the south when mother said that she planned to use some mice bait to kill the vermin that plagued our little kitchen. The poison she said would do the job by '*bursting their hearts'*. This greatly moved me and I wept, prompting father to reply that I had *a golden heart*.

Our concern for animal life including the unborn came out during our visits to the family home of Zameen aunty, our parents' Auction Assistant. The house which belonged to the lady's in-laws of the wealthy Ghafoor clan had been given to the family to stay in and had a sprawling estate facing the better known Kandawala Estate of Sir John Kotalawela. Near the house was a meshed coop which housed about a hundred hens – White Leghorns that laid white eggs and Rhode Island Reds that laid brown eggs. Zameen Aunty, espying some freshly laid eggs conspicuously lying on the gravelly ground, would cry out *Go get them!* We would hesitate, not because the hens were broody and ready to meet any intrusion with a peck, but because we really believed, as most kids do, that all eggs gave chicks. Taking them for the table, we reasoned, meant that they would be killed even before they hatched, and that too in boiling water or the frying pan. Little did we know then the role the male of the species played in fertilizing the egg. Nor could we be enlightened on the secrets of sex at that young age. Strangely, we had absolutely no scruples about eating eggs, but taking them ourselves and snuffing their lives out even before they saw the light of day was a different story.

We should have known better because the folk here were animal lovers. Zameen's mother Pathuma Bibi had a myna she talked to and her sister Sittinaim had a pet squirrel she doted on. In later times they had a couple of black and white goats whom they named Jenny and Jacob.

Though we loved meat, whether beef, mutton or chicken, we disliked the poor creatures being slaughtered for the table, though at the same time there was nothing we could do about it, except on one occasion, when at a family function at uncle Firoze's parental home in Kandy, we secretly hatched a plan to

release some fowl awaiting slaughter for the feast. Needless to say we could not implement it due to obvious logistical reasons. That was no place for a chicken run!

Eventually we came to accept the fact that it was alright to take life for food. That was something we would have to stomach if we wanted a great meal on the table. Meat was something we had gotten so used to, that it was difficult to do without, even at that tender age. Perhaps it was meant to be that way. Man, nay even the child of man, has canine teeth, which marks him as a carnivore and had God willed him to be a herbivore munching away at plants he would have simply given him a set of molars. There's an old saying: *God gave teeth, He will give bread*. One might as well add to it *God gave canine teeth, He will give meat!*

True, the Western way of life we generally admired, but there was one thing we could never agree with, even then, and that was taking animal life at one's whim and fancy or for convenience sake. I recall reading this book on pets - cats or dogs I do not remember - which counselled its young readers not to attempt to destroy any unwanted young of a litter themselves, but to hand them over to a vet who would destroy them 'humanely'. This was advice given to little children.

There was also this English television series, one episode of which told the story of a pet dog an old woman wished to have buried with her after "putting it to sleep". When we told mother about it, assuming that *putting to sleep* was to let it doze off and then bury it alive with the old hag, she explained that it was an euphemism that meant killing by lethal injection, which horrified us all the more. Such incidents drove home the fact that all that came from the west was not necessarily the best and that we in this part of the world still had our values.

CHAPTER 32

Ideas and Ideals

Kids have funny ideas at times, but often we would find they are much more mature than the many grown-ups who strut the world today. For one thing they are not obsessed with false notions of status the way adults are and are more than willing to accept as their equals other kids or even grown-ups willing to be treated as such. For another, they dearly wish to be treated as equals with grown-ups.

In this sense children are far more egalitarian than adults who have gotten so used to absurd ideas like the inferiority of other men passed down the generations that they often lose their sense of reality. If only people could recall how they thought when they were little, the world will be a better place to live without a care for race or social class. And so it was with us. We often wondered why there was so much inequality in the world and why all people in the world couldn't just be equal. Even as kids we often discussed among the two or three of us what we could do to make the world a more equal place. Given our Superhero craze at the time, we were even considering becoming *superheroes* with distinctive figure-licking attire as our Marvel heroes were depicted, just to accomplish this objective of *civilizing* people to think of one another as equals. If we did go for it we would have probably taken on a name like V3.

We could see that in the West which we called *civilized*, that there was manifestly less inequalities than existed in our part of the world. After all had it not been the West that had produced the likes of King Arthur whose stories uncle Firoze regaled us with, dwelling on how he built a *round table* so that he and his knights could deliberate on equal terms, so unlike the rectangular boardroom tables where the boss sits at the head and his minions along the length of the table like the one that sat in the hall of Umma House. What we did n't know then, of course,

was how much of that culture we called *civilized* had been built upon the oppression of other peoples.

Children are of course taken up by trivial things. It struck us as very fine that even the most menial workers over there wore uniforms or fine clothes while at their job, while ours were clad in dirty shorts and if not barebodied wore an equally dirty shirt. One day at Arts class at Mahanama College we were told to draw a man at his job and as if to express my feelings, I drew a local municipal worker smartly clad in uniform and boots trundling a wheelbarrow. A classmate seated next to me was quite amused and commented in Sinhala *Huh,tava avurudu seeyakin vat mehema venne ne!* (Oh, it won't be like this even in another hundred years). His prophesy was a bit premature. Within thirty years of his hasty remark, many of our garbage collectors could actually be seen clad in smarter clothes or at least in a neat luminous orange bib.

One day I matter of fact told a classmate that all people had a right to be treated equally. He promptly replied that would make me a *communist!* I was stumped, for my impressions of communism was not at all a positive one, having been told by father that the commies in Russia ruled ruthlessly with an iron fist and did not even allow people to leave their country, as a result of which many defected to the West. What irked him most was the restriction on people's freedoms and especially on free enterprise the communists imposed in their bid for state control of each and everything. He even had us believe that in Russia toddlers were given a number of toys that represented different occupations such as a gun for a soldier, and whoever chose that particular toy was compelled to take to the occupation it represented.

Father's fears, though largely based on hearsay, were of course not unfounded, for communism was still alive and kicking back then in the early 1980s. His own experience, as a family man with responsibilities when our own country experimented with a nationalistic form of socialism and closed its economy to the outside world in the early and mid-1970s had

heightened his concerns further for he could still recall the privation it brought to ordinary folk while those in power and their families enjoyed all the perks and privileges as *party people*. His auctions did well in those times, since restrictions on imports meant that more people would bid for used items from the west and elsewhere, but despite this he harboured a strong mistrust of people espousing socialism of any kind. In the run up to the 1982 elections or thereabouts an auction help had managed to get a copy of a picture story book in black and white with a catchy title such as *Hat Avurudu Saapaya* (The Curse of the Seven Years). We curiously leafed through its cheap cream white pages, if for nothing else, the caricatures. What we saw horrified us, for it depicted Madame Sirimavo Bandaranaike who had presided over that era in a very negative light. She was shown in military fatigues, with cap and boot, doing all kinds of terrible things including shooting a young woman stripped bare from head to toe. The unfortunate girl so depicted was Kataragama beauty queen Premawathi Manamperi who was brutally murdered by some army men at the height of the JVP insurgency in 1971. Needless to say the grand old dame had nothing to do with the killing. It had taken place during her regime and she had to take the flak. Children are impressionable and we got away with a very bad impression of the poor old woman who had by then been deprived of even her civic rights by her successor J.R.Jayawardane on some pretext or other.

What father or mother did not tell us was that communism envisaged the equality of all citizens, even to the point of advocating collective ownership of property to accomplish the goal so that there won't be rich or poor. Equality was one thing, but the forced pooling together of property was another and with this we could not agree. We did once experiment with the idea of having common property between us - with disastrous consequences. That was when we decided to pool our coin collection which had hitherto remained in our separate possessions. The coins we cared for well when they were in our individual possession, acquiring new ones and caring for the

existing ones by storing them in plastic tubes, smarties containers and transparent plastic cases padded with cotton, much of it gleaned from a Ladybird book on *Coin Collecting* and a smaller *Quiz Me book* on *Coins* by Dean & Son we had.

But alas, as soon as we pooled them, things changed. None of us evinced the kind of interest we had when we actually owned them individually. Needless to say, our entire collection fell into a sad state of neglect. This experience would not be in vain and if we had any more ideas of pooling our property, it was all but abandoned, that is except our books, which mother purchased for us and which was deemed the collective property of the three of us anyway. Books of course did not need the kind of tending and grooming coins needed as a hobby.

However we could still not abandon our egalitarian ideals and it was not long before that we would learn that our Islamic faith advocated the absolute equality of all humanity, so that being egalitarians now assumed a religious dimension as well. I can still recall while approaching my teen years reading with delight the words from the last sermon of the Prophet hung on a wall of the Colpetty Mosque: "*No Arab is superior to a Non-Arab or a Non-Arab to an Arab. No white is superior to a black or a black to a white except in good deeds*". These simple but wise words so strongly enunciated by the Prophet certainly offered a better deal for achieving equality than the harsher doctrine of communism that did not take human nature into consideration, and which was for all practical purposes impossible to accomplish. Little wonder it remained a pipe dream much abused by those in power which George Orwell neatly captured in *Animal Farm* when he summed it all up: *Some Animals are more equal than Others*.

CHAPTER 33

Keeping the Faith

As Muslim kids brought up in a largely Sinhalese Buddhist household, we realized that we were a bit 'different' quite early on. We were told when quite young that we were something called 'Muslim' though back then I did not know what it really meant except that it had something to do with being a bit different from the rest in what we believed in or the way we were expected to behave. It did not at any time mean that we were an altogether different kind of people.

In fact throughout my early childhood I could not even comprehend the difference between race and religion, for I imagined then that all people were divided on the basis of what they believed, in other words religion and not race, that is until I digested the contents of our earliest factual work the *Hamlyn Boys and Girls Encyclopedia* by Jean Stroud at about the age of eight or so. This colourful well illustrated work graphically brought out the differences between the primary races of man, the fair-skinned fine-featured Caucasoid, the straight-haired, slit-eyed Mongoloid and the dark-skinned wooly-haired Negroid.

These obvious differences in men were until then lost on me for some reason and even after this basic grounding in anthropology I could not quite understand how Sinhalese and Muslim differed; they all basically looked the same, somewhat like the Caucasoid type illustrated in the book. This was perhaps the result of a mixed childhood where whatever little perceptible differences of race paled into insignificance and only what one believed in really stood out.

Besides matters of belief, certain cultural peculiarities marked us out from the rest of the household - names for instance. The country's Muslims like others elsewhere are extremely fond of Arabic or Persian names, rather European sounding really, and more continental than English like Ashroff that sounds so

Russian, Hussein more like German and Firoze somewhat like Italian. Father's name *Wazir* with its *z* and my own name *Asiff* with its *f* sounded rather outlandish when compared to the vernacular Sinhala names that lacked the *f* or *z*. Though our maternal clan had no difficulty pronouncing our names due to their familiarity with these sounds which were found in English, there were those more conservative folk connected by marriage who could not, for instance aunt Priyanthi, uncle Suranjan's wife who had this bad habit of calling my name out as *Asip*.

It was our frequent interaction with our paternal kin that really defined our identity as Muslims, for not very far from Accha House was father's family home. All we had to do to get there was cross the road, walk down Boyd's Place and turn right to Alwis Place. The house at No.30 served us as a home away from home where we were kept when our parents were busy at the auctions.

It was here at Umma House that we were really intiated into our Islamic faith. Islam means 'surrender', in a religious sense 'surrender to the Will of God' and so there we were submitting to His Will. God is generally known among Muslims by his Arabic name *Allah* meaning 'The God' as if to stress his Divinity. This is the same name even Christian Arabs such as those of Palestine, Syria or Lebanon use to address Him.

To us little ones he was introduced as *Allalla*, a sort of duplication of the proper divine name which our father's folk probably thought would appeal to us better as kids are known to be fond of repetitive sounds such as *mama* and *papa*. We were hardly four or five years old, when while stationed at Umma House, we were instructed by our aunts Fairoze, Shafeeka and Shanaz to sit cross-legged on the floor, close our eyes and reel off the words *Allalla… Allalla…* While at it for a minute or so, a brazen five or ten cents coin would suddenly fall at our feet with a clink as if from heaven. This, our aunts would exultantly tell us was a reward for praying to Allalla. He had been pleased with our prayers and had sent down the coins from the heavens.

We did not grudge them though, after all it was all in good faith meant to instill in us a belief in God, especially since we were growing up in a largely Buddhist environment. Though these small-time worldly inducements had only a limited effect in introducing us to our Creator Lord, it was not without its benefits, for by now we had some vague idea of whom this god whom we called *Allalla* was – some sort of transcendant being who lived up on high and who looked after people.

More was to come with the Arabic classes grandmother '*umma*' had us attend when we were around seven years old, not at some *madrasa* or little seminary attached to the mosque as most Muslim boys and girls are used to, but at her house which we had to attend after school or in the weekends. Here we were taught the basic creed of our faith by one Saleem Lebbe, a tall bearded man attired in white shirt and sarong with a white skullcap perched on his head.

The man had earned a reputation as a lebbe or religious teacher and quickly set about teaching us the *Kalima* or Declaration of faith '*La-ilaha-illallah, Muhammad-ur-rasulullah*' (There is no god but God. Muhammad is the Messenger of God) which was followed later by lessons in the Arabic script in which the Qur'an is written. The primer he employed for the purpose sufficed to teach us the entire Arabic alphabet with its profuse bows and dots which looked like little stylized crescents and stars, so beautiful to behold.

We then thought of Arabic as a sort of sacred language taught to man by God Himself for the purpose of revealing His Word to mankind. Little did we know then that it just happened to be a language that existed among a people known as Arabs even before Islam was brought to them 1400 years ago. It was a language like any other belonging to a particular group of people, but one which God had chosen to reveal his final revelation, His very own Word, the *Qur'an*, which in Arabic simply means 'The Reading'. And so it was that Saleem Lebbe taught us the Arabic alphabet with its 28 characters beginning with the first two letters - *Alif* and *Be*. A couple of years later we

were thrilled to find out that these two characters *Alif* and *Be* were related to the first and second letters of the Greek alphabet *Alpha* and *Beta* which in combination gave the English language the very word *Alphabet*. Both Arabic and Greek had derived its alphabet from the ancient Phoenecians, a hardy sea-faring people who had first developed it.

The lead came from our *Hamlyn Children's Wonderful World Encyclopedia*, a compendious illustrated work which mother purchased for us when we we were about ten years old. A graphic in the book very much in the form of a golden tablet very beautifully traced the evolution of the Roman characters *A* and *B* used in modern English to the Phoenecian hieroglyphic forms based on an image of an ox and house, the Hebrew forms of which were given as *Aleph* and *Beth* in which our inquisitive minds saw a close resemblance to our *Alif* and *Be*, especially since there were others that showed a similar pattern, as for instance Hebrew *Daleth* for door, *Lamedh* for whip, *Caph* for palm and *Shin* for teeth which closely resembled our Arabic *Daal*, *Laam*, *Kaaf* and *seen* representing the sounds *d*, *l*, *k* and *s*. We were correct, for Arabic like the Hebrew had derived its alpabet from Phoenician and shares a close relationship with it, not only alphabetically but also because both are Semitic speeches originating from a common tongue spoken as far back as the days of Abraham over three thousand years ago. That their speakers are constantly at loggerheads with one another and sometimes at each other's throats is another story.

Adding to our religious knowledge were the regular Islam classes at Mahanama College Colpetty where we schooled. These were handled by a fair chubby lady we simply called 'Sitty Miss' to whom all the Muslim boys of a particular grade were brought for Islam lessons. The first day of the class stands out in my mind for an interesting incident that took place that day. Here stood Sitty Miss surveying the little boys and not so little boys, for some of them who hailed from Slave Island were notorious failures compelled to do time in our grade.

She now started throwing out questions to test our religious knowledge and the very first question she shot out was *Apey Nabituma Kavuda?* (Who is our Prophet?). All the boys looked on stone-still, silent as lambs, as if pondering over the question and there I was plucking up some courage to show off the little Islam I knew. The question rang out again *Apey Nabituma Kavuda?* That was when I managed to blurt out *Muhammad*, for that I was quite sure was the name of our Prophet. The fair lady looked at me and then at the others reproachfully "*Ogollanta Taama danne nedda apey nabituma kavuda kiyala?*" (Don't you'll know who our Prophet is?) in such a scornful tone that the boys looked down shamefaced. Not that they didn't know the answer, they had been dallying simply because they were too scared of the teacher.

Whether it was her roly-poly form draped in saree, or her rosy, somewhat porcine mug sitting on top of it, or the short pixie hair sprouting from it, so different from the homely kind of ladies these lads were used to seeing, I cannot say. Whatever it was, it certainly had the lily-livered bunch petrified as if they had just seen Medusa. Had she covered her hair with the end of her saree in keeping with the standards of female modesty required in Islam, these lads from conservative Muslim households would probably have felt more comfortable, but then again she was not obliged to do so, even by her religion, in front of these pre-pubescent males. We eventually got used to her and she made a good teacher, dwelling on the teachings of Islam based on the textbooks issued by the Ministry of Education.

Another important work which we often read at home was an English translation of the Islamic Holy Book, the Qur'an which Muslims regard as God's Word. This lovely green-covered paperback with its text printed on light green paper had been published by Dar Al Shoura, Lebanon and was issued free by the Islamic Call Society of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriyya. It made fascinating reading, relating as it did God's Commandments to man; His Glory and Grandeur, Mercy and Munificence and His Omnipotence and Omniscience which was

said to be closer to us than our very jugular veins; the duties of His heavenly winged messengers, the Angels; the stories of his chosen earthly messengers, the Prophets; parables of various sorts and even beautiful poetic verses that speak about time, natural phenomena such as the night and the glorious morning light and heavenly bodies such as sun and moon. These were after all Signs of God, Signs by which humans could know Him; Signs to be found in the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of the night and day; in the sun and the moon; in the beasts of all kinds He had scattered through the earth and in the variations in the colours and languages of men, in the mates He had created for them among themselves. Of all this the Qur'an spoke about in beautiful verses which even in translation did not lose its profundity.

And so we learned more and more about our faith and particularly about our God of whom a clearer picture was now being formed in our young minds. We learned that God was our All-Powerful Creator and Sustainer, who despite all our efforts, was the One who actually provided us sustenance and that too according to a measure He had alloted to each one of us. He nevertheless desired the best for His Creation and particularly for man whom He elevated above the rest of creation. He desired that man whom He created in His Image be just and fair just as He was all the more, but most of all He desired that man be wise enough to believe in Him through the signs He had created and humble enough to worship Him, bowing and falling prostrate before Him at least five times a day; to this transcendant Divinity up above the heavens we could not see but were nevertheless required to believe in. What we could not figure out was why God had left us earthlings in seeming charge of ourselves without as much as offering a glimpse of Himself to instill greater faith in us. But then again, who were we to question Divine Wisdom. Faith was, after all, not about seeing, but about believing.

Father loved to stress how Islam was not only the the newest of the great faiths, but also the most modern. He went on how

the Qur'an described the growth of the foetus in the womb of its mother from a leech-like clot long before such knowledge became known to Western science, which he took as a remarkable prophesy. This he probably picked up from somebody discussing the findings of eminent French surgeon Dr.Maurice Bucaille, author of the book *La Bible, Le Coron et La Science*. Little did we know then that there were much more details in the the Holy Book that agreed with modern science, including among others, the creation of all life from water; the orbit of the celestial bodies, each swimming along in its rounded course and even the idea of a *Big Bang* when the heavens and the earth were a single entity before being split asunder to form what we call the universe.

And so it was that our faith was strengthened in our God and in the other articles of our religion including belief in the Angels He had created, the Prophets He had sent, the Scriptures He had revealed and the Afterlife He had promised. These bore a remarkable likeness to the teachings of Christianity which we were becoming increasingly familiar with through the books we read at the Children's Section of the Colombo Public Library including the stories of the prophets and the parables of Jesus as well as some of the programmes on the life of Jesus we watched on television, especially during the Christmas season. They had to be, they were after all from the same source.

We loved to compare Islam with Christianity. We had come to look upon it as a *civilized religion* which like Islam was devoid of the kind of idols we saw for instance in the *gopurams* of Hindu temples, colossal termitarium-like structures whose gaudy sculptures of various deities and demons in various postures seemed rather scary to our untrained eyes. Nor were we alone in feeling like this, for even some of our paternal kin such as uncle Hyder shared our sentiments, taking pleasure in comparing Islam with the older faith brought by Christ, not to mention our parents' auction assistant, a cheery young Malay woman named Zeenia who would gleefully compare even something as trivial as the Christian *Amen* with the *Aameen*

uttered by us Muslims at the end of the *Fatiha* or Islamic Lord's Prayer.

What little we learned about Christianity seemed so much like Islam. This was especially so since we thought at that time that the God of the Christians was One like our God and that Jesus was simply a messenger sent by this One God. That most Christians believed that God was One of Three or Three in One, God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost was lost on us, for such a grotesque doctrine as the Trinity is not even taught to Christian children for whom the books we read were meant. Little did we know then that what we supposed to be Christianity with its Unity of the Divinity was professed only by a miniscule number of Christians known as Unitarians whose beliefs are very much like those of Muslims. The Christianity we knew as kids had been dealt a severe blow in the Council of Nicea over 1500 years ago when the Trinitarians prevailed over the Unitarians. Little wonder the Qur'an which was revealed a couple of centuries later urged Christians to say One instead of Three.

Generally however the Qur'an spoke favourably of Christians, calling them the closest in love to the believers in contrast to the Jews whom it condemned as the foremost foes of the faithful. Indeed there could hardly be any love between Jew and Muslim and this we learned very early. I distinctly remember my paternal grandfather *Vappa* dismissing the Jews as a *cursed people* while in later times while residing at Umma House for a while in my youth I recall grandmother *Umma* expressing a great admiration for Hitler, calling him a *strong man*. Unlike some Muslims today, I never heard them rue that *Hitler had not finished the job*. I could n't imagine they would condone the Fuhrer's plan to exterminate Jewry, but there was ill-feeling nevertheless. The reason for the hostility was perhaps the stories of Prophet Muhammad's own treatment at the hands of the Jews, like when he and his small group of followers were betrayed by them after taking flight to the town of Medina.

The Jews who fondly believed themselves to be the 'Chosen People' had not only rejected and sought to kill Jesus who had

been sent by God to reform them and do away with their devious practices like usury, but even when given a second chance to accept the message of Islam brought by their Arabian cousins, the offspring of their forefather Abraham through a different mother, had spurned it in their racial arrogance.

Also deeply troubling to them no doubt was the emergence of Israel, the Jewish state that generation had witnessed being implanted upon a Muslim country once known as Palestine. They had probably heard or read how the Zionist state had been founded by Jewish terror groups like the Irgun and Stern Gang who massacred in cold blood innocent Palestinian men, women and children and even the unborn in the wombs of their mothers, to enable the Jews to return to their 'Promised land' after a nearly 2000 year exodus as a result of Roman rule.

Prominently hanging on a wall of Umma House was a framed colour picture of the Dome of the Rock Mosque in Jerusalem with its beautiful golden cupola which had come under Israeli occupation following the Six Day War fought in 1967, an aide memoire that this third holiest mosque after Mecca and Medina, the one from which the Prophet had ascended spiritually to the heavens, would always remain dear to Muslim hearts. The Jews were now claiming the site as their own on the grounds that their holiest shrine, the Temple of Solomon, long destroyed by the Romans had once stood there. But nay, the picture on the wall, like in many other Muslim households, was a compelling reminder that Muslims would not allow it. The holy land would have to be liberated, if not in our times, certainly before the end of days. Islamic tradition had it that Jesus would descend to earth before the Last Day to usher in an era of peace and justice. The Muslims would throw in their lot with him and they would fight against the Antichrist and his Jewish bandwagon, wiping out the entire lot!

Among other beliefs which we shared with our Christian friends was the belief in angels, winged beings created from light, among them, the archangel Gabriel known to us as Jibreel, the angel of revelation who had announced Jesus' birth to Mary

and brought down the Qur'an to Muhammad. There were others we learnt about, for instance Mikail known to Christians as Michael. Then there was Izraeel or Azrael, the Angel of Death who took away the souls of those God had willed to die and Israfeel or Raphael who was bidden to blow the trumpet that would extinguish the lives of all creation on the Last day, after which the Almighty would resurrect them for the afterlife. These four archangels we learned about from our textbooks, but there were others I was not aware of. One such was Rilwaan, the Keeper of Paradise after whom a Muslim classmate of mine had been named. I once happened to remark to grandmother that this chap had a funny sounding name that sounded more like a *rilava*, a type of light brown furred monkey commonly found in the country. She promptly corrected me, admonishing me not to say such things, for to put it in her words, it was an *angelic name*. Grandma, despite her Tamil speaking upbringing, knew her English well and put it to good use especially when instructing us on religion.

Unlike Accha House, Umma House had no dogs as they were believed to keep the angels out. However there was one angel whose advent was often taken to be indicated by the howl of a dog. The folk at Umma House held that whenever a dog howled incessantly especially at night, a death would very likely take place in the vicinity, since the creature could make out the frightening form of Azrael, the Angel of Death as he hovered around, waiting to take the soul of a dying man or woman.

It was mainly from an English translation of the Qur'an and of course uncle Firoze that we imbibed the stories of the prophets, belief in whom was another important article of the Islamic faith. The Qur'an named only 25 prophets from Adam to Muhammad, but according to long accepted Islamic tradition there had been over a hundred thousand prophets. There had to be, for had not God sent them to every nation at different times to invite people to Godliness and warn them to keep away from evil. Adam's mission had been confined to his immediate descendants, that of the later Hebrew Prophets like Moses,

David and Solomon to their people and the final mission of Muhammad meant for all mankind.

Our English translation of the Qur'an sounded somewhat like the Bible when it spoke of these Divinely inspired messengers of God. The story of the first man Adam it dealt with at length with man's arch foe Satan being brought into the narrative. God, having decided to create a vicegerent on earth commanded the angels to fall prostrate before Adam after He had fashioned and breathed into him his soul. They all fell down prostrate before him, except Iblees, a Jinn or Genie created from fire who refused saying: "*I am better than him. You created me from fire and him you created from clay*". Since then, this Iblees, also known as Shaytaan or Satan had been the arch enemy of man telling God Himself that he would mislead and arouse in men false desires, ordering them to slit the ears of cattle and change the nature created by God.

God created for Adam whom we call Aadam a wife Hawwa or Eve and let them dwell in paradise, at the same time warning them not to eat from a particular tree. Satan who was up to mischief whispered to them that God had forbidden them the tree only because they would become angels or immortals and so misled them with the promise of a kingdom that would never waste away. They ate of the forbidden fruit so that the shame of what was hidden from them, their private parts, became manifest. They sought God's forgiveness and He forgave them, but banished them to earth to live and die and to propagate their kind. The Holy Book also told the stories of many other prophets, but these stories, profound as they were, were scattered over its many pages and not as easy to make out to our young minds as the way uncle Firoze related it to us in his simple language in the course of the casual, yet intellectually stimulating conversations we had with him.

So it was that we learned about the story of Noah and his Ark which conducted to safety a pair of every species of animal after the great flood so that they could propagate their kind once the waters had subsided; the story of Abraham who had discovered

God amidst all the idolatry around him and who was even willing to sacrifice his son Ishmael to Him after seeing a dream, only to find near the sacrificial spot a sheep being sent to take his beloved son's place; and even the story of his contemporary and kinsman Lot who was sent to reform the people of Sodom but to no avail, whereupon God rained down fire and brimstone on their city. He was cautious not to go into too much detail, simply telling us in all innocence that these folk were 'bad people' but not dwelling on what he meant by it. After all we were too young to understand what a Sodomite or for that matter a Bugger really meant.

Belief in an afterlife we were also agreed on, with the godly entering heaven and the devilish falling into hell following the Great Judgement when the Almighty Himself judges them, questioning and penalizing them on matters even as seemingly trivial as taking the life of a bird for no cause. I could only imagine that Day of Judgement as a vast horde of humanity with God passing judgement this way or that on each and every one of them who would then be commanded to cross a bridge as thin as a hairline. The godly ones would have no difficulty crossing over to paradise while the evil-doers would simply not make it, falling over somewhere midway into an abyss of hellfire where they would suffer torment upon torment. This fiery abode of the wicked ones we know as *jahannam*, the same as *Gehenna* which Jesus warned us about.

Paradise on the other hand, we were told, was a beautiful place before which all the bounties of the earth would pale in contrast. Here was a place where all that one desired would be fulfilled in an instant. For instance if one longed for an apple, he had only to wish it and presto it would appear right away in our hand. This was perhaps a bit overdoing it, but nevertheless sufficed to show us what paradise could be like. About the only splendour of paradise we were not told about then were the *houris*, fabulously beautiful heavenly nymphs whom no man or genie would have touched before.

Besides our belief in God & c, what would also define us as Muslims was the service or prayer we offered Him, not once, but five times a day. Yet it would not be proper to do so with our foreskins intact, especially at our age when it was still not retractable and when the urine after a pee tended to stick on to it. Urine and such unclean bodily emissions are considered by Muslims *najis* or polluting to the extent of invalidating one's prayer and a Muslim child was expected to commence his prayer when he was only ten years old. In our younger days, it had served a protective function, protecting our little penises and especially the glans, the erogeneos warhead-like part, from harm or injury in the process of birth itself and even in later times when we would have been running about naked, besides preventing any urine dribbling after a pee soiling our pants; but now it had outlived its use and had to go. And so it was that we were deprived of our little prepuces at about the age of ten in a little surgical operation our folk simply called *sunnat* 'the way'. The procedure not only purified us for prayer, but also physically marked us out as Muslims.

Within a year or two, urged on by grandmother, we were learning to say our daily prayers, getting used to it by attending the weekly Friday congregational prayers at the nearby Colpetty or Devatagaha Mosque and studying a book entitled 'Let's Pray' issued free by a foreign Muslim missionary organization. The manual proved to be an easy one to follow as it was well illustrated, depicting all the movements of prayer with the Arabic words one had to utter neatly printed below in Latin text with its English translation. We had by this time already learnt what would go on to be the main body of the prayer, the *Fatiha* or Islamic Lord's Prayer and a couple of other *surahs* or chapters of the Qur'an that would figure in our daily prayers. These short surahs were three in number; *Surah Ikhlas* which affirmed the Oneness of God; *Surah Falaq* where one sought the protection of the Lord of the Dawn from the evil He had created, from the evil of the darkening night and of witches blowing on knots, and *Surah Nas* where one sought refuge in

the Lord and Cherisher of Mankind from the evil one who whispered in the hearts of jinn and men. These we had by-hearted when quite young, well before we were circumcised, reciting these at night shortly before going to bed to earn our Lord's favour.

And so there we were praying to God day and night in the peculiar form of Islamic prayer with its cycles of standing, bowing, kneeling and prostrating - the most active form of prayer prescribed in any faith. Particularly elevating to both body and mind was the prostrating posture where after dropping on one's knees one placed the forehead on to the ground in an act of utter humility and submission to the One True God, the blood gushing in to the brain imbuing to the head a feeling of tremendous exhillaration that one sometimes felt like keeping it that way for as long as one could. The prayers we sometimes offered at home and sometimes at the mosque, making it a practice to walk all the way to the Colpetty Grand Mosque for the dawn *Subah* prayer which we would pray in congregation, after which we would find our way to a scenic spot at Perahera Mawatha overlooking the Beira Lake to enjoy the cooling breezes as the day broke.

Our grandmother we constantly saw at prayer in her bedroom and grandfather often found his way to the Colpetty Mosque, on one occasion even chiding us when still quite young for trying to accompany him to the mosque wearing shorts. Even children had to be well attired without their thighs showing in order to visit God's House and this he impressed on us very early. However father nor mother offered their daily prayers, though father never missed his Friday prayers and whenever possible took us along with him. They were not alone. Many Muslims of that generation seemed to think that the Friday prayer alone was compulsory much like Sunday service in church and took their daily prayers lightly or neglected them altogether.

One could hardly blame them. They lived at a time when much of the Islamic world following the fall of the Ottoman empire had succumbed to colonialism, socialism and petty

nationalisms that banished religion to the rural backwoods except for a few lucky ones who had kept the faith. However that was changing in the 1980s when we were growing up and entering our teens. A sort of Islamic revival was underway and it told in many things, and not just prayer.

This was seen in other more external aspects like dress, particularly of the women, so that now instead of looking like any other local woman in saree and uncovered head of hair, they were clad from top to toe; the fairly orthodox among them with their colourful headscarves looking like red riding hoods; the strictly orthodox with their hooded heads and long gowns like Christian nuns and the ultra orthodox with their black veils with only a slit for the eyes like Japanese ninja warriors, a strange and outlandish sight for the uninitiated.

Before the revival some seemed not to be aware even of the basic teachings of the religion against idolatry, the greatest offence one can do to God. For instance, reverence for some saintly persons known locally as *awliya* or guardians had degenerated to such a low level among certain sections of local Muslims that they were used to posting pictures of these persons on the walls of their houses and praying to them, beseeching them to intercede with the Almighty to grant the humble supplicants their very worldly wishes.

This we saw even in our own home in our young days when mother used to hang upon a wall in the pantry of Accha House a framed picture of a local saint named Thalayan Bawa, a barebodied fakeer clad only in a sarong and seated on the ground cross-legged much like some Indian guru, a pose perhaps taken after the seated Buddha familiar to most Sri Lankans. She would pray to the saint for favours while holding under the framed image an incense holder as if the fragrant fumes it belched would reach him in some distant spiritual abode. Mother used to say that the easiest way to a man's heart was through his stomach, but now she seemed to think that it was through his nose. Her prayers, needless to say, went unanswered though it took some time for the sanctified image to fall from grace.

True, the image concerned was not an idol in the strict sense of a graven object made of wood or stone nor was it, strictly speaking, bowed down to; nevertheless the very act of giving it a hallowed place and praying to it as a medium between man and God, was in itself anathema to the faith, since the Almighty is supposed to be prayed to directly, not through an intermediary of any sort, especially the picture of a dead man.

Despite its unflinching attitude towards idolatry, Muslims generally do not regard photographs even of living creatures to be prohibited in their faith as they are a mere reflection of an existing created object much like a mirror image and not a product of one's own imagination as a statue would be. Nor for that matter are playthings for children prohibited, for had not the Prophet, upon beholding a doll belonging to his young wife Ayisha which she probably kept as a keepsake and inquiring what it was, merely laughed when he was told it was a winged horse and that King Solomon had them.

There were nevertheless occasions I thought that the penal laws of Islam, though not applicable to us here, were rather harsh. For instance, when the CBS television series Kane and Abel was aired on local TV in early 1987 towards the tail end of our stay at Accha House. The series named after Adam's two sons Cain and Abel known to us Muslims as Qabeel and Habeel told the story of two men, worlds apart, one a privileged US banker and the other a Polish migrant who no sooner they meet, fall apart, with one later finding that the other who had passed away, actually had a soft spot for him, a nicely woven tale no doubt, but one that also depicted Islam in a very bad light.

A part of the plot had the Polish hero Abel giving the slip to the Germans and Russians in the days of the Great War and finding his way to the Ottoman dominions. Here, out of hunger he grabs a fruit and makes away with it after a salesman refuses to accept his obsolete banknote. He is quickly arrested and taken to the executioner to have his hand lopped off, but in the nick of time is saved by a diplomat who conveys him to the Polish

consulate whence he migrates to the United States to start life anew.

It was much later that I would find out that the tale was an absolute travesty of facts, for no Ottoman who knew very well the laws of his faith would cut off the hand of a man who stole out of hunger or something as insignificant as an apple or orange. Further, the act itself as portrayed in the series was not theft but misappropriation which does not invite such punishment.

True, Islamic law lays down that the hand of the thief, male or female, must be cut off from the wrist, but many conditions apply before such punishment could be carried out. For instance, it could not apply to a child, a lunatic or one who steals out of hunger, or in a famine or a war or in the case of public property. The item stolen must also have a considerable value, worth at least a little over a gram of gold, besides being deliberately removed with the intention of stealing from a place of safekeeping like a safe or locked house, which by extension means it cannot apply to those sharing a common residence, or even an employee, servant or guest. Thefts in public places even when no one is looking around will not incur the punishment, so that it will not apply even to shoplifting or pickpocketing; nor will appropriating an item by seizing it or running away with it since an element of stealth such as seen in burglary should be involved. And to cap it all, the victim could pardon the thief by gifting the stolen item to him or her before he or she is taken to the judge for redress.

These and many other conditions like the requirement for two witnesses seeing the thief in the act itself make the prescribed punishment for theft a most difficult one to implement, which was of course not what I saw in the series. In fact, it made me feel rather ashamed that a man should be so punished for an offence as trivial as getting away with an apple or orange simply to satisfy his hunger.

What I would later find out was that the punishment portrayed in the series reflected not the state of affairs as it existed in Islamdom, but rather of mediaval Europe and even of pre-eighteenth century England when even a teenager could be put to death for stealing something as little as a loaf of bread out of hunger, let alone pickpocketing or petty shoplifting, which went even beyond Jesus prescription:"*If your right hand sins, cut it off*", a few of over 200 individually defined capital crimes the English had at the time.

CHAPTER 34

Circumcision

Circumcision is a hallowed Islamic rite going back to the days of Abraham, and perhaps even further back to the time of the Pharoahs. The Egyptians did not confine it to their males like the Jews did, but also extended it to their maids. Lady Hagar, Abraham's Egyptian spouse was herself cleansed by it and passed it on to her descendants through her son Ishmael who eventually went on to become the father of that nation we know today as the Arabs.

In Islam too, both males and females are supposed to be purified by it, though in the case of males it is better known and publicized, being generally performed in early childhood between the ages of 5 and 10. The circumcision of girls is generally performed in early infancy, usually on the 40th day and is not publicized beyond the immediate family circle. It is strictly women's business left entirely to the lot of women.

The difference in the case of Muslim male circumcision is that it is not strictly an all male affair. Women are associated with it in different ways. In Arab societies mothers would prepare their young sons for it by gently endeavouring to push the foreskin beyond the glans and singing verses to the effect that what they are doing will make them men. In Malaysia, the involvement is taken further, with female surgeons playing an active role in lopping off the prepuces of litle boys, many of them as young as seven years, the preferred age.

In Sri Lanka the female involvement is much less marked though sometimes this is observed in the breach. In our case, the earliest announcements of the impending operation came from women, not surprisingly. That was when mother and her assistant at father's auctions whom we fondly called Zameen aunty used to joke about it once in a while, teasingly commenting about cutting our 'gadgets'. Now gadget was the name by which we referred to our little penises, no doubt taught

to us by mother. Hearing it often since the tender age of five or six we took no notice of it, till one day father too joked about it, and mother matter of factly asked him "*Seriously Luvi, when are we going to circumcise them?*". I was about seven years old then and realized from the tone of mother's voice it was no joking matter after all. This was serious talk!

And so it was that my brethren and I girded ourselves for the surgeon's scalpel within the next couple of years. Though we were not too keen about it initially, with time the perception changed and I came over to look upon it in a more positive light, even eagerly looking forward to it. Not that I disliked the idea of having a prepuce or removing the little strands of thread from my pants that sometimes got embedded in that fold of skin which I regarded more as a diversion than anything else; there was something about altering this very special organ and that was the draw. Little did I know it then, but had I remained uncut into my teens it would not have been very conducive to my personal hygiene as the prepuces of grown-ups are said to produce a cheesy stuff called smegma which may serve as a breeding ground for germs. Little wonder then that my Islamic faith, so concerned as it was with cleanliness laid down that this superfluous bit of skin, though serving a protective function in infancy and early childhood, be removed before adulthood. This applied to both males and females, for women too have a little prepuce that covers their clitoris like a hood.

I gradually came to fantasize with the idea - perhaps the first sirrings of a very nascent, narcissistic sexuality - of having a circumcised penis and even made several attempts at about the age of eight to push the foreskin beyond the glans to see how good it looked. Nay, it would not budge, still looking very much like an unpeeled banana with its lower tip still intact. It was only a year or so later and with some difficulty that I would succeed in retracting the foreskin to reveal a pink glans protruding beyond the prepuce that had been temporarily drawn back. When would it be a permanent feature of my organ I wondered. I didn't have long to wait. The big day came the following year,

but when it did, I nor my brothers - who were all done the same day - were too happy about going under the scalpel. It momentarily scared us. After all we were about to be fleeced of our foreskins. It was only a little bit of skin no doubt, but it was still skin and it was going to be shorn off us like the scalp of an injun. Any kid would be apprehensive when that moment arrived.

We were done at a local hospital or nursing home during the school holidays as most Muslim boys were and still are. Asgar being the elder by 12 minutes went in first. And then they came for me. As I was being taken in to the operating theatre and he was being wheeled out on a stretcher, I queried "*Did it pain?*" much to the amusement of the giggling nurses. All I could hear was a muffled mumble and I figured it wouldn't be easy going. I was done by a Muslim surgeon ably assisted by this matronly type, little doubt the matron of the home as far as I could judge from her peculiar headdress that looked like a truncated pyramid.

Even though the part had been locally anaesthesized, I was still in my senses and could somewhat feel the doctor putting his scalpel or shears or whatever he used back there to good use as he snipped and stitched as I lay down strapped to the table. I muttered it hurt, but the man carried on indifferent to my murmers. I could not see it being done as a metal or plastic plate of some sort had been placed as a no-see barrier near the navel area, blocking my view.

The operation a success we were conveyed home in a van clad in white sarongs and were soon recuperating, though it took about a week or so for the wound, dressed in white bandage, to heal. Our paternal grandmother Umma, who had much experience in this sort of thing, having herself seen to the circumcision of as many as seven sons, paid a visit to Accha House, perhaps her first and last, to remove the dressing about a week after the snip. She and mother gently took off the dressing that evening after flushing it with water while we were all wet and naked in the bathroom.

The wound was still somewhat sore, but healed well no sooner mother bandaged it with some gamma-irradiated gauze recommended by a family doctor. It certainly looked better than the uncut organ or so I thought. At least now it looked more like a modern missile with a thick warhead than an unpeeled banana with its discoloured primitive looking excrescence at the tip, a look which perhaps appealed to my subconscious militaristic psyche.

It was while recovering and running about wearing nothing but underpants that a saucy Malay girl named Zeenia, joined our parents' business as an auction assistant. To make our day, she fawned it was a very good thing for boys to have done, and that they did it in the West too. We too were quite certain about its benefits as mother too had mentioned that they did it in countries like the US, but we were a bit irked why only boys had to undergo it. Why not girls, we reasoned. Could not something similar be done to girls ? We were sticklers for gender equality even then. *What's good for the gander, had to be good for the goose surely*. No one had ever talked of girls being circumcised, but we decided to find out just in case. And so one day we decided to ask this young lady we called Zeenia Aunty whether girls were circumcised. *No!*, she simpered quite bemused, her lips from which we had tried to winkle the answer poutier than usual. We should have known better. After all, it's strictly women's business!

CHAPTER 35

Growing up

When a child, one simply cannot wait to grow up which is perhaps why in one's young days, time seems to pass ever so slowly but when one really grows up it seems to fly so swiftly so that one wonders whether a lifetime is such a long time after all. Looking back on those days even now it seems to me that even a little time seemed so much back then.I supposed like most or all kids my age that babies were born spontaneously, with their mothers' bellies being slit open to deliver them and that fathers were there simply as the husbands of their wives, to take care of their wives' children.

As with life, so with death. There was a time in my very young days when I believed this worldly life was eternal and that people lived on and on. Even when I became aware of this thing men called death, I came to believe that men or animals died only when killed by another or in an accident. It was only in later times that I learned that people could die of disease and old age like when our great grandpa *pappa* died. Nobody could escape death and this in itself seemed such a frightening prospect. I would eventually come to accept it as a fact of life. As our Holy Book, the Qur'an succinctly put it *Every soul shall taste of death*.

One evening when quite young, I learned that the heart had to continually beat to keep one alive. I had felt that beat before, going *dug dug, dug dug*, but upon hearing the news, instinctively placed my hand upon my chest, only to recoil in fright, for I could feel no such beat. Startled, I gasped "*Mamma, my heart has stopped beating!*". Mother burst out in laughter while my heart skipped a beat or two. Being a right hander, I had held my hand on to the right side of the chest. She promptly replied that the pump was on the left side, and so placing my left hand on it I could now breathe a sigh of relief. I was probably aware of the heart's home even earlier but had forgotten about

it in my sudden curiosity following the revelation that its beat was necessary to live.

Another object of curiosity were of course our genitals which we knew simply as 'gadgets' and which we believed to be solely for pissing purposes. I recall us asking mother one evening after stripping for our regular bath or body wash whether girls too had 'gadgets' and being told that they had no such thing. This only aroused our curiosity further, which was only satiated when we convinced a young female guest holidaying in the house to play doctor. *You show me yours, I'll show you mine!*

Indeed so innocent were we at the time that we conjectured whether not the word *fucker* which we knew to be a 'bad word' had its origins in the World War One German warplane known as *Fokker*. We reasoned that this word which even grown-ups dare not use except when greatly incensed, must have come into being when the Brits began cursing the German Fokkers which gave them some extraordinary dogfights during the Great War. In fact, allied pilots called themselves 'Fokker fodder' when facing the superior German planes. Our little theory on the F Word was not so far fetched after all.

The only sex education we had in those days came in the form of a coverless outdated sex manual with a few illustrations and a lot of missing pages which one of us found neatly tucked away in our parents' cupboard or drawer. We would eagerly browse through it when our parents were away, though there was nothing much we could glean from it except for a few irrelevant tidbits like nudist camps and a penis enlargement technique probably thought up by some aging Casanova.

Sexuality was a slow process that peaked in my early teens. Its first signs I guess were the feelings of shame I experienced while still quite young such as when I attempted to put my socks on in the mornings before departing for school and noticed my toes sticking out of my feet which I thought to be a rather unseemly sight, perhaps shades of the shame our first parents Adam and Eve felt upon discovering their nakedness after eating

of the forbidden fruit, though strangely this sense of shame did not extend to my still uncircumcised penis.

A year or two after circumcision, when I was about twelve years old I noticed after urination, a thicker, stickier fluid trickle out following the spray of urine which was all the more noticeable in the absence of the foreskin. This was about the time I began to experience some amorous thoughts, though it took some rather strange forms like fantasizing over a lurid, rather kinky picture of Lady Godiva, naked and rather golden-complexioned with firm upturned breasts and cascading blond hair sensually mounted on a white horse riding through the town of Coventry. This salacious, almost pin-up picture which I came across in an illustrated children's encyclopaedia in the Kiddies section of the Colombo Public Library was veritable kinderporn, certainly enough to turn on any pubescent boy, kindling a fire of a desire he could achieve only in his wettest dreams, in a fantasy factory of his own making.

No words could capture the hold it had on me- this image that could spark a Baccanalian orgy or drive an aspiring Viking warrior to the battlefield fantasizing about the Valkyries in Valhalla. Unlike today's prudishly conservative culture, folk back then did not seem to think of such works in the public domain as corrupting, which is why even a cartoon strip like Avenell and Romero's *Axa* published in the *Sun*, a local daily newspaper as late as the 1980s could depict the heroine topless or even nude at times in a manner that it could even have a seasoned Victorian voyeur drooling over it.

The hormones had sprung into action and before long I would experience my first ejaculation, not as a wet dream, as many adolescents do, but as a deliberate attempt to hurry my manhood. So there I was one afternoon after school in the bathroom of Accha House all alone to myself, my right hand the only collaborator in the peccadillo now being enacted. Destiny was at play here, a drama that would change my life forever. It didn't take long to come, and come it did with a force and feeling that had me almost reeling - this rapture, when bursts of

white seed gushed forth in a flush of orgasmic delight. In the few seconds that preceeded that fateful moment I had felt my heart throbbing with excitement, as if it were in some mighty rush, flushing my body with adrenaline and sending the hot blood pulsing through my veins, so overwhelming that it was almost as if I were in a dream, nay in a delusion of fantastic, unimaginable proportions. I was the first of my siblings to experience that rupture into adulthood and nedless to say was proud of it. I had finally become a man and I had rushed it. The experience was impressionable, for even many years later I would get away with the idea that people made love standing.

On the one hand, it had been a fall from innocence, the innocence of childhood, the innocence of my father Adam, the father of my fathers, before he ate of the forbidden fruit and felt the shame of sex. On the other, it had been a flight, a flight to another world that looked down upon the celibacy of childhood with scorn, a world created weak in the flesh both as bait for sin and as a foretaste of the pleasures of paradise. A world one had to tread with caution. I would reserve my first real sexual encounter for marriage, many, many years after we had left Accha House. My faith strictly forbade pre-marital liaisons of any kind and it had to prevail over any other instinct, however strong it may have been.