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# Firefly Song

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## FIREFLY SONG

Lasantha Rodrigo

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Chethiya is a brown, gay, disabled (ultimately), abused young man from Sri Lanka, who comes to the U.S. on a full scholarship. His dream is to be a Broadway star, but after coming out of his first relationship with an emotionally abusive, alcoholic man, he is diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, a chronic, degenerative neurological disease that results in demyelination, causing progressive debilitation. The story is divided into six chapters that narrate his life under various marginalizations he is subjected to, culminating in traumatization. His tale, however, ends on a positive note of redemption with the narrator looking forward to his days to come.

FIREFLY SONG

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English

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FIREFLY SONG

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation is dedicated to my mom

W.W.L.R.

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CHAPTER I

THERE WERE SIX OF US ON MULBERRY STREET

(A BROWN MAN)



*My home is light buttermilk, and the texture reminds me of grainy frosting.*

*Located on a small branch of Mulberry Street, it looks majestic, especially when the sun sets. Golds and saffrons. This is where I grow up. This is where I make dazzling garments for dolls and dress up in mom's colorful saris when there's no one in the house. A strange boy, I am.*

*In the morning, I walk on the gravel lane with Aiya to the bus stop. When coffee trees on either side of the street are in bloom, Mulberry Street hypnotizes me with the scent. Thaththa takes me home after school on his orange motorbike. Near the blue-green lake, I am entranced by the fragrance of white water-lilies sleeping.*

*It's like a dream, my growing up years. Rich in color. Picture-perfect, almost. Innocent. Pure.*

\* \* \*

When I was a little boy, I used to sleep in my parents' bed. I was right next to Amma, the way I liked. Her arm was next to me, and I needed it to fall asleep. I gave her arm different colored kisses every night. If I were in a good mood, a happy mood, the kisses were gold, silver, or pink. If I were sad or annoyed, I gave her arm black or brown kisses. Thaththa was on the other side. There was a powder-blue mosquito net covering us all. Just before going to bed, sometimes, Thaththa rubbed mosquito repellent on my skin. These repellents were expensive. They were a luxury for us.

\* \* \*

I remember staying in a damp, discolored, musty annex in my maternal grandmother's big house. We didn't have much money, so we had to be grateful to

Grandma for letting us stay in her house. When her youngest son's kids came over, Grandma was all smiles. She called them her "angels." Dharshini and Asanga always got more biscuits than we did at tea time. Grandma kept her rather soggy ginger snaps in an old tin. We didn't know where she hid it. At tea time, she called Dharshini and Asanga.

"Come get your treats, Dharshini and Asanga! I'm giving you four each today."

We only got two each. We were just a pathetic brood, unfavored and miserable.

When we lived in Grandma's annex, I sometimes saw Buddhist priests going down the road. I was fascinated by their orange robes. Their heads were shaved, and in the morning, they went from house to house, asking for food. They were not supposed to eat anything after noon. I was excited to have them come to Grandma's house. I insisted on carrying whatever food Grandma wanted to give them. I took it with both my hands and carried it to put in the wooden bowls they carried. When the sun was glaring, their shaved heads shone like in the story-books I saw. I wanted to be like them. With orange robes against brown skins and dark, wooden bowls in hand, they blessed those who gave them food. "Suwapath wewa!" they said. They looked peaceful. Compassionate. Content.

\* \* \*

Aunty Yamuna, one of Thaththa's younger sisters, never forgot to mention that I was dark like a little tropical berry when I was born. When I grew up, the darkness seemed to have stretched across my skin, lightening it a little. I became like everyone else. Thaththa called me "malli," little brother. He said my head was like a tamarind seed, smooth and even.

In my middle-class universe, amidst poverty, heat, mosquitoes, monsoon rains, bombs, and unrest, I grew up fast like most children do. I remember how every cookie, every candy bar, every chocolate we received had to be divided into six equal parts. My parents made us practice sharing to the very last letter of the word.

\* \* \*

There was an enormous uguressa tree in Grandma's back yard. The purple-colored fruit, when ripe, was sweet and tart at the same time. Grandma got poor Gunadasa to hang a ringer made out of an old milk powder tin to scare off squirrels and birds. A long corridor, open to the backyard, led to our annex. On this corridor, on the back stoop, Amma fed Sha and me alternately from her own hand. In one plate of white rice, she mixed two or three curries and formed it into bite-sized balls. Then one for me and one for Sha. When she fed us, even the most ordinary and cheap curries became more palatable and appealing. Just in front of us was a scraggy pomegranate tree without any fruit on it. There were orange-colored blossoms, but no fruit.

One early morning, when it was still dark outside, we all moved to a house that was still being built. It was in the same town that Grandma's house was, but it was our own. When we moved that dark morning, Amma made kiribath, the fragrance of which filled the empty house with wholesomeness. Hopes. Dreams. The aroma of white rice and creamy coconut milk heralded our new beginning. An invigorating breeze blew in from marshes that were directly ahead. Our new house was perched in an expanse of marshy land with rivulets running through. Golden-tailed little fishes glistened when the sun appeared unashful in the dry season. A beautiful illusion, perhaps.

\* \* \*

Our house was naked without curtains or even windows. When darkness descended, Amma sat outside on a verandah chair, and Sha and I sat on her lap. Stars came out and so did a host of fireflies with their little, moving lanterns of light. Sha and I jumped off Amma's lap to come up with our own firefly game. We got them to land on our palms, and the one with the most fireflies was the winner. Sha always won.

I was too little.

Others in the neighborhood probably watched television, but we didn't have a TV. On quiet nights, when the house was packed with blood-sucking mosquitoes, studying was the only thing to do. My older siblings and girl cousins listened to some radio drama too difficult for me to understand. When it was uncomfortably warm at night and I became sleepless, Amma rocked me to sleep on her stretched out legs. Amidst the darkness, the mosquitoes, and the warm air, I went to a better land on Amma's legs: a land of plenty and prosperity. I would have liked to see Amma's face when she saw me falling asleep. When I had fallen completely asleep, she carried me to my bed and covered me with a blanket to shield me from the hungry insects and the unexpected coldness of a dawn that arrived with dew.

\* \* \*

Thaththa used to switch jobs every so often. He was a tour guide for a while. When we were little, he invited some of the foreigners he was a guide for, to have lunch or dinner with us. Our naked house was rather meager for foreign eyes. The bedrooms didn't have doors or even curtains, so ungodly messes were open to foreign inspection.

Amma made clothes for us; all four of us. Ready-made clothes were way too expensive to buy. Our school uniforms were far from perfect because Amma stitched them all. She had to wash and iron them as well. The mornings were a big hullabaloo. Amma cooked, cleaned, washed, packed our lunches, ironed clothes, and finally, got ready herself to go teach English. She had to take three different buses to get to the school. It was in a fairly loud area unlike the manipulated serenity of suburbia.

Thaththa slept. When he woke up, he screamed our names repeatedly in an attempt to get us out of bed.

“Wake up, Sha!”

“Wake up, Che!”

“Wake up, Nish!”

“Wake up, Gaya!”

“Wake up, wake up, wake up! What is this?! It’s almost six thirty. Should I spray some water?”

So we woke up. Sparrows chirped loudly. Our neighborhood had been designated a bird sanctuary. Thaththa’s voice was more commanding, shriller, and a lot more urgent than the sparrows’. One by one we headed to the bathroom. For all six of us, there was only one small bathroom. It wasn’t much of a bathroom either, as it had not been completed. The floor and walls were rough cement, and the water, pumped directly from our well, was painfully cold in the morning. When running late, we felt that six to one was a bad ratio.

“Sha, are you going to school or a beauty pageant?” Aiya would ask impatiently.

“Give me a break; I’m a girl,” Sha would retort.

I didn’t know what happened in our house when we were all gone to school. Amma was the last to leave. After finishing all her morning chores, she had to wear six yards of sari to go teach English in that overcrowded area of Colombo. Traveling by bus was no easy task. The buses were in such a hurry, competing with one another, they took off just as passengers could barely get in. The often malfunctioning bell didn’t ring, sometimes, when passengers had to get off the bus. Buses were full of drama: of the oppressed; the lower-middle class. Brown bodies jam-packed in discomfort. This is how they began their day. This is how they ended their day, too. Arms against arms, legs against legs, hands against faces. Annoyed bus conductors, shouting passengers, body odors, sneezes, sighs of misery.

Aiya and I went to one of the most prestigious public schools in Colombo. Built in 1835 by the British, Colombo College was in the most elitist neighborhood in Sri Lanka: Colombo 7. In that part of Colombo, women drove cars and wore pants. They were still brown, but some of them were of lighter shades, almost white. When they spoke Sinhalese, the native tongue, they had very Anglicized accents. It was evident that they also took pride in their accents. “Very posh,” they would say. If they felt they had to show compassion, they would say a highly contrived, “Sin, men.”

Thaththa was gone for weeks on end. When he came back, he was happier and had more money, it seemed. We were excited when he invited his foreign guests to the house. I remember Aunty Chi Chi, who was from Hong Kong. She had jagged teeth and loved to drink hot tea. Amma served her black tea with a piece of jaggery made out of

Kithul treacle, and aunty Chi Chi said, “Wow, this is so yummy,” and after the first time, Amma was making a lot of tea just for her, and Aunty Chi Chi insisted on kithul kakuru every time. Uncle Chi Chi always made us laugh. “Why did the chicken cross the road,” he asked me. “To see me,” I said. “Good try, mister! But he just wanted to get to the other side,” he answered. Then he dramatized it, flinging his arms about and making all kinds of chicken sounds.

\* \* \*

In the eighties, I heard my parents talking about riots in the capital. It took me many years to comprehend the situation. The Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority were not seeing eye-to-eye, Thaththa said. I remember hearing about Tamil shops being looted and burned. Curfew was imposed, and we had to stock food for many days. We lived in a predominantly Sinhalese area, but it became evident to us that no place was safe, especially for the Tamils. Angry Sinhalese mobs were setting fire to vehicles with Tamil people and their houses and shops. I heard that these mobs stopped moving vehicles and asked the passengers to pronounce certain words in Sinhalese. When their speech was detected to have Tamil accents, the fate of the vehicles and those who travelled in them was decided. Mothers, fathers, kids were roasted alive for being apparent outsiders. The land belonged to the Sinhalese, they claimed. The Tamil minority had to travel as far as Jaffna, the northern peninsula of the country, to be safe. There they clustered with like-minded, traumatized, and rejected brothers and sisters to avoid danger, to start over from scratch, to shed tears for the brutalized and annihilated.

I was young, but I felt the pain in their eyes. We learned in social studies that Tamils came to the country as indentured plantation workers, but there's evidence that they had been there from the time of ancient kings.

I was safe in suburbia. I was safe because I was Sinhalese. I was safe because I didn't speak Sinhalese with a Tamil accent. I was safe because of my involuntary skin tone. I heard our neighbor, Perera Uncle, who was into heavy drinking, talking to Thaththa. He said that next to the bank he worked at, shops belonging to Tamil people were destroyed. People looted the property, and Perera Uncle snatched "free goodies" belonging to Tamil shop owners who labored over years to own.

"Free gold jewelry, electronics, and many other valuable items, machang. I couldn't resist."

"Would you like it if it happened to you?"

"Well, it didn't."

I didn't like to go to their house after I heard this. His two daughters, Ayesha and Binari, used to play with us, but Amma said we probably shouldn't go there again. I understood what she meant. The very next week, Perera Aunty wore new gold jewelry. How could she? How could he?

\* \* \*

Sweat beads trickled down my forehead in the blazing sun. I wiped them off with the hand making contact with my brownness. My skin. My skin. Did it make me a better person? More credible? More honorable? This skin tone of mine and the language I



spoke created a shield to protect me when mad blood stirred under the pretext of patriotism and nationalism.

In school, kids got along: Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim, Eurasian. They didn't use the yardstick employed by some of their parents, but then, of course, the parents intervened. "Don't speak with so and so," they said. "Don't you ever be seen with so and so again," they threatened. At dusk when the sun set amidst marshes, the sky was decked in a burning evening gown. The rays blinded me, and far away in the marshy expanse, I saw birds flying to their nests with food for the young ones. A carefree existence. An existence ruled by corporeal needs. In the suburban air, I could breathe in the scent of pigeon orchids that were opening up to release that strong, unsettling scent, reminding me of funerals. I walked into the kitchen where Amma was cooking supper. She was making a Malay pickle and asked me if I would like a date. She ruffled my hair. There was an eerie silence. It was time to turn the lights on.

\* \* \*

I liked looking at myself in the mirror, especially the full-length one in my sisters' room. When they were not home, I paraded in front of it, having dramatized conversations with myself. I experimented with different feelings: happiness, anger, jealousy, sadness, tiredness, shock. I liked experimenting with my eyes and mouth and perfected the moods and altered my features a hundred times until my perfect standards were met. I didn't change clothes, though. My wardrobe consisted of a few hand-me-down t-shirts and shorts; some of them had holes in them. When I went to school or family functions, Amma made new clothes for me.

“Che, try this shirt on.”

“It’s too big. I will look like a clown.”

I tried to understand, but it was a little hard when my classmates from Colombo 7 sported nothing but new clothes.

Thaththa liked gardening. He kept the lawn meticulously mowed. At the edges of the lawn grew tropical flowers of various colors. Akka grew orchids and tied them in coconut husks to the mango trees, bordering the front lawn. The yellow orchids called “Kandyan Dancers” bore flowers in the shape of traditional Kandyan dancers. On the embarella tree in the backyard, near the kitchen, she had grown pigeon orchids of a soothing ivory color. They blossomed at night.

The kitchen in my house was an important place. That’s where Amma labored most of the day. She cooked all our meals, and it was only Akka who helped her. My other sister, Sha, was busy, trying out various shades of make-up. Amma went to the market and bought groceries. It was a short walk, but she had to carry bags and bags of fresh produce and other groceries by hand. The weight of the grocery bags penetrated her skin, and their marks were visible long after the goods were unloaded: fresh tomatoes, greens, coconuts, purple brinjals, small red onions, fresh fish from the fish market, wood apples, avocados, dahl, rice, dates. Amma’s brown hands were the pillars of my home. They bore the weight of the life in all of us. Amma was fair. In the wedding picture on the cabinet of our living room, she looked like a model, slim and beautiful. My earliest memories of Amma didn’t match up with what her wedding picture

captured. She had gained weight and her wrinkles were apparent. Silver hair was creeping in. Ah, what happened to my beautiful, brown mom?

From the time I can remember, I enjoyed the colorfulness of Amma's sari collection. Lime greens, bright purples, maroons, sea greens, they looked good on Amma's fair skin. I fancied wearing them and parading in front of the full-length mirror. When Sha and I played house, we dressed up as parents. I wanted to be the mom, so I could wear the sari with the peacock feathers. Amma didn't wear make-up, but Akka had some. I was a boy, though. I didn't want people to laugh at me. But the saris continued to tempt. I wanted to look beautiful like a mermaid I had seen in picture books.

\* \* \*

I did very well in school. When I was a student, Colombo College had eight thousand boys. All brown boys, but some were much lighter. Some much darker, of course. The boys in the Tamil classes were very dark, but there were a few lighter ones, too. Some of them were, in fact, so light that they looked like foreigners. They spoke in Tamil, which I didn't understand. In my growing up years, my best friend, Bachcha, was of Tamil ethnicity. His dad was Tamil, but his mom was Sinhalese, and Bachcha did not understand Tamil as Sinhalese and English were the languages spoken at home. He was in my class because Tamil was not the language in which he studied.

After coming home from school, I did homework, and after the cruel sun had descended through the marshes, I stitched dresses for my doll collection. I didn't play with trucks and cars like my other classmates. I didn't play with the dolls either, though.

I just made beautiful garments for them. At Christmas, I asked Santa to bring me dolls, and surprisingly, he did bring me a little doll once. I had hand-me-down dolls from Akka. All these plastic dolls were of a tone between orange and pink. They must have been foreign aunties. But they were like my kids, even though I dressed them up in grown-up clothes and displayed on my window sill. One day, Amma's garrulous friend, Aunty Rathna, saw my doll collection and made some sarcastic comments.

"Whose are those dolls on your window sill, Che?"

"They are mine."

"Seriously? You play with dolls? You don't like trucks and bicycles?"

"I don't play with them (, *dumbass*). I only design clothes for them."

Then Amma rescued me from the devil. She told Aunty Rathna that I was very creative, which was true and not true at the same time. Yes, I was creative, but no, I didn't design clothes for dolls because I was creative; I just liked beautiful things. But Aunty Rathna was so fat, and that was that.

\* \* \*

The war escalated as some of the traumatized Tamils formed themselves into a militant terrorist organization. They called themselves the Liberated Tigers of Tamil Elam or the LTTE. Even though their headquarters were in the northern peninsula, from time to time, they sent suicide bombers to the capital. After explosions, pictures of suspected suicide bombers were published in the newspapers. Martyrs for their cause, these suicide bombers always happened to be women. Their reconstructed, bloody faces were

aimed at generating repulsion, but it was difficult for the compassionate to disregard the pain and hurt behind their martyrdom.

Bachcha's father owned a pig farm. His mother, hailing from a well-connected, Sinhalese family, was a stay-home mom. They were darker than me, fitting into the horrendous cultural stereotype. It was in middle school when I was friends with Bachcha that I started speaking exclusively in English. Even though Amma was an English teacher, we hardly spoke English at home, Thaththa having been opposed to the idea. Being fluent in English was a giant class definer. Many of my classmates were already fluent in English, coming from those Colombo 7 households. Their mothers wore make-up, and came to pick them up from school, driving their own cars. We didn't own a car, so I was already in that murky, liminal space.

\* \* \*

When I was in second grade, I was invited to a friend's birthday party. He lived in Colombo 7, and his mom always put on lipstick before going out of the house. The party began at four, and Thaththa took me to their big two-story house on his motor-bike. When we arrived, there were several cars parked outside already. It was a little daunting to be around such wealthy people. Thaththa must have noticed my nervousness, so he lifted me off the trunk of the bike and placed me safely on the ground. I had a storybook carefully wrapped in brown paper by Akka. I was a little embarrassed by this gift as it was not brand new. It was a present I had gotten for my birthday. It looked new, but I knew it wasn't. Thaththa was going back home and said he'd come back to get me when the party ended. I walked with the present in hand and wobbly feet.

When I entered the huge house, it was already full with boys from my class. They were all speaking in English, and I was scared to open my mouth in case I made a mistake. Through the whole night I sat in a chair placed in a corner without saying a word. Everyone else played musical chairs and other games. Most of them were fairer than me and spoke fluent English. Their mothers wore lipstick; I had never seen my mom wear lipstick. Ah, but I knew she wore lipstick at her wedding. She told me so.

That evening when Sha asked me how the party was, I said it was great, even though in reality, I would have preferred to be home with my humble family. I told Sha that I played many games and ate delicious food. I lied. I only sat in a corner feeling like a fish out of water. It must be their lipstick-wearing, English-speaking, car-driving mothers, I thought, that made them so rich and posh and all that. My mom was better, though. She was real.

\* \* \*

The gravel path to the bus stop was beautified when coffee trees were in bloom on either side of the road. It smelled most delicious, and I loved when there was a light rain in the morning. When there weren't other people on the road, it was only me, Aiya, the coffee blossoms, and the rain. Aiya walked briskly, leaving me behind to pause in the drizzle and coffee blossom heaven. I dreamed with a pure white coffee blossom under my nostrils, gently sprinkled by the mild drizzle. Then I heard Aiya say, "What the hell are you doing? Hurry up!"

In an old, discolored school bus, we headed to Colombo 7 to study. When I was in grade three, we had a morning assembly under the mango tree where the head

teacher gave out important information. I often happened to be the student that provided special music, so I sang about being good boys, good students, good citizens, and other such jazz. Despite the shade of the mango tree, the sun was always omnipresent in the morning, making me perspire. As soon as the assembly was over, we ran to our classrooms and drank lots of water. On the days I sang, my class teacher complimented me most generously. The war was young, then. It wasn't too close to home. It wasn't too close to heart, and we were too little. Occasionally, though, there were reminders from suicide bombers that there was a war going on. School had to be closed. Sometimes, for weeks.

Over the years as I grew up with the war, our differences became more evident, more menacing. There was one Tamil class in every grade. While the more outgoing Tamil boys interacted with the Sinhalese boys, the more reserved ones kept to themselves, including most of the Tamil teachers. The war was getting more intense, and more people in Colombo were blowing up.

\* \* \*

Color became an important topic in adult conversations. Gayan was in my third grade class. He was very dark. Black, really. I sat next to him in class. Amma gave me butter and sugar sandwiches to take to school. We were poor, but I liked the sugar sandwiches. Gayan didn't bring any lunch. I didn't like the crusty edges of my sandwiches, so I left them, eating only the soft middle. Gayan looked at what I was doing.

"You don't like the edges?"

“No. They are hard and brown.”

“Oh, can I have them?”

“Sure! Are you hungry?”

“A little.”

“Here, have this whole sandwich then.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. You can have the edges too, but eat this whole sandwich first.”

I only heard a semi-audible “Thanks.”

\* \* \*

The morning I auditioned for *The Merchant of Venice* would change my life for good. It was a sunny yet crisp morning. I dressed in a comfortable cotton shirt and extremely tight jeans that all four of us had worn at one point or another. We could, amazingly, fit into the same jeans. It was a unisex pair of jeans, so no one had to feel embarrassed. I took a bus to the New Auditorium for the audition. There was a huge maara tree near the entrance, and its little yellow flowers formed a carpet at its foot. Through the yellow carpet, I slowly made it to the New Auditorium. There were several boys there already, some of whom were assisting the director. They were senior boys who had acted in The Shakespeare Drama Competition for several years. After getting me to read several passages, the director gave me Jessica’s lines to read. So I knew if I were going to be cast, I was going to be Jessica, Shylock’s daughter. After a few readings, many of the boys were dismissed. They were obviously not cast. I had to stay,



though, which made me think that I had landed the part of Jessica. When the list of characters and the respective actors was read out, my prediction came true.

Our costumes were very colorful. Strangely, though, the costumer had selected a dark pink for my dress. It was almost a magenta. Against my dark brown skin, it looked rather ghastly. And initially, the director wanted to have something like a water fountain in the middle of the stage. I was supposed to girlishly play with the water.

“Play with the water? How?” I asked.

“Just toss it in the air and dance around the fountain.”

“Maybe a water fight with Lorenzo?”

“You can jokingly sprinkle water at him, but not too much. And girlishly, please.”

\* \* \*

My mind darts back and forth. To Puget Sound. To the Water Front. I was young, then. Naive too, maybe. I liked holding hands. With Kyle. He was a buff muscle-man.

Two hundred and thirty eight pounds of muscle. A war tank. He took my hand and inspected it. Very brown, he said. Beautiful, he said. What’s so beautiful about my hand, I wondered. Brown is just a color. A fall color. The last color before white invades it.

\* \* \*

I had a dream last night. It unsettled me, and I woke up sweating and panting. I was on an island inhabited by aboriginal people. They were white, though, and I was the only brown man on this island. They stripped me naked and tied me to a tree. They took everything I had with me: my wallet, watch, cane, glasses, and clothes. I tried to plead but they did not understand anything I was saying. The women hauled in a huge pot and

filled it with water. Soon after, they placed it on fire. The water started boiling, and everyone started dancing around it. Then two big men came over and untied me from the tree. Everyone was screaming and singing by now. The two men tied my hands and carried me. I didn't want to think what they were going to do next. Then I woke up.

\* \* \*

The brown nurse with chapped lips held me down. She held me very firmly. When the needle hit my spine, I felt an electric sensation run through my whole body. Dr. Clifford was taking out some spinal fluid. He had told me to curl my body like a fetus. I felt like one. Helpless. I didn't howl in pain, but my eyes were fresh springs, creating darker patches on the bed covers. I felt like a fetus in a tunnel. There was no light anywhere. Not even a trace.

After the spinal tap, I had to lie on my stomach for six hours. I thought about Kyle, and wondered what he might be up to. He was probably drinking with Julio. Maybe even talking about me. I was alone. One more time. The African-American nurse said I was very brave.

"You are a real trooper. I don't think I could do it. It was very painful, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, but it's over. Thank god!"

"Are you hungry?"

"I think so."

"I'll get you a menu, then."

\* \* \*

Dr. Hall ordered a complete bladder examination to get to the bottom of my horrendous frequency of urination. A few days later, I was sitting in some gigantic chair in the middle of a room, waiting for the nurse to begin the process. There I was, dressed in one of those sick-looking hospital gowns, about to expose my dignity, my manhood, my brownness to a complete stranger. Within this grueling hour, the nurse inserted various tubes into my urethra and beyond. She placed a basin directly below for me to urinate in. She needed to measure everything. Every drop. I felt exposed.

Mutilated. Ravished.

\* \* \*

*Sometimes, when I feel down for whatever reason, I take out pictures from my childhood. Some of them are black and white photographs that hide my brownness. A few are taken in studios with perfect lighting: Mom holding my two sisters when they were babies, my brother on a hideously ornate studio swing, my picture-perfect family on blue, blue benches. Then there are photos from weddings, parties, New Year celebrations, funerals. I look at these photos and wonder what happened to us. What happened to me. There's one studio picture of me when I was less than a year. I'm a plump baby with a solemn expression on my face. I don't know what thoughts are running through his head, but I want to be that baby again. The years have done many things to me. I'm nostalgic, but I don't even know what I'm missing. Innocence? Family? Childhood? Colors of my exotic island? Supple limbs? Maybe all of the above?*

*There's something I desperately long for in those pictures. Something I would die to have back. But I'm a big boy now. I have left the nest. And I have crossed oceans to*

*get away. Home. Ah, the place I so anxiously wanted to get away from also bursts with the most precious essence of my being. Chasing Fire-flies in our tropical garden, yellow orchids in the shape of bedecked dancers, traditional New Year games, multi-colored, Wesak lanterns that illuminated our little worlds, strawberry ice cream on Dad's orange motorbike, sleeping water lilies on the way to school, my sisters offering me a ton of coins in exchange for a bill that valued a lot more because I was little and didn't know any better, guavas, marigolds, dew-dappled gardenia blossoms, sea bathing on lazy, Sunday mornings, stealing candy from my sister when she was deep in thought, and gloating over it, buzzing mosquitoes, dragon flies with mirage-like wings, geckos on the ceiling, ivory-white pigeon orchids, watching TV at a neighbor's, Buddhist priests in bright orange robes, my sisters' coming of age parties, string hoppers, milk-rice, going to school in pure white uniforms, riding the school bus, falling asleep, standing and drooling on my shirt to my brother's boundless embarrassment, mud-covered water buffaloes with dreamy eyes in my neighborhood, the bread man on his bicycle, fat raindrops of monsoon rains, the scalding heat, the humidity, building sand castles on golden sands, saffron sunsets amidst palm groves... Mom. I miss them all. It's the price I pay to be where I want to be. To do what I want to do. To be what I want to be. Most things have price tags attached. Some cannot be seen until we lose them.*

*I look at my baby picture and wonder what he is thinking. I envy the innocence. I envy that which I no longer have. I look into those baby eyes and inquire most earnestly how I could be like that. Just like that. Is he trying to hide from blinding studio lights? Is he about to cry? Is he wanting to be held? Where is he looking? What does he see?*

*Whatever it might be, I want to see it, I want to feel like he does, I want to be him again.*

*A brown baby with longing, brown eyes in an abandoned corner of an unforgiving world.*

CHAPTER II  
IN THE SPOTLIGHT  
(A GAY MAN)

My home had three girls to begin with (counting Amma as a girl), and after a while, my parents became the guardians of one of Amma's elder sisters' two daughters, when my aunt went abroad for work. So I grew up with five females in the house. After Thaththa took me for my regular haircut, my girl cousins liked to feel my hair. It was like a trimmed carpet, they said. Like a freshly mown lawn.

One of my girl cousins had a huge collection of bangles. I was so greatly attached to my cousins that I often happened to be around when they tried these bangles, and invariably ended up wearing them, as my cousins needed a model to see them on. The sound the bangles made changed according to the material they were made of: glass, metal, wood, plastic. I liked wearing a lot of bangles of the same kind and the music they made when the arm moved. Like a harp.

\* \* \*

The Wesak season celebrated the birth, enlightenment, and death of Buddha. It was customary at this time to stage various dramas that enacted stories from Buddha's five hundred and fifty lives. They were usually set to music and were performed on temporarily erected stages. This is probably where Aiya got the idea. He proposed that we stage a play to be viewed by our family. Only Aiya, Sha, and I acted in this play, and the others in my household were to form the audience. I had only one line in the play. Aiya, who came up with the plan, starred as the leading actor, of course. He was the king, and I was simply a guard in the palace. All I had to say was, "Yes, Lord" in response to some question he asks. I can't remember if we had many rehearsals. It was mostly improvised, the actors being familiar with the story rather than their exact lines.

It was decided (by Aiya, obviously) that the play was going to be performed in his room, which was right next to the kitchen. The stage area was separated by a curtain drawn on bangles. All characters, including myself, were to wear Amma's saris draped differently according to the roles. After dinner, my two cousins and Akka helped us get dressed. I didn't see Sha or Aiya getting dressed as I was getting dressed outside the room, where I was to come in from. They applied a measly bit of make-up on me because I was not playing an important part. I didn't even get to wear lipstick. I wanted to wear different colored bangles, but my cousins said it would be odd for a palace guard to wear bangles like that.

Half an hour after dinner, the play was on. My parents, cousins, and Akka were in the audience. Waiting in the living room for my entrance, I could hear the audience laughing and clapping from time to time. My cue to enter was when Sha came out. Before I knew it, there she was coming out of the room. Sha looked very different. As she was the princess, she was wearing a lot of make-up including bright red lipstick, eyeshadow, and the whole works. I was jealous. I had no time to think about this injustice as I had to go in almost immediately and so I did.

Aiya was sitting in a big chair because he was the king. Not only was he wearing a cardboard crown, but he was wearing a lot of make-up as well. He also wore two wiry, gold bangles as earrings like ancient people. When I got really close to him, I noticed that he was wearing a beautiful, blue eye-shadow. I couldn't believe it! They didn't give me anything at all, but they had generously painted Sha and Aiya. I was so upset that I



forgot my line. I knew I had only one line. So looking directly at Aiya's transformed eyes, I said, "Lord, your eyes are beautiful."

That was it! The entire audience erupted into riotous laughter. Some of them laughed so much that they had tears in their eyes. As far as I knew, this was not a comedy. They were laughing at me, of course. No one gave me lipstick or eye-shadow to wear, and now they were all laughing at me. This was when I started howling in my extremely loud crying voice. Aiya said I was an idiot. My cousins tried to pacify me, promising candy and chocolates. They were able to hush me only when they promised lipstick and eyeshadow. It had to be red lipstick, though. And blue eyeshadow, naturally.

\* \* \*

There were only five houses on our little by-lane of Mulberry Street, and the kids were mostly girls. To the left of our house were the Pereras. They had an army of girls. They were the ones that Sha and I usually played with. Right across from the Pereras were the Silvas. There was one girl there, but she was a little older and rarely played with us. The game that we almost always played was called Ice spice. It could have been "I spy," and we could have gotten it all wrong. A tin full of stones was sealed, then thrown away. The seeker was to run and get it, during which time, the others had to hide themselves. Then the seeker was to ask one by one to come out of their hiding places when spotted and shake the tin. If someone hiding were able to shake the tin before the seeker, the whole process had to continue all over again with the same seeker. This game took a really long time; until the sun came down, in fact.

During the school vacation that coincided with the traditional New Year, we had too much time on our hands. Everyone was getting a little tired of “Ice Spice,” and one of the Perera girls came up with an exciting idea: to do a play, a fairy tale, for our little neighborhood. The play that was decided on was “Sleeping Beauty.” The roles were determined by drawing lots. When I unrolled mine, it read “Rapunzel.” I was very excited, as I was getting to wear a lot of make-up and high heeled shoes. Prince Charming was one of the Perera girls with sleepy eyes and short black hair. We hardly rehearsed. The older girls told us what to say and do. There was no script, so we just used our own words.

On the day of our performance, the Perera household was transformed into a hub of activity. Mrs. Perera and other adults were helping us get dressed. All the attention was on me. I was given a long, blond wig to wear and everyone was applying all sorts of make up on me. I really liked the attention. And the make-up, of course. Sha was playing the witch, a very unenviable part. We had invited Mr. Fernando who was a Bank Manager, to be our chief guest. Mrs. Fernando who came earlier to help said I looked like a “sweet devil.” A blond wig, bright red lipstick, and blue eyeshadow on my dark brown skin made me look like nothing I had seen in my picture books or on TV. I played my part very passionately, though, despite the dull-looking prince charming. I was supposed to sing in the tower, so I sang most mellifluously, brushing my long blond wig. I thought my spell-binding portrayal would make people cry, but on the contrary, all the guests, including our chief guest, cackled most obnoxiously, although afterwards everyone said I was a beautiful Rapunzel. I was happy.

\* \* \*

I always wanted a room for myself, but I had to share a room with Aiya. There was a musty, damp, additional room in the house next to the bathroom. It was a store room of sorts with unwanted furniture and other such clutter. Because of its location, it was like Sri Lanka on the Silk Trade Route: high traffic at all times. But here was my chance to have my own room. Of course, to be my room, it needed severe rearrangement and redecoration. When I was in grade four, I was first in class in the first semester, and Thaththa asked me what I wanted. Ah ha! I said I needed the store room to be my bedroom, after, needless to say, purchasing everything I needed to make it artistic and elegant. The most important requirement was that everything in the room had to be pink. I was nine.

So Thaththa and I went shopping. We had to get pink paint, pink bedding, a pink lamp, and whatever else, obviously, in pink. We were able to find pink paint and pink bedding, but we could not find a pink lamp. We looked everywhere but could not see a pink lamp or even something that resembled one. Then Thaththa showed me a red lamp. Pink, red, oh well, close enough, I thought, so I settled for the red lamp.

The walls of this room were rather damp so the paint refused to stick well. Besides, the paint we had gotten was not exactly pink. It was a dirty, brownish sort of pink. Bedding was fine. Then there was the red lamp. I spent hours tidying the room and the next day Thaththa and I painted. Ah, my pink, pink room with the red lamp. At night when the room was completely painted, rearranged, and swept, I turned the red lamp on. It was like a shrine. It looked great, I thought. Brownish pink walls, a pink bed, and a

red lamp in the most frequented spot in the house. A pink paradise. I didn't tell any of my friends because they would have laughed at me. "Pink is for girls," they would have said.

At night when I slept in my pink bed, Thaththa used to come and sit on the bed. I pretended to be asleep. He said, "If he's asleep, his left leg should shake a little," so I shook my left leg. Then he said, "I caught the rascal!" and tickled me. We ended up laughing. Those memories come to me when I least expect them, and I smile fondly, wistfully, longingly.

\* \* \*

I remember soap operas on TV from my adolescent years like *Falcon Crest* and *Dynasty* that were "adults only." On warm nights, I liked to sleep on the cold cement floor. Also, if I drew the curtain a little, I could catch a glimpse of these soap operas that Amma watched. In these shows, women always kissed men. They were beautiful, these women, with rosy lips, long eye lashes, meticulously made-up faces, and expensive-looking clothes. I didn't look at the men.

I rode the school bus in the morning. The bus was packed to capacity, and I clearly remember a day that solidified my desires. Shehan was an older boy who had started shaving. I was about twelve or thirteen. He always smiled at me, and I felt drawn to him. It was his aftershave, I thought. Near the lake, the bus took a steep bend. On that day, Shehan stood right next to me. I could smell his musky aftershave. When the bus took that steep bend near the lake, my hand accidentally brushed against Shehan's face. I was embarrassed, but more than that, my body responded in an unsettling way. I

wanted it to happen again. Over and over. I could barely concentrate on anything in school that day. All I could think about was the feel of Shehan's face against my hand. When I went home from school, I re-lived that incident in my mind a hundred times. I thought I was maybe in love with Shehan. I knew, though, that boys were only supposed to fall in love with girls.

After that incident in the school bus, I never looked at women in the soap operas that Amma watched on TV. I looked only at men. They were handsome, well dressed, and emanated a very masculine essence. I wanted to be next to them. Be held by them... maybe even kiss them. I was really weird, I thought.

I was in middle school at the time, and my friends always talked about girls, which never made sense to me. I didn't find girls so fascinating like my friends did. On the contrary, I found boys fascinating. I had to hide my abnormal tendencies. I had to lie. I didn't want to be called a "weirdo." When I was alone at night, though, I could be as weird as I wanted to be. I thought about Shehan and how I felt when my hand brushed against his face. I experienced the most amazing sensation in my body. I felt awoken.

Ever since puberty, ever since my hand brushed against Shehan's face, I was a cave of secrets. In the normal world of home, school, town, city, and beyond, I knew that my longings and fantasies would not be tolerated, so I pretended. It was around this time that I began to deeply appreciate the glamorous world of theater. It was my escape, my make-believe world, a more benign corner that allowed me to like boys. Because of my voice and gracefulness of movement, I often landed females roles. I

didn't have to justify liking boys. I was supposed to like them. In fact, I was often supposed to be in love with them.

\* \* \*

In high school or maybe even before, I learned that the female characters were always played by young boys in Shakespeare's plays. Girls were not allowed to act, I read. This is basically what I was because I went to an all-boys school. I enjoyed being coy next to a testosterone-filled boy. When I was at the height of my acting career in high school, I had no doubt whatsoever in my mind that I liked boys beyond the stage. I couldn't let anyone know, however, that I did. When I acted initially, the directors got me to practice how a girl, an Elizabethan girl, walked, sat, and stood, among other things. Very soon, though, these habits were like second nature to me, so much so that I often helped younger actors playing female characters with their mannerisms and gestures.

When I was playing a female role, especially in a Shakespearean play, the directors often got me to bring a skirt to get used to the idea of walking in one. So I took one of Sha's skirts to practice. I fanned the wooden floor of the stage with my nimble walk in a skirt. Fan, fan, turn, and sit gracefully. When the scentless vine was in bloom near the front door of my home, I walked under the purple canopy it formed. Just like the coffee blossoms on our gravel path, it transported me to a different world. A beautiful world. So I did the *fan, fan, turn, and sit gracefully* routine.

I often had to wear a bra, too, when I was playing a female role. I secretly took one of Sha's padded bras. Once when I was leaving the theater, that padded bra fell out

of the bag in front of many people. Some of them laughed. And the director, who was among them, exclaimed gleefully, “Oh, la la! A padded one!” Theatre was a safe space, a nourishing nest for deviants like me. But I still kept my deviant fascination within me. Walls had ears.

\* \* \*

I played Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of being Earnest*. “Lady Dumbleton is an instance in point,” I said. “To my own knowledge she has been thirty-five ever since she arrived at the age of forty,” I said. “Chest out, chin up,” said Mrs. Dayton. I wore a padded bra. Algernon was hot, and his thighs almost burst out of blue polyester trousers. I couldn’t stand Cecily. He got to flirt with *thunder thighs*.

I was a transvestite of the stage. When I played Lady Bracknell, the bra that I wore was heavily stuffed with socks. It was stuffed to full capacity, giving me an enormous bosom. The director told me to look up at all times, so my bosom was jutting out. I was to take pride in my bosom. I was to be led by my chin and my bosom. A gorgon I was, indeed, whatever that meant. I practiced arrogant mannerisms: sitting down, standing up, walking, highly pretentious kisses, talking with my chin up in the air and my enormous bosom steady and unflinching. I wore a dress of many layers made out of three shades of pastel blue fabric.

\* \* \*

When I left high school, I was compelled to enter the real world. I did act in semi-professional theater, but I was always cast as a male. In these plays I had to pretend to

be a heterosexual male. I had to, at times, flirt with women. I had to learn to do this. I was a novice. The director had to train me to flirt.

“Look at her body. Look at specific places of her body. Look at the breasts. Do I have to teach you to flirt? Just do what you normally do when you interact with the opposite sex.”

“I’ll try.”

When I did try, he said my performance was weak at best. He said there was no desire in my eyes. No shit, I thought. I felt like a bad actor. Maybe professional theater was not for me, I thought, but every character couldn’t be straight, surely.

\* \* \*

I wanted to study theater. Even more than that, I wanted to escape the trauma of my frosted buttermilk home. It stifled me in many ways. And I wanted to start over. In a place that wasn’t swift to label me a “deviant.” This is why I wanted to apply to foreign universities. But my parents did not have the funds to give me a foreign education. A scholarship was my only hope, so I went to the British Council and the American Center. I tirelessly copied information from enormous catalogues of universities. I drafted a long letter highlighting all my achievements in high school and beyond, and asked these universities if I stood a chance of receiving a full scholarship. I wrote to over fifty colleges, and they all wrote back. I was getting letters and catalogues by the truckload. The mailman was possibly cursing me as he had to bring all that on his bicycle.

Some colleges informed me that they could offer a certain percentage, leaving me to fund my own room & board as well as the balance of tuition. Out of this large



number of colleges, five were willing to consider a full ride if I furnished further details like test scores. So my battle of preparation began. I started writing my statement of intent, filling out applications, getting recommendations, and taking the tests they wanted me to take. The outcome was unknown, but I did give it my best shot. Ultimately, out of the five colleges that were willing to consider a full ride, I ended up applying to only one college in the state of Iowa. After everything was sent, I got extremely anxious to find out if I had won the scholarship.

\* \* \*

I bought an old laptop from ebay. I went to a gay chat room I'd always wanted to visit. There was a separate room for Tacoma. Screen name? I called myself "Just a nice guy." The next line asked for my "stats." I left it blank. I couldn't publish my sexual deviance to the whole world, so I didn't upload a picture. I started chatting. The first question that came from almost everyone was, "Stats?" There was one profile that caught my attention: White man, 238 lbs, killer biceps, 33 waist, blue eyes and blond hair. So I typed:

"Hello!"

"Hi there"

"Killer biceps, huh?"

"Yes, sir. Are you white?"

"Nope. Brown. Very brown."

"Now we're talking. How old are you?"

"Twenty three. You?"

“Twenty eight.”

“Cool.”

It was difficult, he said, to find someone who didn't judge him because of his muscleman stats. He wanted to meet me that night itself. As I had no homework, I was willing to find out what he was all about. I asked if he wanted to go for karaoke. He said that he couldn't sing, but would gladly listen to me singing. I suggested The Cave, a karaoke lounge, so that's where we went. I sang. He drank beer. Lots of it. He asked me if I had been to the Waterfront.

“Not at night.”

“It's much more beautiful at night. Calm, too. Wanna go?”

“Sure.”

“Tell me your name again. I'm a white man; it's hard for me to say it, but I want to learn.”

“Chethiya. Che for short. Che for love.”

“Che it is, then.”

“And you are Kyle, right.”

“Yup. Not too hard.”

“Is mine hard, then?”

“Oh, I'm just a white American. Che is easier, though.”

“Call me Che, then.”

“Thank you, Che!”

“No worries.”

The Waterfront was peaceful. Just a few lights on the horizon, a chilly breeze, and Kyle with me on the deck. He took my hand. We walked on the deck.

“Are you single?” he asked me.

“Yeah. You?”

“Technically. I broke up with my partner of eight years, but he still lives with me.”

“That must be hard.”

“He’ll move out soon.”

A mild rain started to fall from the skies. I didn’t mind it. He didn’t either, it seemed. At the Waterfront, I wanted to come across as calm and confident. But inside, I was just an infatuated, brown, South Asian guy.

“Can I see you again?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said. “Maybe we should wait until your ex moves out. What do you think?”

“He’ll move out soon. Within a month, anyway.”

The brown planks of the deck were weather-beaten. They were used to it, though, the planks. Even in the night, Kyle’s whiteness showed in a menacing glow. On the far horizon, there were some ships that were possibly leaving this town, this country. Maybe they were from other countries. They were at the horizon, after all. We headed to his car, an old Lumina. It was a rusty maroon. When I got in, I could smell a trace of gasoline.

“You know what ‘cruise control’ is?” he asked me.

“Yeah. Why?”

“So I can hold your hand, that’s why.”

“Clever.”

\* \* \*

Kyle was into dark-skinned men. That’s probably why I fitted into his universe. He was a muscleman, a disfellowshipped Jehovah’s Witness, and a white man. He chewed tobacco and people. Over the years, Seth, his ex, had gradually started working out, too. From an ordinary brown body, Seth had systematically worked towards a buff, brown one. It was difficult for Kyle to exercise his white privilege. Kyle liked ordinary bodies. Ordinary, brown bodies. Ordinary, brown, male bodies. Seth was dumped. After eight years. Because he challenged the white privilege.

We dated very briefly; then he said we were in a relationship. It was my very first relationship. I had a sparkle in my eye.

“So does that mean we are like boyfriends?” I asked him.

“Hell, yeah,” he said.

“That’s so cool. I have never had one.”

“Come here,” he said. When I went to him, he enmeshed his stubby, white, muscleman fingers with my brown, scraggy ones. He said he was glad he found me. I believed him. I wanted to.

*I keep reliving our first date when we went to the Waterfront on Puget Sound. The water was still. At the far horizon, I could see lights, sporadically placed. Their reflection on the water was calming. Surreal, almost. My long shirt, one that Amma had*

*given me, was flying in the wind. The air was nippy. Despite the thick hair, my scalp was tickled by the wind. There was no one on the deck. Just Kyle and me. He held my hand. I felt safe. Safer than I had ever felt. His grip was gentle. Loving, almost.*

*"I like diving," he said.*

*"That's cool. Do you dive here?"*

*"I have, a couple times."*

*"Nice. I don't think I'd like diving. I can barely operate on land," I said.*

*"You look nice with the cane. Distinguished. So what exactly is wrong with your leg?"*

*"I have no idea. They are doing tests, still."*

*"Oh, okay. I'm sure it'll be fixed in no time."*

*"I hope so."*

\* \* \*

Kyle held my hand against his. Brown and white. He said I was beautiful. I thought he meant it. He wanted to play chess.

*"What's your color," I asked.*

*"I'll be black, like I always wanted to be."*

*"Really? Why?"*

*"No reason. I just like the color."*

*"Oh, okay. Makes sense."*

So we played. I was white. I was sleepy. I lost fast.

*"Oh, well. It's only a game. I'm sleepy," I said.*

“I like games. I like winning.”

“There you go, then. It’s time to sleep.”

\* \* \*

Kyle loved to work out. His workout schedule was his bible. When I was around, he wanted me to “spot” him. Ah, muscle man, muscle man. I felt inadequate in my frailty. He lifted almost two people of my size. During his workout, Kyle changed clothes several times as he sweated a lot. Whenever he changed shirts, he flexed his muscles in front of me. “Look what I can do,” he said. I said, “Wow.” I said, “Whoa.” I said, “Holy Toledo.” He wanted me to work out, too. I could hardly lift anything. I was weak. I was normal. Maybe not normal at all.

Then there was that scrub. He supported Kyle in everything he did. Ah, the scrub, the scrub. A scrub by profession, Julio was Kyle’s best friend. Maybe only friend. Julio had an enduring crush on Kyle. Whenever he came into the house, I blended into the background. I went into the bedroom and closed the door. I heard their laughter outside. I heard Julio’s soprano voice. One day, all three of us went to see a movie. It was Kyle’s idea. He sat between Julio and me. Halfway through the movie, I noticed that they were holding hands, Kyle and Julio. Best friends? Holding hands? And they were both gay.

\* \* \*

When Dr. Clifford finally came in, he was very intently studying some computer printouts. His intense focus made his forehead wrinkle. He avoided looking at us. At me. Then he spat it out.

“We suspect you have a condition called multiple sclerosis, commonly known as MS.”

Jan’s brown eyes hinted at the gravity of this diagnosis. She squeezed my hand. I had no idea, then. MS was just two letters of the alphabet to me.

“So how long do I have to live?” I asked.

“Oh, you’ll live to be a hundred.”

“Is it that bad?? Jeez, I don’t even know how I came this far, but to be a hundred?? So what would this MS or whatever do to me?”

“The symptoms can be many. There’s no cure for MS but we can treat the symptoms as they appear.”

“What are they?”

“We’ll take one day at a time. Your assignment is to do some research and find out about MS. It’s a common neurological disease, but whatever you find out, keep in mind that MS is not the end of the world. We are here to help. When you come next time, we will talk about the disease and our action plan. How does that sound?”

“A little morbid, I think.”

“Che, you are a funny guy. You will easily beat this disease.”

“If you insist, but I don’t even know what this MS is.”

\* \* \*

*“How is your vision?”*

*“I can see.”*

*“What about the frequency of urination?”*

*“Well, sometimes, I feel like moving my bedding to the bathroom. And often, I have the urge to go immediately after urinating. I can never get a good night’s sleep. Is there something I can take for that?”*

*“There are some. They’re not that cheap, though, and they might not work well for everyone either. I’ll give you some samples to try. Tell me any other complications you have. Are you sexually active?”*

*“No.”*

*“Do you wake up with an erection, though?”*

*“Not anymore.”*



CHAPTER III

IS THIS A NIGHTMARE?

(AN ABUSED MAN)

I'm not sure if this incident I remember is real. My experiences tell me, though, that it very likely happened. I remember running away from Thaththa, because he was about to beat me. I was in my parents' room in Grandma's annex. There was a table right next to the bed. I must have been about two. I crept under the table, got back up on my feet, and ran as quickly as my legs could take me, away from Thaththa. Away from his leather belt. Away. Away from angry eyes. It disturbs me every now and then that Thaththa had been violent when I was that little. People call it tough love, but can love be brutal? Sometimes, this incident visits me in dreams. I run run run. Like a terrified rabbit. Then there was Amma. Could she save me? She was powerless. Completely.

\* \* \*

In grade school, we learned about national heroes who saved us from colonial rule. I remember a little hero. Madduma Bandara was his name. When his brother was about to be beheaded and was trembling in fear, the younger brother, Madduma Bandara, said, "Brother, don't be afraid. I'll show you how to die." Then he offered his neck to the executioner. Afterwards, his mother, who was carrying a baby in her arms, was ordered to put that baby in a mortar and pound it with a pestle. She fainted.

So many heroes were subjected to cruel torture. I'm here because of their sacrifices. That's what I learned in school. That's what adults told me. So when I sleep at night, sometimes these heroes' martyrdom visits me. Babies being pounded in mortars, people being beheaded, tortured. This must be my colonial legacy. My heritage. I have inherited their trauma. I feel for them. I feel I have a part in their suffering. I get up

panting. I have a bottle of water by my bedside, so I take a drink of water and go back to sleep. To nightmares, really. But I have a repertoire of sources that generate nightmares, and forefathers is only one.

\* \* \*

After monsoon rain subsided, after darkness seeped into the suburban neighborhood, after Mrs. Perera plucked star-shaped white blossoms to offer Buddha, a host of quiet fireflies invaded our garden. They dotted every corner with moving lanterns of life: above the yellow orchids hiding in darkness, near the Chinese guava tree, over the light-reflecting brilliance of the patio floor. Thaththa watched *Crown Court* on the television, so we had to maintain pin-drop silence. Amma took Sha and me out of the house and sat on a fading red patio chair, closing the door behind her, leaving *Crown Court* within, escaping unpredictable wrath of my frosted buttermilk home. The moon tried to expose the contours of her aging face, and Sha and I collected fireflies. We got them to land on our palms until they got tired of us and flew away. In the buttery moonlight, Amma couldn't hide her eyes, glistening in their moistness.

"Amma, is there a rabbit on the moon?" I asked her.

"Yes, there is. Can you see the outline? Look! Can you see the ears?"

"Are they ears? Is he listening to us, then?"

"He is, so you have to be a good boy."

Sha had three fireflies on her palm, and she was oblivious to us. I could catch a glimpse of her brown eyes full of wonder.

"Then he probably heard Thaththa shouting at you," I said.

Amma hesitated before replying, "Perhaps."

\* \* \*

Mrs. Fernando always looked through her bedroom window whenever there were signs of turmoil in our house. I could see her open the window and draw the curtain a little, so she could see what was happening. She might have been able to see Amma coming out of the house, wringing her hands. She would have seen Thaththa following her to insult, denigrate, and threaten. She could have heard Sha crying.

In the morning, things were quiet in the mild drizzle, and when I was leaving the house with Aiya, dressed in our pure white school uniforms, Mrs. Fernando fully opened her bedroom window to greet us.

"Good morning, boys!"

"Good morning," I said, a little embarrassed of what she might have heard or seen. "I have a test today."

"Oh, good luck! What is it on?"

"Buddhism," I said. "It's about Nirvana."

"What's that?"

"It's kind of like heaven. Peaceful. Beautiful."

\* \* \*

There was a massive pylon near our house on Mulberry Street. Only one of its legs stayed in our garden. The meticulously mown lawn, the beautiful ixoras, the mango trees, the begonias, the Kandyan dancers in coconut husks, and marigolds beautified our garden, our exterior. Inside the house was a bitter-sweet world of paternal authority,

patriarchal love, and tough nurturing that made me an outcast. That's what I considered normal, the way the world was.

We played carrom with the Perera girls. The carrom board was theirs. On a Sunday when everyone was home, Thaththa was mowing the lawn as he always did. He constantly cut the grass with a little instrument that had a sharp knife-like blade attached to the edge. He rhythmically swung it this way and that. I heard the crisp sound of grass getting cut. The garden was his pride. He planted, watered, mowed the lawn, and sometimes, he cut down mature trees much against everyone else's protestations. Big trees. Thaththa climbed the tree and chopped off the branches first. Then he cut down the trunk. It was like some obsession. Every once in a while he had to do this. Coconut trees, jack trees, mango trees. They were chopped off. Cut down. Destroyed. Brutally.

On this Sunday, I pestered Thaththa to be on my team when we played carrom. We were going to beat Sha and Binari, who were playing against us. Thaththa told me how to play to win. He was the mastermind. I simply followed his advice, but alas, we were losing to the girls. This was an unpardonable offense. He arranged the coins.

"Here we go," he said. "I bet two would go in," he added proudly. Yes, two went in, but they were the other team's coins! I was angry. "You are a blithering idiot," I said. Oops! A public insult! He went in to bring out his leather belt. To show his power in front of everyone. I was the object of his tyranny.

He brought the black leather belt I knew too well and started whipping me. The Perera girls screamed as Thaththa assumed the role of a mad animal. Amma left

whatever she was doing and came to save me, even though she couldn't. Sha screamed, the Perera girls ran home to tell their parents.

"Let me teach you how to talk to your dad!" Thaththa bellowed. Helpless Amma was running around frantically.

"Oh, he's so little, Ranjith. Please stop. Please please please! The neighbor would hear."

"They should. Do you honestly think I give a fuck? I'll show him what I can do."

"Beg for forgiveness, Chethiya. Fall at his feet."

But he kept whipping me with that seasoned belt. Ah, no mercy. I was his partner. We played together, but now we were not equals. I was the kid and he was the parent. I had to obey him in everything he did. I had to accept punishment for transgressions without question or complaint. Now on my knees at his feet and begging for mercy, my back was an easy target for the belt, and he whipped and whipped. Ah, our carrom game. Ah, my back. Ah, my arms and legs.

\* \* \*

I felt the blood on my tender brown arm. When Ramya Akka applied au de cologne on the fresh cuts on my arms and legs, I winced. Quietly. I was seated on the hard, teak chair in the living room next door. My legs were still shaking, but there were no tears in my eyes. Perera Uncle had to come to my rescue. Thaththa didn't beat me often, but when he did, he lost sight of my age. I was only ten. Tender. Kamala Aunty's gentle voice bailed me from the leather belt.

"Are you tired, putha? Can I get you a drink? Maybe something to eat?"

"Nah."

"Would you like to take a nap, then?"

"I'll just sit here."

"Oh, I know just the thing you want! I have some delicious Belgian chocolates.

You will

have some, won't you?"

"Maybe."

She disappeared into the kitchen and reemerged with a golden box. My eyes glowed.

"Are they minty?"

"Not at all. I know you don't like mint."

"Are they really from Belgium? Oh, wait! The capital of Belgium is Brussels, right?"

"Absolutely! You are a genius!"

"Thaththa told me."

\* \* \*

Thaththa dangled a gold-rimmed, porcelain plate from his fingertips. I feared. I feared he would release it to the blazing red cement floor below to spite Amma. Everything was mute. I was not sure where Amma was, but I felt her agony. Don't. Please don't. Thaththa, please. Thaththa, Dad, Daddy, please don't.

Then I woke up, panting.

\* \* \*

Thaththa watched *Crown Court* on TV. We couldn't even whisper. His eyes were glued to the screen. We wanted to watch *Little House on the Prairie* on a different channel, but there was no way he'd miss *Crown Court*. From the time I reached puberty, I stopped watching television. I locked myself up in my room and turned the ceiling fan on to drown Thaththa's constant bickering outside the room. The old fan whirred like a beast in agony. Whirr whirr whirr.

Thaththa growled outside. He shouted. He threatened. He insulted Amma, especially about her cooking. We never ate as a family. When we did, he dashed everything on the floor. Dishes, rice, lentils, chicken, and whatever else was on the table, landed on the floor in violent smithereens. Akka and Sha cried. Amma pleaded. Aiya got ready to get out. Escape.

"I'm sick of this house," he remarked in a tone of disgust and anger as he was leaving.

"What did you say, you son of a bitch? I'll teach you!"

"Ranjith, Ranjith, neighbors will hear."

"Let them hear. Let the whole fucking world hear!"

Aiya fled on his motorbike, leaving a dying trail of black smoke behind him.

And that was the end of dinner.

\* \* \*

The bust of the African woman flew from the lunch table along with Akka's arduously grown Kandyan Dancers. It smashed against the blazing red cement floor. Then the dhal dish. Then chicken. Then salad, landing in bitter circles of cucumber, red



onion, and tomato. Amma wrung her hands and ran around the living room. Thaththa shot aspirated insults at Amma's agonized face: the rice was not boiled, he shouted, the curries were bland, he shouted, he toppled the table, Bengi ran away, whimpering. Akka battled tears that gushed out involuntarily in mute torrents. Aiya and Sha hid behind floral curtains. I was very scared. We were all going to die, I thought. I peed my pants.

Sun saturated my frosted buttermilk home on Mulberry Street. Sunrays landed on the African woman's broken earring. Amma picked up shards of the vase, broken glass, porcelain, and remnants of Sunday lunch. Thaththa was behind her, still threatening to be violent if the "head of the household" was not given due respect. If rice was not properly cooked, he'll burn the house down, he said. I wondered how he was going to do it. I would have to get Benji out of the house, if it happened.

Thaththa kicked Benji. He barked.

"Get the fuck out, you miserable animal. Get in my way one more time, and I'll fucking kill you!"

"What did he do," I asked in a little voice.

"He doesn't have to do anything. He's a fucking dog! And who the hell can eat this rice? It's like paper," Thaththa screamed. I looked at Amma's anguished face and wondered how she was going to take all this. I heard Akka sobbing in her room. Aiya sneaked out of the house on his black smoke-emitting motorbike.

In the late afternoon, the sky was glistening in luminosity, the bigger clouds outlined in a glowing amber. Mulberry Street felt calmer and more beautiful. The pungent fragrance of pigeon orchids on the embarella tree outside the back door

forcibly entered the house. Amma was sleeping. When the fragrance was stronger, she woke up to cook supper. She was chopping garlic with deft brown hands as I peeped in through the kitchen door, not wanting to disturb her quiet. She looked peaceful, so I ran in to help her. I didn't know what she was going to cook. When I accidentally dropped a garlic clove on the floor, I stealthily caught a glimpse of her face as I bent down to pick it up. I gave it to her to wash. She smiled. She ruffled my hair.

\* \* \*

The blond haired doll with thick eyelashes and rosy cheeks was my favorite. I always dressed her up as a bride: a Sri Lankan bride. Only I could see her naked. It didn't appeal to me, her form. I only wondered why my pretty dolls didn't have breasts like Alexis in *Dynasty*. I used to watch it on the sly when Amma thought she was the only person watching. It was on national TV late at night. My room door was always ajar, and through the transparent lace curtain, I could always catch a glimpse of Alexis kissing various men. I rarely looked at Alexis, though. At thirteen, I found her boyfriends striking and murderously masculine. Steve was my favorite. He had very blue eyes and a straight nose.

When the setting sun permeated the frosted glass of my bedroom window, the cheeks of the dolls shone with a coyness that made me smile. The Japanese doll was so petite that she reminded me of my cousin who was only six years of age. Pink was her color. I had made an umbrella for her with a bamboo stick and a curved piece of cardboard. There were five dolls in total. They were neatly arranged on the window sill in colorful eclectic attire.

\* \* \*

In high school, I had to pretend a lot. I had to act the part of a straight boy to avoid being bullied. I lied. I lied. Everywhere. To friends. To teachers. I had to. There were the straight, gangster-type boys I had to be careful of. With eight thousand boys, hiding was not that hard, but I was highly visible. I was an actor. A boy actor. A boy who always played female parts. I invited bullies by default. I was liked by teachers, so bullies kept a distance but there was that occasional gangster-type, straight boy who tormented me. The guys in my classes thought I was straight. I joined the bandwagon of testosterone-filled high school boys who drooled over girls. I oohed and ahhed and wowed. I had to be untrue to myself. I had to be untrue to my kind. But I had to avoid trouble. It was the price I had to pay to be safe. To not be labeled a “faggot.”

\* \* \*

Around three in the afternoon, I received a call from the agency post office, saying that I had a fax from the United States: the news I had been waiting for! I had written to First Lutheran College, asking if I had won the scholarship. This was my time. My moment in the sun. I was going to be a star. I was going to leave my eventful, frosted, buttermilk home. I was going to dazzle in front of the best-looking men in the world. But was I being too optimistic? What could I do if the fax brought me bad news?

It was a short walk from Mulberry Street. I ran, not seeing anything on my way. When I reached the little agency post office, I told the man behind the counter that I had a fax from the United States. When he brought the fax, I instantaneously grabbed it. The words were smudged. I read the first few words: “We are happy to inform you....”

\* \* \*

Heather picked me up at the small domestic airport in North Central Iowa. I had to fly for almost two days. I was excited. We left. Black-brown roads unfolded like chocolate from a milkmaid's spoon. I looked for Broadway. Skyscrapers. Neon signs. But I only saw cornfields.

Where was Broadway? Heather stopped in front of some ordinary-looking buildings.

"I'm not tired, Heather," I said. "You can keep going." "This is the college. We are home. This will be your home for the next few years," she said. I felt like a gold-rimmed, porcelain plate. Dangling.

\* \* \*

I had not been home for three years. I got off the plane. A warm Sri Lankan breeze embraced my brownness. My insides churned. All of a sudden, the setting seemed uncomfortably familiar. It was hard to navigate with a heavy suitcase in one hand and the cane in the other. I wobbled forward, gearing myself to meet Aiya. I remembered how he used to take me to the make-up artist's early in the morning when I was taking part in the Shakespeare Drama Competition. When I saw him in the baggage area, he acknowledged me. He didn't smile. He didn't think it was necessary. Family, they call it.

Then we drove home. Home? As Amma used to say, "The nest is getting empty." One by one, we drifted into an abysmal unknown.

On the freshly paved Airport Road, we passed fruit vendors on both sides. It was sunny. It almost always was. Sweat beads trickled down my arm. I felt the brownness of

my skin. Aiya probably noticed through his peripheral vision. He said nothing. Was he going to help me brace up? I wondered. Was everyone home? Was Amma everyone? I engaged in an internal monologue. My mute Aiya didn't think silence was a bad thing. Family called for silence.

It felt like forever, the drive. Pedestrians crossed the road at every imaginable place without warning. The sky looked disturbingly blue. So blue that it saturated me with childhood memories. Amma used to rock me to sleep when I was a baby. She couldn't sing much. Her lullabies were out of tune, but I fell asleep in the haven of her everythingness. She was everything.

Amma must be excited to see me, I thought. I knew. We pulled into the garden. Home emerged so fast. There were little orange fishes in the pond near the entrance. Amma stood there. Waiting. Just like she stood there when I left. She didn't know I used a cane. She vanquished South Asian familial distance and hugged me in a tight squeeze. She looked thinner. More silver hair. She wore a hand-dyed batik dress. I pretended that I didn't see her staring at the cane.

The red cement floor was polished to blazes. A little slippery. The fish-tank in the living room was a ton of water waiting to smell foul. No fish. That's how it was when I left. Someone must have changed the water. What would she say? I wondered. I needed to justify the cane; sugarcoat it.

"I'm just using this for balance," I said without looking at her.

"It looks posh," she lied in an unsteady voice. "Are you still vegetarian?" She changed the subject. I was relieved.

"Yeah. Not even fish. Eggs are okay."

Aiya blended into the background like he always did. My graduation picture stared at me from the pastel green wall. I looked fat. Perhaps happy. Amma brought me a tall tumbler of a lemon drink. I gulped it down. "It's hot out," she said. The lemons are from the garden, Amma told me. When I was about fifteen, I used to live on this lemon drink. Sometimes, there were fifteen lemons in one cluster.

Aiya was down from Dubai just for a while. Yes, the nest was empty. How did she deal with it? She still ran the Montessori school. She held a concert every year. In the nursery, she kept pictures of us from happy days when we were kids, building sand-castles on the golden sands of Trincomalee that had become the home of separatist freedom fighters who were dying by the thousand for a lost cause.

There was so much to get used to all over again. Amma's room smelled of herbal oils. Akka's smelled of lavender even though she had been gone for many years. Aiya and I used to share a room. We never talked, though. Thaththa had killed communication in the house. We held everything inside until we had to scream and cry. When he dashed dishes to smithereens at the dinner table, I used to study Amma with puppy eyes.

In the morning, Thaththa took me to school on his motorbike like nothing ever happened. Near the lake it always smelled of cashew fruit. I always fell asleep on that orange tank of the bike. I couldn't fall off as Thaththa's arms were around me. He was out of work then, my Thaththa.

I held the tumbler to the sun. As my eyes processed the remnants of lemon drops, I felt the sun of Amma's eyes on me. And I closed my eyes to sever myself from this house of pain. I lost myself in her everythingness.

\* \* \*

When scarlets were smothered by a setting sun, still fairly visible through the new houses jutting out in the marshes, I was drawn to Thatththa's empty, white room. It smelled the same. Everything was methodically arranged. Books, shoes, clothes...belts. I opened the top drawer in the familiar chest of drawers. A worn-out leather wallet caught my attention. I opened it. In the leather heart of the wallet, I saw a stamp-sized picture of a small boy. He had porcupine hair and puppy eyes. He must have been about ten. Tender.

\* \* \*

Kyle went to look for work. He was going from place to place and filling out applications wherever anyone was hiring. He was a blue collar guy. He could lift a ton. My muscle-bound hero, he had a GED. So this day, he filled out applications and finally ended up at Julio's to drink. Julio loved to get Kyle to drink. When drunk, all Kyle's inhibitions went away. He told me so.

As it was getting late, I called Julio's number and asked what Kyle was doing. Kyle came to the phone and sounded delirious and slurry, so I knew that he was already drunk.

"Kyle, when are you coming back?"

“Hey hey, my prince! I’m well...I waaant to. As shoon as this drrrink is ovah, I’m all yours.”

“Don’t drink too much.”

“Of coouse naht!”

The scrub, the scrub. Just like handing tools to a surgeon he did all day long, he was probably handing glasses of nectar to Kyle now. I paced in the room. The telephone was right there but what good could it do? In Kyle’s bare house, there were dumb-bells everywhere. Kyle’s demi-gods. I went to the microwave, one of his very few possessions, and boiled a mug of water. I put in some instant coffee and started drinking. The time went by, minute by minute. Second by second. Slowly. Lingeringly. And every minute was a millennium to me. I called again. No answer. The phone was off the hook, probably. I went to bed. It was getting darker. My world was, too. Seconds, minutes, hours passed, but no news of Kyle. Every vehicle that passed on the road outside the bedroom woke me up. I stood up, hoping it was Kyle. I just had to sigh. Every time.

It was around five in the morning when the back door creaked. In walked a guilty man. Sheepish. To my horror, Kyle’s forearms were full of bloody cuts. Did they wrestle with knives? Was Kyle attacked? I could hardly find the words.

“Wha... w... what happened?”

“Nothing happened.”

“Your forearms are bleeding!”

“Physical pain is nothing compared to emotional pain.”

“You cut yourself???”



“Yeah.”

“Oh, Kyle! Let me disinfect those cuts, but I’ll give you a hug first.”

“No to both.”

The sun was coming out mildly, vaguely, shyly. It’s just what the sun did. By habit. By practice. My eyes were wide. Alert. Quizzical. But defeated.

\* \* \*

In my little dorm room, I waited for Kyle faithfully by the phone. When it finally rang, he postponed picking me up. He was at Julio’s. Drinking, of course. The scrub. Kyle’s nemesis. As I was waiting by the phone, I didn’t want to go to the bathroom because Kyle could have called in my absence. He called almost every hour. He was supposed to pick me up at five. It became six. Then seven. Then eight. Nine. Ten. Eleven. Midnight. There was no news after that, and the phone was probably off the hook. I received a call at three in the morning. It was from outside my building. I was still awake. When I opened the door to my building, he was all giddy. Laughing. Smiling.

“How arrre ya?” he asked.

“Why are you all wet?”

“We had a water fight. Julio and I.”

His response shut me up. I didn’t know what to say. I couldn’t find any words. I just looked away and focused on my steps.

“Is that an attitude?”

“I just don’t know what to say.”

“Ah ha. Alrightie, then.”

Once in the car, Kyle started driving like a maniac.

“We’re going on a joyride, baby. Attitudes don’t fly with me.”

“It was not an attitude. Please slow down.”

He only increased the speed and violently brushed against a car parked on the side of the road. My words only fanned the fire, so I didn’t say anything. I was getting ready for heaven or hell.

\* \* \*

When Kyle picked me up that night, he was more than usually reticent. I tried to act cheerful, but his spirits seemed down, nevertheless. He yawned loudly. I sensed that he was preoccupied, depressed, almost. When we entered the house, I asked him if he wanted to play a board game. It was late. I could hear crickets.

“I’m sleepy, but what game did you have in mind?”

“Oh, any game is fine. What do you have?”

“I have Chess and Monopoly. Which one would you like?”

“You pick.”

“Okay. Let’s play Chess, then. Haven’t played it in a while.”

So he took out the chess-board and started arranging. He was black as usual. I was white. He didn’t look at me. When I tried to look at him, he evaded my eyes. I wasn’t really into the game. Kyle was. I was losing fast. He checkmated me. I checkmated him. He said my move was illegal. The clock read just after two in the morning.

“Of course not. It’s definitely legal,” I said.

“Nope. I’m going to call Julio to find out.”

“At two in the morning? That’s insane.”

“I need to find out.”

I went to the bathroom. When I came out, Kyle was seated, thinking.

“So what did Julio say?”

“Just as I said. This is not working.”

“What is not?”

“This relationship.”

“Because of some stupid chess game? Good grief! Why don’t you take me home?”

“Alright. Collect your clothes, then.”

“My clothes? Why is that?”

“We’re through. I gave you a chance to talk, but you didn’t want to. This is it. We are incompatible.”

My body ached. Inside and out. My eyes burned and my vision was blurry. So I collected my clothes slowly, meditatively, sadly. I got into his maroon Lumina. We headed to campus, silently. When he dropped me near my residence hall, I collected my backpack, clothes, books, cane and started hobbling towards Gideon Hall. It was a chilly dawn. I didn’t look back at the cruel Lumina behind me. And he didn’t honk profusely like he usually did. He was gone. Quietly. Gone for good.

\* \* \*

The weekly shot gave me flu-like symptoms for twenty four hours. The first time I gave myself the shot, I had severe chills and needed to use the restroom almost every two minutes. Over time, my body got used to the medication, and I didn't suffer as much. I could deal with the side effects of my medication, but I could barely deal with Kyle's indifference. He wasn't mine anymore. I had to learn that. Slowly. Achingly. Before he went steady with the Indonesian, I could see through Kyle's Grandma's lace curtains different men going into Kyle's house at night. They left in the morning, and when they did, they took a little part of me with them.

\* \* \*

When Ruth and Grandma took me in, I didn't think it would be so hard living next door to Kyle. I was determined to completely sever myself from that past. I knew I was going to see him often, but I forgot that he had a key to Grandma's house. He came there to eat, to play with the dog, to watch television, and to tell Ruth and Grandma how he was doing. He also came over to remind me that he was still there. I slept on the floor of the tiny living room, and when Kyle was working out, he came into the house multiple times at night. I pretended to be asleep. I used to sleep with a teddy bear, then; a teddy bear who would never leave me.

My days were monotonous. During the day I went to campus for classes, and I came home around four. Then I did homework, ate supper, and went to sleep. There was no excitement in my life. Wake up, go to school, do homework, eat supper, and go to sleep. In between, I bumped into Kyle. When I did, he avoided me. On purpose.

The front door of Grandma's house creaked as if it had been shut for a hundred years. Whenever someone came in, which was usually Kyle, I could hear the outer door opening and then the front door creaking. When Kyle came in, Grandma's tiny house dwarfed even further in his war tank presence. When he was in the house, I usually withdrew to Ruth's room. I pretended to be busy with schoolwork. I pretended that he belonged to my past. I pretended that his presence was indifferent to me.

One night, when I was sleeping on the floor, Kyle came into the house with a gun. It was close to 2 a.m. I knew Kyle could beat up a cop when angry. He could be irrational. Unfeeling. Maybe he was going to shoot us all, I thought. I knew this was possible. He wasn't wearing a shirt. It was a chilly night, but he was covered in sweat. I looked while his back was turned towards me. I thought I was soon going to join my fore-fathers, so I went under the blanket and waited for the bullet. I worried about Ruth and Grandma. They were sleeping, so they didn't know what was happening in their house. My heart was beating fast. It happened without any warning. I said a quick prayer and waited under the blanket with my teddy bear. Then I heard the front door creak again. I heard Kyle's hurried footsteps outside. He was gone. I peeled off the blanket and went to see Ruth and Grandma. They were asleep. Soundly. Dreaming, maybe.

CHAPTER IV

PIGEON ORCHIDS AND GUAVAS GREW IN OUR BACKYARD

(A FOREIGN MAN)

When Thaththa brought foreign uncles and aunties home, Amma cooked for a long time. She was in the kitchen for hours. I remember her frying fish. She put a handful of small fish into a hot pan of oil, and a giant flame rose up from the stove. I thought the whole house was going to catch fire. The flame disappeared in no time, though, and the small fish came out golden and crispy. I ate a couple when Amma was not looking.

The foreign uncles and aunties were much fairer. They had different colored eyes; color of deep waters mostly. Vicky was a foreign aunty. She said I was “adorable” or something. She liked my hair a lot and said it was velvety and thick. I had to ask Amma later what velvety meant. When Aunty Vicky and her husband, Uncle Mike, came over for dinner, Amma and my sisters dished out everything and carried them to the big dining table in the living room. Earlier during the day, Akka had made a beautiful flower arrangement for the dining table. She used big, yellow wild flowers and many ferns of deep green. Aunty Vicky said my sister was very talented. They were married, Aunty Vicky and Uncle Mike, but they didn’t have children. They liked to travel, Aunty Vicky told Amma, and Sri Lanka, she said, was her favorite country to visit.

After dinner, Amma made tea with sliced ginger root in it. We were all sitting in the living room, chatting. Initially it was only the adults, but Aunty Vicky insisted that the kids should be there as well, so Thaththa called us all in his loud, trumpet voice. All four of us joined in, then. Aunty Vicky gave me two enormous chocolates because I was the youngest. We could divide them after Aunty Vicky and Uncle Mike had left for sure. The moment they left, I asked Amma if I could divide up the chocolates. She said, yes,

fortunately, and we all ate chocolate. One was minty, though, so I gave my share to Sha. I ate the other one as it was just almond-flavored milk chocolate. I had never seen almonds, but I really liked the taste.

\* \* \*

*I never thought I would end up being a foreigner, but here I am far away from where I grew up. From everything I had gotten accustomed to. Over the years, I have gotten familiar with this second home. By default. By necessity. By my desperate need to belong. Sometimes, here in the States, people ask me where in India I am from. I have to tell them diplomatically, kindly, that I have never been to India.*

When I was small, I thought everything foreign was good. I remember wanting a pencil box that was “foreign.” At the book-store, these boxes were expensive. Beyond us. They were apparently imported from China. At Colombo College, everyone had these expensive boxes. I didn’t, so I pestered my parents to get me one. Thaththa was out of work then. I cried for a box, a foreign box. I wanted to belong. I liked the box somewhat, too. After weeks of crying, Thaththa finally took me to the bookstore to get me a “foreign” pencil box. It was Amma’s money, as he was not earning then. I felt a lot better when I could be like everyone else in my class.

\* \* \*

On my bus ride from Colombo College, we had to pass slums that were a world different from the elitist Colombo 7 landscape. There were kids everywhere, running around naked. People were bathing at public taps with hardly any clothes on. Unashamed. Deprived. There were enormous piles of garbage right by the road. Kids



were running about in the midst. Music from living quarters with open doors deafened the whole neighborhood. There were plastic flowers in imitation gold vases inside houses. They were open for passers-by to see. There was nothing to hide in these slums. It was just a struggle to be alive. Bordering the line of slums was a canal whose water was a deep, dirty green. All the refuse from the slums as well as other industrial waste was dumped into the canal, making it unfit for any life. Gaunt, brown, naked, little bodies played in the open. Blissfully unaware of their misery. Innocent in their ignorance. Pure in their lack.

Mangy stray dogs barked furiously in these slums. There were emaciated little puppies, too. Once I saw eight of them competing to suck out non-existent milk from a scrawny mother. Sometimes, beggars got into the bus singing to the beat of a little drum, asking for money. The more sophisticated beggars had printed stories of misery that they handed out to passengers. After singing their mournful songs, they collected the handouts along with whatever coins the passengers were willing to part with. The sun was scalding at one thirty in the afternoon when school ended. The roads were busy, the bus was dirty, and I was hungry. I wished I could fly home, but we didn't even have a car. My friends did. They went home in air-conditioned comfort.

\* \* \*

On the front cover of a *Time* magazine, I saw the picture of a child soldier. He was holding a rifle that was taller than him, his eyes narrowed. I didn't know if it was from a cruel sun or the blinding flash of a camera. But his eyes penetrated the very earth, trained to kill without rhyme or reason. Untimely stolen from his family, from

school, from childhood, from innocence. The picture was taken in Jaffna, the northern peninsula of Sri Lanka. An L.T.T.E. child soldier on burning soil.

\* \* \*

I heard seven sisters beginning to chirp. I opened eyes deprived of sleep. Sunlight attempted to enter gently through the ventilation gaps above the windows. It was a special day—the day I was flying to Iowa. The trip would take about thirty hours. The red docket with my plane ticket caught my drooping eyes. I walked up to the teak table and made sure the ticket was still inside. I brought it to my chest and sighed. I might be happy, I told myself. I would leave behind Mulberry Street. I would leave behind rich brown earth where Benji lay.

Amma was making kiribath, which is usually made at auspicious times. I avoided eye contact when I passed her on my way to the bathroom that all six of us had waited in line for for almost twenty years. As I opened the faucet, the coldness of the water surprised me. Fragrance of the kiribath had permeated the very walls. It smelled of fresh rice and coconut milk. It smelled like Mulberry Street. It smelled like home. It smelled like the kind of love only Amma could show.

I wore clothes Amma had neatly ironed the night before. In the living room my two suitcases stayed on the floor next to the fish tank, a ton of water without any fish in it. The thick living room curtains were drawn to hide us from the five houses on our suburban gravel lane. Rocky was having a German Shepherd dream. His ears stood up as he heard my footsteps. He tried to open my suitcases with his moist nose. Then he licked my hand. As I blew steam off my coffee, I saw Thaththa weighing my suitcases

again. He was obsessive-compulsive about such details. When I drew open the living room curtains, I saw Akka plucking jasmines outside. She gently and thoughtfully put them into a glass filled with water. Sha was standing behind her, wrapped in a worn-out, blue blanket. Rocky was supervising them with his big brown eyes. He was seated like a good boy.

Colombo – Seoul – Amsterdam – Des Moines – Mason City. Heather would pick me up from there to take me to First Lutheran College. I bowed at my parents' feet with betel leaves grown on the wall separating us from the Weerasinghes, to ask their blessings. Amma gagged a little, and Thatththa hushed her. Rocky licked my limp hand. He emitted a mournful sound. I welcomed the excuse to pat his head.

I took dreams, hopes, anticipation, nervousness, excitement, good wishes, the empty fish tank, Rocky's moist nose, the kiribath, smooth, pastel green walls of the living room, Mulberry Street, and a bit of Amma with me.

\* \* \*

I took my South Asianness, my brownness, my foreignness, and my developing country misery to the cornfields. I helped diversify the little college town. I met Mrs. Benedickson when I joined the choir. She was the secretary of the music department. She asked me where I was from, and I said Sri Lanka.

"Where is that? Is it in Africa?"

"No. Asia. Southeast Asia, to be specific. It's an island."

"Was it part of the British empire?"

"Yeah. We gained independence in 1948."

When I first landed in the Mason City domestic airport, I had twenty three dollars in my wallet. Thaththa had given that to me. It wasn't much, but it was something. My scholarship covered full tuition, room and board, and health insurance. I didn't need much money. I worked on campus, so I could buy my books.

I wrote to Amma from the land of the free. From the United States. In the cafeteria, students threw away lots of food. There was one kid who weighed about three hundred pounds. He threw away about three pounds of food at every meal.

Two of the most important events in the International student calendar at First Lutheran College were the Global Food Festival and the Global Variety Show. Since I was the President of the club that year, I had to play a very responsible role in planning and implementation. The Global Food Festival was not too hard to organize. Students from different countries undertook to make a dish from their home country. First Lutheran had a fairly large international population: Slovakia, Ghana, India, England, Australia, China, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Czech Republic, Malaysia, Indonesia, Mexico, Mongolia, Colombia...the list was long. On that Saturday of the Global Food Festival, tables were set up in the big auditorium to represent every country and the food being sampled. The students wore clothes from their native countries and explained to visitors different cultural artifacts they had on display next to the food samples. Tickets were issued, and many community members from the college town came to experience the little globe in their own back yard. A taste of the world for the stagnant lowans in the little town, it was an attempt to promote diversity, the other, the often marginalized.

The Global Variety Show was a larger and well-attended event. There were dances, songs, cultural demonstrations, and finally, a fashion show that showcased different clothes from the world. All international students took part in the fashion show, but only a few of them did individual or group presentations. I volunteered to sing a song in my native language, Sinhalese. It was a song about a mother's love. Alina from Russia was my accompanist. She played the piano extremely well. On the evening of the show, I wore my ivory-colored national costume and gelled back my hair.

The show was going really well, and even though it was a long show, judging by the applause of the audience, it was received very well. My item came after the intermission. The song was something I had learned when I was very small, but this was the first time I was singing it to piano accompaniment. As I was singing the first couple of verses, I could see several of my friends in the audience. Despite the bright stage lights, I tried to acknowledge them with a smile, as it was good to be singing with a smile as well. In my preoccupation, I forgot the words of the third verse. Alina was playing the interlude, and I was seconds from singing the third verse. At this most opportune time, a brilliant idea came to my mind: there was absolutely no one in the audience who could understand Sinhalese, and I definitely knew the tune. So I sang the third verse in absolute gibberish. I sang tunefully, but no Sri Lankan could ever understand what I was singing. Even I couldn't. When the audience applauded at the end of the song, I had to bite my tongue not to laugh.

\* \* \*

I had heard about gay bars, but in the middle of the cornfields, there was hardly a bar, let alone a gay bar. The college was in the middle of nowhere. Literally. There was a Wal-Mart somewhere, but it was quite a walk for someone without a car. I really wanted to see what a gay bar was like, so at the end of one semester, I took a bus to Minneapolis. I had a little bit of money, and I thought that was enough for me to manage the trip. I was over the moon. I thought I was going to a glitzy gay bar filled with the most handsome men in the world. It was late when I arrived in Minneapolis. The bars weren't crowded until late, I thought, so I looked around the city until it was late enough to go to a bar. I just had my conspicuously childish backpack with me. I was dressed well, though, as I had very carefully planned what I was going to wear. So I went to the entrance of a gay bar I had previously researched on the internet. I was a little nervous so I walked very slowly. At the entrance to this bar, there were some very tall women with big hair and sky-high heels.

One of them asked me if I were looking for a date. The others laughed most cacophonously. I was feeling a little uncomfortable, so I walked right into the bar. Near the entrance, a desk was manned by two enormous men.

"Can I see your ID, please?"

"Oh, I don't have an ID with me. I'm not from this country," I said.

"Sorry, bud. No ID, no entry."

Holy shit! I came all this way for nothing. Now what? So I had to leave, and I had no idea what to do next. There weren't any buses going to the little town at night, so I waited outside the bar with the backpack, considering my options. It was utterly foolish of me

to have come all the way to Minneapolis without knowing what I was getting myself into. I probably had a very troubled expression on my face when a woman went past me.

“Are you alright, honey?” she asked.

“Not really. I don’t know what to do.”

I told her the whole story. She seemed kind. And she listened to my story. Attentively.

“How much money do you have, kid?”

“Not a lot. About seventy bucks.”

“Oh, honey, that’s not even enough for a motel. I’ll tell you what. You can sleep on the couch in my apartment, and I will charge you just thirty. How is that? I feel bad leaving you here alone.”

“Well, I don’t have a lot of options. Who else is in your apartment?”

“Just me and my boyfriend. He won’t bother you.”

“Well... I guess I’ll take the offer. I’m lost.”

So through back roads and alleys, I followed her to her apartment. It was not the most residential part of town. In fact, the neighborhood made me a little nervous, but it was too late to go back. I followed her to her apartment building and she ascended a rickety staircase. Then she turned in the key, and in we went. The apartment was almost bare except for a couch. I kept my backpack near the couch and asked her if I could just go to sleep.

“Of course, honey. My boyfriend is in the room, but he won’t bother you. You can give me the thirty bucks now.”

So I gave her exactly thirty dollars and put my wallet back in the back pocket of my jeans. I had about a hundred dollars, which I had not been completely honest about. As I was trying to sleep on the couch, my nose was burning due to some acidic smell coming out of their room. Oh, great. They could be doing drugs, I thought. Was I going to be able to leave in one piece in the morning? I had my doubts, but I was going to make the best of the situation.

As I was almost falling asleep in this drug-filled dungeon, I felt someone shaking me. It was that woman. I could just see the outline in the dark apartment, and I recognized the raspy voice.

“Hey, honey! Can I borrow twenty bucks from you? I’ll give it to you in the morning.”

Even though getting the money back in the morning struck me as an impossibility, I also knew that I was not in a position to refuse, so I gave her twenty bucks. In about half an hour, she was shaking me again. She wanted to “borrow” another twenty bucks. Then another twenty, and finally, the only ten bucks I had.

It was such a dingy apartment that even the sun seemed to shy away from the place. Morning came very slowly, and I thought maybe the woman might give me back the money she “borrowed.” I never saw her partner in crime, but early in the morning, she said she would go to her workplace and get me the money she owed me. A small part of me wanted to believe her, so I went with her through dark alleys towards her supposed place of work. She asked me to wait near a disheveled building and went to get the money. I stood there waiting. Like a buffoon. The woman never came back. I had



no money and didn't know what to do next. I was alone in the city without a penny to my name. So much for my idea of going to a gay bar filled with the most handsome men of all time. I only saw three very tall women in short, shiny dresses. So here I was tired, robbed, disappointed, and mad at myself for making asinine choices. Then I had one bright idea. The best place to ask for help, I thought, was a church. So I walked through the long streets of Minneapolis looking for a church. I needed a godly man to deliver me from this nightmare. I kept walking with an expectant heart and tired legs. It was a Saturday morning. The roads were busy and the sun was majestic as it was almost summer. Billboards, pedestrians, vehicles, buildings all meshed into one big, incomprehensible mess, but I kept walking.

Then I saw a massive church. It was a Catholic church with many buildings. The garden was very tastefully landscaped. I went into the main building. In the sanctuary, there were several people praying most fervently. Forgetting my need of the hour, I was looking at the beautiful stained windows. A sign pointed to the office of the assistant priest. I went in calmly, hopefully, unabashedly. He instantaneously greeted me with a welcoming smile. His eyes were emerald, calming, compassionate.

“Hello, my brother! What blesses me with your presence today?”

“Well, I need help. I have no idea what to do.”

“Let's try to figure it out together. Can I get you something to drink, first?”

I told him how I had gotten lost in the city. I didn't tell him about the gay bar or the woman. I told him that I was in town to visit my roommate and had lost his phone

number. I didn't know where he lived, I added. There was a kernel of truth in that I was lost and had no way of getting back to campus.

The priest called up the transit station and found out when the next bus was leaving and how much the ticket was. Then he gave me money for the ticket and took me to the bus station in his own car. Ah, there are good people in this world. I wonder, though, if this savior of a man would have helped me if he knew the whole story. The true story. I gave him the benefit of the doubt as he clearly did the same for me. He saved me.

\* \* \*

Cultural incompatibility was Kyle's excuse. He said we couldn't be in a relationship because our cultures were very different. He said I should find someone from Sri Lanka. I felt that the break-up was pre-arranged, though. My expiry date had elapsed. I had served my purpose. For him. He said I didn't understand how things were done in the United States. I was a foreigner. Then he said I should find someone with MS. I was limiting him, he said. He liked to dive, he said. He said I should find someone who was not into drinking. He said I should find someone with a lower IQ. He suggested he was a genius. He had a GED. He said I should find a "towel head." He said I should find a student. He said I should find someone into theater and music. He was too good for me. Too manly. Too smart. Too white. Too strong. When he used to flex his muscles in front of me, he used to say, "Look what I can do."

\* \* \*

There were sweet-scented lilacs in the garden, and every time I opened the little door of Grandma's story-book cottage, I was in lilac heaven. The fragrance was alluring. I heard Kyle talking to Ruth. He was planning to go to Indonesia with his new love or whatever one can call him. A short, shaved-headed, "towel head" he was. Ruth listened to Kyle's travel plans. He said that the Indonesian guy was paying for both tickets. Kyle didn't have money. Not even a job. They were going for a month. A whole month. Fully funded by the new boy-toy. He wasn't really a boy, but he was a toy.

"Where'll you be staying?" Ruth asked.

"In his home. His mother's bed-ridden."

"I wonder what kind of food they eat."

"I guess I'll find out."

I was trying to read a book by the window, but I couldn't. I was eavesdropping. On every word. And every word injured me. I just listened like in a bad dream. I read the same passage over and over.

When Kyle was gone for a month, I missed seeing him get into his old Lumina. I looked through Grandma's lace curtains. I didn't know what I was looking for, but I looked. Maybe for some signs of familiarity. Signs of presence. Kyle sent picture postcards from Indonesia. Ruth showed them to me. Maybe she didn't know what those picture postcards did to me. I gave them back after a cursory glance.

Like the constant drizzle in Tacoma, my life went on, halting every now and then to pine internally over my brief history with Kyle. I hobbled every morning to the bus stop. In class, I retained little and failed most miserably to maintain a façade of bogus

excitement about education, about various theories, and classroom management tools. I thought about Indonesia, about the ocean waves that always went back to where they came from.

Trying to start over right next to the memories I wanted to get over was impossible. Even when Kyle was gone for a month, I knew he was coming back, maybe with a tan. And sadly, I was looking forward to his return, even though he took very little notice of me when he was around. I needed to see him. I needed that taste of having someone by me, for me. The month was long. It was agony. It was emptiness. It was being alone, physically and otherwise. When he finally returned, he was full of stories. Stories for Ruth. Not me. I was an outsider. A foreigner.

It might have been easier if I could find a place away from Kyle, but I didn't have options. When Ruth agreed to let me stay with her and Grandma through my MA in Education, I was simply relieved that I could pursue the degree, even though I did not like the idea of an MA in education, but beggars can't be choosers. So there I was, living right next to the man who flaunted before my eyes his new life, his new pastime, his new brown lover.

\* \* \*

One day when I was a Master's student in New York state, we were discussing snacks that a group of us wanted while we were going to have a study group. Peanut butter came up as a subject. At that time, I couldn't eat peanut butter. I hated it. Laura was writing down what we wanted to buy.

"You don't like peanut butter?!" She sounded shocked and revolted.

“I don’t. In fact, I absolutely hate it.”

“Oh, my god! How could you hate peanut butter? I guess it’s because you’re a foreigner. Americans grow up on peanut butter.”

Finally, we ended up buying Reese’s peanut butter cups. I was outnumbered in the casting of votes. That was a number of years ago. Maybe I have assimilated into the American way of life, because now I love peanut butter. Sometimes, I put a spoon in the peanut butter jar and eat ravenously. I never did that in Sri Lanka; it was very expensive, to begin with. Growing up in Sri Lanka, on the way to the Buddhist temple in our town, there was a snack vendor on a bicycle. The temple was located on a small hill, and as we went up the road in the evening, Sha and I pestered Amma for some coins so we could buy peanuts, chips, and other snacks. Thaththa never came to the temple with us. At the entrance to the temple, we had to remove our shoes and hide them, the two shoes in two different places (to wade off thieves), before observing our religious rites. That was home. At least at that time, before I spread my wings. There was no question about what home was.

\* \* \*

You must be kidding, I thought. So I have one Master's degree already, but may I not get another if I want to? Is education rationed in the U.S.? I wanted to say so much, but I realized that I was at the mercy of the short, stout visa officer behind the bullet-proof glass. Her hair was spiked and her ears were not pierced. In my mind, I named her William.

William never looked at me, and it bothered me, not because I yearned to be looked at, but because I was just a number to her; a number whose future lay in her hands with which she could do as she pleased; she could rape my passport with the hideous stamp that said "REJECTED."

She started typing very loudly. Whenever her fingers made contact with the keyboard, I thought about what a UFO might sound like when crashing on a massive iceberg. William was done with me at the blink of an eye. She shot words of absolute indifference at me, highlighting the documents she wanted to re-evaluate my application. William kept my passport. I thought it was a fairly hopeful gesture, as it meant that I could perhaps be issued a visa after all. But I knew how sadly wrong I could be. Maybe William wanted to send it to the FBI.

I had already bought my ticket, and the plane was to leave the next day. I didn't think I could ever be denied a visa; I had already been to the U.S. many times. I suppose I wasn't really denied this time, but I was asked to come back with transcripts. Unapologetically. Callously. I had to cancel my ticket, but the travel agency was nice enough to say that they could issue another ticket if and when I secured the visa. It would cost more, of course. A lot more. Poor Amma.

Amma had given me money to buy the ticket from her hard-earned savings: a lot of money in Sri Lankan Rupees. I'm sure it would not have crossed William's mind at all. I was only a number. Who cares about the challenges of numbers? As I headed out of the embassy, crestfallen and dejected, I saw more people lining up outside the embassy in burning sunlight. There was no canopy to shield them from the rays.

I met my best friend, Ramesh, at The Hot Cabin, and over steaming coffee, we launched the plan for getting the transcripts. It was to be a long night. William wanted transcripts from all three universities I had attended in the U.S. She had told me that electronic copies were okay, so I had to call every university to get them e-mailed to me. Stacey, Debbie, and Roger, registrars of the three universities, were extremely helpful when I called them. They promised me that I would have the transcripts in my e-mail in a matter of hours.

We waited until all transcripts were sent, and by the time we received the last one, it was close to three in the morning. But everything was in order. In my mind, that is. I wondered what William might think. She might think that it was a bad hair-day and no Sri Lankans should receive a visa, consequently.

I hobbled back to the embassy the next day. I was wondering if my cane could make matters worse for me. Yes, I had MS, and it wouldn't go away. Yes, Sri Lanka simply committed MS patients to wheelchairs when their condition worsened. There was no medication available, and when wheelchair-bound in Sri Lanka, one had to stay home until death intervened. Provisions for the disabled? People had to eat first. There were greater matters that required the attention of a developing country's government. There was a civil war going on in the country.

It was a nervous morning and my eyes were tired. But I smiled broadly at William. She didn't seem to believe in smiles. She barely looked at my transcripts. I basically had A's to be looked at. She asked me to wait in the lounge. More emotional torture. As I waited in the lounge, the VCR was playing a promotional video that painted

the U.S. in breathtaking colors. An Arab said, "I'm American." Then an African. (-  
American) A Chinese (-American). A nun. A white soldier. The list is endless. They were  
all Americans. And they were smiling. What happened to William?

After several hours, William called me. She told me that my visa was issued. She  
never smiled. I had to collect my passport the next day at five in the afternoon. I didn't  
smile. As I left the embassy, I realized that William had kept a little part of me with her. I  
knew she was going to trash it. I called it human dignity. I wondered if William knew  
anything about it.



CHAPTER V  
LITTLE PIECES OF ME  
(A DISABLED MAN)

When I was six, I woke up one day and was unable to walk. Just like that. I can't remember how I felt, but I know that due to some reason my legs refused to move. Not having given me the polio vaccine, my parents were worried that I probably had polio. On that orange tank of the motorbike, Thaththa took me to various doctors. Finally, one doctor diagnosed me with a weird bone condition. It was called Legg Calve Perthes or something. As there was no remedy for it according to Western medicine, I was admitted to an Ayurvedic hospital. I had to stay in that hospital for six months. They gave me various oils and other herbal concoctions to drink. I could barely tolerate their smell, but I got used to them eventually. Staying in the hospital for that long was lonely, but fortunately, there were other kids in my ward who were suffering from various bone conditions. They all walked funny, and they didn't have many toys. I wasn't from a rich background, but those kids didn't even have enough food to eat, sometimes. When Amma brought me food, she always brought enough to share with my new friends.

The hospital was clean, but the smells upset my stomach. There was a small Buddhist shrine outside my ward. At the entrance to the little building that housed various replicas of Buddha, there was a small bush whose white blossoms emanated the most heavenly fragrance. I was not supposed to walk much, but I did walk up to the shrine from time to time to experience that scent. That transforming fragrance. Sometimes, I stayed there until my friends wondered what happened to me. Priyanthi was my best friend. She could not walk at all. Her mother was very old; her father never visited. Maybe he was dead. When Amma brought me food, I always gave Priyanthi some because she had to eat the unpalatable hospital food day in and day out. When I

left the hospital to go home, Priyanthi wrote a poem for me. I didn't understand it, but I remember her writing. It was like little pearls.

After I left the hospital, I had to use crutches for several months. I played with the Perera girls on crutches. I ran with them. Very soon, however, I didn't need the crutches. I was free. I was normal. I could, once again, join my friends in class when they played during recess.

\* \* \*

*I live alone. I do whatever I want to do. If I feel like baking a cake at three in the morning, I can do just that. On a lonely Sunday, when falling asleep was difficult, that's just what I did. The gooey batter transforming into a delectable cake is a miracle. And I make my own frosting, too. I'm not terribly fond of cakes, but I'm a big fan of the culinary experience. My apartment, my rules. Cleaning is a big challenge, though. After I have baked and frosted the cake, my little kitchenette is a giant mess. I let the mess lie for several days. I'm not lazy, but MS makes doing simple things challenging. Bending, picking up things, lifting, moving are all on the difficult list. When I clean I have to take multiple rests. The rests revive me a little. I feel slightly better, so I start cleaning again.*

*If I had lots of money, I would hire a cook, a maid, and a secretary. For now, at least, I have to be my own cook, secretary, and maid. The other day, when I cooked, the fire alarm went off. I can't get on to a chair and turn it off, so I opened the door and turned the fan on. The apartment filled with cold air very soon. It took a while for the fire alarm to stop screaming. I wondered, though, that if there were a real fire, escaping unburned was not going to be easy for me. If it were a multiple-story building, and if I*

*happened to be on an upper floor, it would probably take me forever to go down. I could be an easy target for raging fire. I could bake alive.*

*After cleaning the apartment, I have to take my garbage out to the dumpster. It's usually very heavy, and I have to use my cane as well, so one hand carries the garbage bag and the other hand grips the cane. A tenant in a different apartment in my complex sees me struggling, sometimes.*

*"Just leave it there, buddy. I'll take it to the dumpster."*

*"Oh, thank you so much! That's a huge help."*

*"Anytime, friend."*

*There are kind people in the world. Everywhere. I have to let go. I would love to be able to do everything myself, but now I'm on a lingering death sentence, so I have to swallow my pride and let strangers help me.*

*Twelve years after my diagnosis, I believe I'm alive and kicking. Well, almost. I still have MS, and I struggle to get my words out. I, who was once an actor; I, who engaged in witty banter; I, who was on my high school debating team; I, who won all-island speech competitions. And this new I that has palpitations when students go through introductions on the first day of class. When it's time for me to introduce myself, I feel like my arteries are bursting inside me, one by one, steadily, loudly. And with the greatest of difficulty, I make intelligible sound, pronouncing my name that has become alien to me because I can barely say it, sometimes. Che..ei.ei.thi.yuhhh. If my soul is intact despite the infirmities of the frame it's housed in, I will still glow, smothered by the love of six billion, known and unknown.*

*In a messy apartment I scatter careless papers. They escape the grip of my brown fingers. When the day is good, more confident, and my movements sure, I pick them up and arrange them neatly on my desk. I sit by my computer and chat with my friends online. They give me advice that I need to fight. They say how proud they are of me. They tell me I will always be their star, whether or not I become a star of the world. They tell me they love me.*

*Then there's Amma, whose every email at one point used to be a medical questionnaire just like the ones I fill out in multiple numbers at various doctors' offices. How's your mobility, your breathing, vision, bladder, balance, speech, swallowing, reflexes, senses... Jesus, Amma, this questionnaire would kill me before MS could even begin, I say. Please don't ever refer to MS in any of your emails, I say. I capitalize "ever" for emphasis. Then I feel sad at the thought of Amma reading that email, so I end it with a smiley face. 😊 Love, Chethiya. I feel her eyes through the lifeless computer screen, and I almost feel her pain. It must be hard being a mom.*

*When I was at First Lutheran College in Iowa, I used to run from class to class. I always took an overload of credits, and my days were full. Then in the evenings, I memorized lines for various plays at the Moore Theater. My friends said that I was the running kid. Fall, winter, spring, or summer, I would often be seen running with a bright yellow backpack strapped onto my back, all the way to the new building where most of my classes were held. Many flying hellos and many smiles along the way even before I became homecoming king. The Viking statue near the Ludwig Pond seemed to cast steel eyes on me as winter chills forcibly entered my nostrils. My friends at First Lutheran that*

*I lovingly called "First Lutes" remind me today what a hyperactive freshman I was. Ah, thawing snow and falling leaves have changed much, and today, I loathe the idea of walking half a block to catch the bus. When I do out of necessity, I count my steps and tread the unfeeling earth with the calculated nimbleness of a ballet dancer. The hardest part is not having balance. And it all depends on the time of day and what the unseen arbiter determines for me. In the whiteness of winter, I carve out my name on carpets of glittering snow as I wait for busses or rides from my friends to the grocery store. I like grocery shopping. I like riding the motorized cart for disabled people. It was a little challenging at first to navigate, but I soon mastered the art and am now able to avoid ramming into strangers unintentionally. I don't always arrange my grocery list to avoid zigzagging between departments. Now that I use the motorized cart, it doesn't really matter, as I don't have to hobble from one end of the grocery store to the other. When I check out my groceries, I usually joke with the cashiers. Almost always, they are starving for some comic relief. In the absence of classroom intensity, my voice comes out effortlessly. Almost. When I was at the bookstore the other day, buying a book for my Trauma Theory class, the friendly cashier said with a smile that she could detect an accent in my voice. I didn't just tell her where I was from, but went to the extent of giving her an abridged version of my life story. I also told her how I happened to be on the beach in Sri Lanka when that horrid tsunami came to suck in hundreds of thousands of lives in Southeast Asia. She was agape. I over-dramatized it a tad for effect.*

*When the never-ending day is done and my body yearns for rest, I lay myself down on the grey-green couch with exotic flowers in my apartment. I don't sleep in my*

*bedroom as my neighbors' very breathing permeates the thin walls. More often than not, I hear a lot more than people breathing. But I like the couch a lot. It's very comfortable and hot air gushes out of the heat vents directly above me. I'm cocooned in the warm stillness of solitary living. I pop a melatonin pill or two and start dreaming.*

*\* \* \**

*Shattered dreams are not the easiest to live with. Every once in a while, I take out my yearbook from First Lutheran and study my various pictures from plays. We did four plays a year, and I acted in them all, always cast as a principal character. When I graduated and moved to New Jersey to live with some high school friends for a month, I received a quaint letter from a "fan," who apparently came to see me in every play at First Lutheran. It was, and will possibly be, my only instance of receiving fan mail as an actor. I still have that letter somewhere. It's like a glimpse into my past glory.*

*I keep myself busy. That's an effective way to wade off depression. I cook. I exercise. I clean. I write. I read. I take multiple showers. I sing in the shower. I take voice lessons. I listen to music. I play the piano. I watch sad movies. I meet friends for coffee. I go to Denny's and kill time. I go to church. I go to Bible studies. I bake. I smother chocolate cakes with frosting and pile fresh strawberries on top. I crack jokes with the various librarians at the Public Library. I do crunches. I swim. I talk to friends on the phone, friends who accommodate the irregularities of my speech with thoughtfulness. I play Bejeweled Blitz. I check my Facebook a zillion times a day. I change my status multiple times. I hum. I drink Diet Mountain Dew. I write to Amma. I write to friends. And*

*sometime, just sometimes, I wish I could dissipate into the unknown like gossamer clouds drifting towards the earth to vanish in midair.*

*When I think back to those days in Sri Lanka when I hid behind floral curtains, I realize how much water has passed under the bridge. Here in the States, I'm visibly the other, but not of a benign kind either: a brown, disabled, foreign, chronically ill, homosexual. That's what I am. The eye of my "I" looks at this perfect, healthy, white, heterosexual, able, native world and wonders what I'm doing here. But the status quo has to be challenged to propel humanity forward. Towards freedom for all. A world free of terror and marginalization. A world in which two people can hold hands because they feel connected by love, fraternity, or friendship. Black, white, brown, yellow. Gay, straight, asexual, bisexual. Healthy, disabled, broken, traumatized, part, whole, brittle, fragile. At the end of the day, maybe I can find a spot under the great big umbrella of humanity. That's where we all belong. Amen.*

*Sometimes, the grandiloquent notions in my head weigh me down. But first things first. One day at a time. One step at a time. One breath at a time. One word at a time. The greatest way to deal with this truckload of uncertainties and heartaches has to be amnesia, and maybe MS will grant me that, too. The cognitive elements of the brain are not affected usually until the very last stages of the disease. And when that happens, I could be in my seventies or eighties. At that age, who cares about cognition! I'd rather lose myself in blissful oblivion and not have to think of Kyle or Thaththa or decades of living with a debilitating neurological condition. Science is making great strides, they say. Perhaps someone might come up with a cure, so I could get my life back and re-start my*



*journey to Broadway. But it might be too late. Some dreams have expiration dates stamped on them in big, bold digits. Mine is, maybe was, one such.*

*On my way to The Red Brick Building, I fasten my posh London Fog coat tighter. The wind is abnormally gusty in Illinois. When I wear the stocking hat, it messes up my hair. But the cold is too much to handle. Who knows how MS would react to exposure to extreme temperatures? My nerves could freeze and turn purple. That's the thespian in me. Drama-queen. So I hobble out of my apartment, trying to find the right key to lock my apartment out of five or six keys marked by key identifiers. It's a dark pink. Even the key to my humble abode challenges established gender behavior. After dangling the noisy bunch of keys several times with the tasteless cane leaned on the London Fog, I locate the gender-bending, pink key. I walk out of the apartment, squeak through the outer door, lose my balance a couple of times, and finally insert the pink key in and lock the apartment. I hear the click. I take the key out and fasten the outer door. The bus stop is less than a block from my door, and I hurry my unsteady steps on the snow. The bus leaves at 7.33, and I look at my watch. It reads 7.32. A distant screeching of a macho vehicle distracts me, and I look up from the watch to see the bus taking off from the bus stop. I can't run. So I just sigh. I tell myself to plan better next time. Ah, the wind. My eyes tear.*

CHAPTER VI  
I AM FOR THE LIVING  
(A DYING MAN)

The senseless ethnic conflict kept raging in the country, and even though the actual combat was taking place in the northern peninsula, from time to time, the LT.T.E. sent suicide bombers to the capital. Schools had to be sporadically closed and whenever we heard glass-shattering loud sounds, we immediately jumped to the inevitable conclusion: another bomb. When the final bell rang in high school, I was getting my books together. All of a sudden, the whole school shook from a thunderous explosion. It sounded like our school was being bombed. Everyone started running, even though no one knew where the sound came from. A bomb, a bomb. It had to be a bomb. I started running to the entrance of the school. I imagined the best thing to do was to go home. When I was approaching the entrance, Mrs. Aponso, my primary school English teacher, almost caught me by surprise. "The Central Bank is in smithereens," she said. "The biggest bomb to date."

"The Central Bank?" I asked in disbelief. At the time all three of my siblings were working in banks located close to the Central Bank. Were they okay? I started running to the bus stop. I had to go there. I had to know if they were okay. Completely oblivious to sirens and ambulances, I hailed a taxi and asked the driver to take me towards the Central Bank.

"It's all cordoned off, sir. Better not go there."

"Take me as close as you can."

"I will try my best."

And we headed to the scene of devastation. The area was like a beehive. It was loud, hot, unsettling, traumatizing in its uncertainty and damage. I was eighteen at the time,

and I felt helpless in my inability to even figure out what to do. Like under a spell, I advanced towards the heart of the wound, looking for my brother and sisters. The throng of people, looking for their loved ones, was clamoring to get information. I saw police officers with blood on them. Miraculously, I ran into my brother. He was trying to find out about our sisters, too, but there was no way we could get any information from this mess, this massive gathering of troubled people. So we headed home. In silence. In anticipation. In hope.

Both my sisters were home when we got there. They were in utter shock and could hardly speak. Sha's bank was further away from the Central Bank, but my eldest sister's bank was right next to it. A friend of hers had died, being squashed under debris. A friend's friend had lost both her parents who worked in the Central Bank. A sad time, it was. We didn't know what else to expect in the coming weeks. Life was very precarious. We had to sever ourselves from the worldly interest in life for fear of being next.

\* \* \*

When I was taking part in the glitzy All-island Shakespeare Drama Competition in Sri Lanka one year, we were rehearsing for an excerpt from Macbeth. Harsha who played Macbeth is now a reputed surgeon somewhere. I remember him saying:

*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,*

*Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,*

*To the last syllable of recorded time;*

*And all our yesterdays have lighted fools*

*The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!*  
*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,*  
*That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,*  
*And then is heard no more. It is a tale*  
*Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,*  
*Signifying nothing.*

Like a video, I play those words over and over in my head. I do not always imagine myself as a tenuous candle flame, but there are moments. If I knew for certain what was on the other side of this life, I wouldn't have to think so much. We are all connected, and no man is an island. Willful notions of fatality have to be measured in terms of how they impact so many others whose lives are inextricably bound to ours. All I can do at such hours of morbidity is close my eyes. Thoughtfully.

\* \* \*

When the semester started after the Christmas break, the campus was getting busy one more time. Sandy, who worked at the cafeteria, was an old lady I was very fond of. Sometimes, she wouldn't even slide my card. I need to have more meat on my bones, she said. When I went to the cafeteria for the first time in the semester, Sandy gave me a Christmas present. It was wrapped, but there was no doubt in my mind what it was: a cane, wrapped in the same shape. My very first cane, it was, and I wasn't thrilled about having to use it, but I needed to. It made my life easier. Sandy gave it to me with concern, with a bit of trepidation, with a lot of love.

"Thank you, Sandy! I think I need this now."

“It’s the best-looking cane I could find.”

“It looks great. I like it.”

The cane did a lot of things to me, but I didn’t want Sandy to know. She gave me a hug and didn’t let go of me for a while. It’s a new life I was getting used to. Giving up. Little by little.

\* \* \*

When I did research about MS on my computer, I realized what a horrible disease it is. The bottom-line was that patients gradually became shadows. The Bard referred to the seven ages of man. With MS, though, it seemed there was an additional age before second childhood. A somewhat alert mind and a completely uncooperative body is not a good combination. Canes, wheelchairs, stretchers, IVs, pills began whirling in my mind.

\* \* \*

I was working at the Student Accounts office on campus. Parents usually called when the student bills were sent out. One of my duties as a student worker was answering phones, so when the phone rang, I immediately answered it.

“Student Accounts Office, how can I help you?”

“Student what office?”

“Student Accounts.”

“Oh, okay. I assume you said student accounts. Is that right?”

“Yeah.”

“I have a question about the bill I received for my daughter. I think there’s some error.”

“Can I have the student’s ID number?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t quite understand what you said.”

“I need the student’s I.D. number.”

“Sorry again. I didn’t quite understand. Is there someone else I can speak with?”

That was my first realization of what MS was doing to my speech. My supervisor released me from the task of answering phones. It was a blow, though. Speech was one of the few things I was proud of. And now, I was finding it hard to say much. I went to a speech therapist, and she said my speech was fine. Little did she know that my speech became a nightmare when I was tired. The muscles related to sound production were weak. The ability to walk was already compromised because of MS, but now, even my speech was. I was wondering what else MS was going to do to me. The doctor said that the symptoms were many. Little by little, then, my faculties were wasting. Even when I was sleeping, MS was at work, stealing a piece of me at a time. When I went to sleep at night, I had no idea what the next day could bring with it. I could get up tired, disoriented, and acutely disabled and depressed. I could also wake up rested, alive, and happy to be alive.

I had to urinate all the time. I just thought I had a hyperactive bladder. But no, it was a gift from MS. Bladder issues are very common in people with MS, I was told. It was difficult for me to get a good night’s sleep. I had to go to the bathroom many times through the night, sometimes as many as ten times.

\* \* \*

At twenty three my body was falling apart. At twenty three I was hurting, inside and out.

I walked to a Walgreens in a dark haze. In a nightmare; a distorted spell. My legs were weak. I stumbled. I counted pebbles in potholes. I frowned at the yellow-shedding elms. I felt the sky was going to eat me up. "Eat me whole," I said. "Gobble me up. There's flavor in me. Hurry, my flavor is running out." The dolls in the curio shop admonished me. They looked hideous and gray. I wanted to run past the shop window, but my legs didn't obey my brain. I slowed down. The sky advanced. Clouds floated. Gray gray clouds. I couldn't hurry. My heart was coming out of my eyes. My eyes burned. I emitted a whimper. I sighed loudly. No one listened. No one looked. The roads were empty. It was almost six in the evening in Tacoma. Back home in Sri Lanka, Amma must have been waking up to cook breakfast. I missed milk-rice. I missed the smell of dew on immaculate gardenia petals of an exotic ivory. I missed the little orange fishes in the pond at the entrance of my suburban Mulberry Street home. It was home. Sometimes, bleak. Sometimes, painful. Sometimes, unbearable. And love complicated it all.

I shook off gardenia petals and milk-rice from my mind. I felt the scent, though. My eyes burned. The little white man lit up, and I crossed the road. I walked to Walgreens. I opened the door with all my might. It closed before I could squeeze myself in. I tried again. I succeeded. I walked in.

"Are you okay, hun?" The solitary cashier saw my face.

"Yeah, it's chilly out."



I hurried my steps to the medicine aisle. The white lights blinded me. I counted unsteady steps to “sleeping aids.” Seventeen steps. I picked a blue card with twelve pills. I read the back: “Don’t take more than two pills at a time.” I picked up five cards. Sixty. The edges of the cards were silver. I liked silver. I liked blue and silver. I was blue.

I hurried back. I forgot to count my footsteps. I passed the dilapidated high school that looked deserted in the dead of fall. The leaves had changed to shades of burnt hideousness. All was burnt: the yellows, the oranges, the reds. Hideous hideous world. At ten, Amma fed us rice from her own hands. One mouthful to Sha and one to me. It tasted better when she fed us. We were poor. Dirt poor. I just didn’t know. Maybe Sha did. She knew better; she was older. We grew up together.

Campus looked dormant and deserted. I floated towards Gideon Hall. Even with the cane, I felt like the wind was out to get me, trying to abduct me. My hair flew. My scalp felt the cold air through the pores. The grocery bag in my left hand was light; susceptible to wind. It tried to fly. I didn’t let the wind steal my repose in blue and silver packaging. I tightened my grip. A scraggy sparrow flew away from a leafless branch after seeing my firm eyes. My stomach hurt. My fingertips were frozen. My eyes blinked. Hair on my neck stood up. I felt it. I felt uncomfortable in my body. I needed a new one. Walgreens didn’t sell those. But they sold beautiful pills in blue and silver packaging for the sleep-deprived; life-deprived. The world blurred and meshed into one indistinguishable, shapeless mess.

I entered Gideon Hall. The girl at the front desk was doing her nails. A raw, brutal red. She stuck out her manicured nails.

“Pretty?”

“Yeah. Very.” I smiled with unwarranted compassion. I was insincere about the nails.

“Are you OK? Your eyes are very red.”

“It’s cold out. I went to Walgreens to get some stuff.”

“What did you bring me?”

“An icy smile.”

“You suck.”

“I know.”

There was no one in the hallway. I took my keys out. They dangled noisily from a purple key string. I opened the door. I entered the mess of orange peel, Fitzgerald, Tennessee Williams, pop cans, dirty socks, and a pastel blue comforter. “I’m fire and air. My other elements I gave to baser life.” I’m a queen; I’m Cleopatra. *Angels in America* was on the floor. Kyle drove me to that audition. He helped me learn lines when I was cast as Belize.

The room was spinning. The light dimmed. Angels flew off the script on the floor. Kyle’s framed picture stared at me from the tan bookshelf. My scarf was a blood red. It attempted to throttle me as I moved through hurdles on the floor. It was a noose. Potential salvation. I liked blue and silver better. I missed Benji. And Rocky. They would have sensed the emptiness in my eyes. They were good dogs. They were my boys in smothering suburbia.

Then there was the phone, my nemesis. I wanted to ignore its presence. I told myself that I won't pick it up. I won't. I won't. I won't. I dialed 538-0919. I slammed the phone down. I picked it up again. I pressed redial. I hung up. I dialed again. I waited with my heart in my mouth. I felt the silence. It woke up the little hairs on my body. I felt cold. I adjusted the blood red scarf. I was cold. I was so cold. I missed Benji. And Rocky. The good boys. The room was spinning. My hideous hideous room. It was a mess. Hideous world.

The brute answered. Rough, gruff voice. I visualized chapped lips.

"Hello"

"It's me," I said.

"What's the story?"

"No story. Just wanted to say hello."

"Oh, okay. I was getting ready for my workout, so I have to get going."

"Of course."

"What's going on, though?"

"As you say, same shit, different day. I'm tired of it."

"I hear ya. How's the MS?"

"Not pretty."

"You might want to go to bed or something."

"Yeah. I will do just that. Thanks for the memories."

"Huh?"

I slammed the phone down. I slammed it good. His picture stared. It was titled “My world.”

After *The Night of Musical Theater*, he carried me on his shoulders. He was a war tank. I needed a war tank for my battle. But, I had blue and silver. Five of those. Oval shaped, deep blue drops to save me. Sixty. It was seven twenty nine. Phone blared. Phone shook the room. I shook inside. I knew who it was. It was going to be my victory. Dog’s day. Phone shook the room again. It rested a second and rang again. No messages. I knew who it is. The man had a huge issue with guilt. He said I was good with guilt trips.

Look what I can do, mister. I have all the power in the world, now. I can look away from you like a pharaoh. Like Cleopatra. You have no power over me, muscleman. The phone rang. I let it scream all it wanted. All he wanted. I was the victor for one small moment. A miniscule, insignificant moment. So I vetoed the objection in blaring rings.

The room was spinning. “Five hundred twenty five thousand six hundred minutes.” The RENT CD sang on a sticky, beige floor. Carpetless, orderless. “How do you measure a year?” In orange peel, in blue drops, in phone rings, in angels, in heart pulls, in Walgreens, in blue and silver, in oval shaped, deep blue drops. Room was spinning. Light dimmed. Hidden shadows danced on dry wall. Bed post was covered in blue jeans and ethnic shirts. Blinds were closed. I was hidden from eyes outside. I heard frisbee-playing in the hallway outside my lifeless tan door. I heard gleeful screams. “Ah, you missed it,” someone screamed. Partially angry. Partially joking. Partially thrilled that he could accuse. Jovial, joyful, innocent accusations.

I was barred, barred, barred from such innocence. Such carefreeness. Such youth. Such lightness. Amma applied herbal oil on my legs when I was six. A sticky and noisome concoction from the sap of trees. I used crutches at six. I mastered dancing on crutches. Scraggy little me dancing on crutches. When the jambu tree was covered in bright red fruit, I used a crutch to bring a ripe cluster closer to me, so I could taste one before the squirrels that played outside all year round. Once I spotted seven squirrels racing, one after the other, on the thick cable that ran from the end of the house to the gravel lane. Light dimmed. Memory faded. I wanted memories to dissolve like powder blue.

Inviting blue and silver, still in the Walgreens bag. Eyes blinked. Blinkered. Blinkered. Rapidly. Eyelashes were sticky with salty mush. I went in front of the mirror. Nose dripped. I could only see my bust. My brown brown bust. Red eyes. Ah, heartless baboon. I wanted to be poor. Dirt poor like so long ago, when Amma fed us, her babies. Grandma hated us. But she let Amma live in her mansion with the brood. Those were the exact words. Sha and I were part of the brood.

One early morning when I was very little, we traveled to Mulberry Street, to our half-completed, suburban home. It was dark outside. In the early morning blackness, Amma made milk-rice. The smell lingered in my dorm room. It attached itself to my skin. It was a protective membrane. Ah, Mulberry Street fragrance. Our new home. And we grew up. And here I was in cold cold Tacoma. The suburban front porch on Mulberry Street was covered by an unknown vine that bore purple blossoms twice a year. They

smelled like garlic. Pretty pretty suburbia. Soothingly purple, garlic-scented blossoms on my Mulberry Street home.

Nose dripped. Eyes burned. Phone blared. Light dimmed. A morbid Friday evening. A thunderous knock on the door. I stopped where I was. I stared at the tan door. Who could it be? I breathed softly. I didn't stir. The ceiling seemed to close in on me. Thunder shook the door again.

"Anyone there? This is 911. Open the door or we'll break in."

"I'm in here. Give me a second."

Did they know? What did they know? How much? Did someone call them? It could only be one person. I went to the door. I hesitated. I opened the door slowly, shy and embarrassed. Two cops charged in. They searched the room. My eyes burned. The room spun. No frisbee game outside, now. I heard whispers. I heard guesses. He stole my repose. My rest. I was almost ready, there. One officer found the blue and silver in the white Walgreens bag.

"Did you take any?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"You can check the receipt."

"Are you okay?"

"I will be."

"A friend of yours called us."

"I thought so."

Behind the cops, Andrew, my Residential Director, panned the camera of his eyes. Old Spice deodorant, Hemingway, Asian Ramen, dirty white socks, spilled detergent of a sticky blue. His eyes halted at “My World.” He came over and put his arm around me. He ruffled my hair.

“I’m here for you, buddy.”

“I know. I’m sorry, Andrew.”

He gave me a hug. It was his job. I felt my heart attempting to beat out of my chest. I was cold inside. I was so cold, I wanted Amma. Andrew put his hands on my shoulders. He looked me in the eye. I looked down. He lifted my face from the chin. I trembled. I swallowed cold spit. I was embarrassed. I couldn’t look at him.

“Can we do coffee, tonight? Just you and me.”

“Yeah.”

“Denny’s? Your call. I’ll come get you at nine?”

“Okay.”

Andrew smiled the milk of human kindness. Cops left with him. Room had stopped spinning. I shut the tan door. I hummed my favorite lullaby Amma used to sing to me when I was a baby. Crickets sang outside. I was alone.

\* \* \*

When I was doing my first Master’s in upstate NY, there was a grumpy old professor who used to give me a lot of grief. Once he stopped me in the hallway and said, “If I give you a break in the middle of the class, would that be enough for you?” It seemed that he thought I enjoyed going to the bathroom many times during his class.

All I could tell him was that I had little control over my hyperactive bladder, as it's a symptom of MS. Even though he seemed satisfied with the answer, every time I needed to go to the bathroom, I had to think more than twice, because I knew I was disrupting the class. At least, that's what he made me understand. He was a big fish in a little pond, who enjoyed flaunting what he thought was his "greatness."

\* \* \*

*Today is a good day, I think. I have good days and bad days, but the physically good days can be counted on one hand or maybe just nonexistent altogether. But I can't put my life on hold, so I step out to take a bus to campus. The bus leaves at 10:15 and my watch reads 10:14. Just in time, I think. The moment I get out of the apartment, I can see the bus leaving the bus stop without an apology or remorse. I'm too late. Again. When will I ever learn? I re-adjust my watch and set it five minutes ahead. That's for next time. Maybe tomorrow, I could be on time. Maybe even early. I sigh and go back to my apartment. I think of things I can do in one hour. I decide to disregard all my options and start eating dates I bought from the Indian grocery store. Namaste Corner is its name. Namaste. I thought about the strange lady in the bus who looked at me for something like three minutes and brought her hands together, saying "Namaste!" I burst out laughing, and she was embarrassed. I could be from India (of course), Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Maldives, or even biracial. Taking pity on the lady, I asked what her name was. She said, "Tami," looking away.*

\* \* \*



I still remember how badly I needed to go to the restroom in the middle of a doctoral seminar. My professors do understand, but the awful part is that I needed to go at that very minute. The closest bathroom was a ways away, and I thought I might end up peeing my pants, but fortunately, I could hold until I was inside the bathroom. One time, though, again in the middle of a class, I had to use the bathroom, and that time, my body didn't behave too well. As I was almost in the bathroom, my bladder gave in, so I had the most noticeable dark patch on my trousers in an unflattering spot. After this embarrassing experience, I thought maybe I should cut down on liquids, so I didn't drink much at all. Strangely, though, I needed to go to the restroom even more. Every time I went, I could only squeeze out a few miserable drops of murky urine. When I went to see my urologist, the first question he asked me was, "Do you drink enough water?" Apparently, then, not drinking enough water can lead to frequent urination. Ah, what a mess, I thought. It's always a catch 22.

\* \* \*

*Now I take the special services bus, and sometimes, there are many passengers to be picked up or dropped off before my destination. If I have the urge to use the restroom, I'm in a miserable position. So I discover 'depends.' It is a tough decision as I feel I am bidding adieu to my dignity. A wet patch on my pants in a noticeable spot is much worse, of course, so I start using depends. I feel like I have prematurely reached my second childhood.*

\* \* \*

The Emergency Room is my second home. The first time was when I experienced a severe pain in my shoulder, which gradually got worse. I hobbled to the refrigerator to get a drink of water as I was feeling extremely thirsty. The shooting pain in my shoulder was making me unsteady on my feet beyond what I usually experienced. The glass of water escaped my grip and dashed into a hundred fragments, and sprayed the floor with drops of ice water. Ah, the pain was getting the better of me. My mouth was dry. I felt dizzy. I thought I was dying, so I went to bed and closed my eyes. The misery continued. I was okay with death, as it ends suffering, but I was not okay with prolonged misery, so I called a friend and explained what was happening. He came to get me within minutes to take me to the ER. Despite MRIs and blood tests, nothing was apparently found to be the cause. It could just be the MS, they told me.

*Since that first time, I seemed to take permanent residence in the Emergency Room. If not for a shooting pain in my shoulder, it was what my neurologist called "an MS attack." I didn't mind the ER as I felt important when I could simply press a button for help. Any kind of help. Whenever I went there, they put me on steroids. I usually felt better, but I never went back to what I was before entering the ER.*

*I was diagnosed with primary progressive MS. The other kind, relapsing remitting MS, was apparently receptive to the medications available, but not the primary progressive kind. A slow ride to doom, it is. Little by little, my body is giving in. Even as I write, the beast is at work. Tirelessly. Relentlessly.*

*I make friends with the nurses. They are kind. I make them laugh, and they are overly cautious not to hurt me when they poke multiple needles into my body.*

*“Which arm, buddy?”*

*“Oh, take your pick. I’m immune to being poked with needles.”*

*“Ha! Funny guy. How about the left arm, then? It’s closer to me!”*

*“I see how it is! Just kidding, but the left arm suits me just fine.”*

*“Okay then. Here we go. You’ll feel a small prick.”*

*“Done already? I didn’t feel a thing. Either you are really good or my arm is dead.”*

*“I’m really good.”*

*“Ha ha! Good one.”*

\* \* \*

Amma used to say, “Always aim for the moon. Even if you fail, you will land among the stars.” That’s what I do. I aim for the moon, knowing full well that it is way beyond me now. Deep within me, though, I still have that fire I had when I first auditioned for a play. When I learned my lines for the first play I was in. My first curtain call. My first standing ovation. My first award as an actor. The first rose. The first time I washed my make-up off. I remember how my face glowed, then. I felt like a new man. Emerging from the green room, there were always people telling me what a great job I did. All this is such a big part of me that I can never fully sever myself from these memories. I don’t think I want to.

As I go, I invent new dreams. Old dreams get prematurely shattered when new symptoms appear or old symptoms become more acute, more challenging, more menacing. Fernando Uncle once told Thatththa (I overheard) that I was very adaptable.

MS makes me even more adaptable than I used to be. There's no choice involved. One simply has to live with the new limitations. There are no second chances in this game. After a hard day of limping, falling, uttering gibberish, laughing like a hyena, feeling lost, embarrassed, and ashamed, I soak my tired feet in warm water. It's a bit of heaven. I feel revitalized. Rejuvenated. Ready for another day? Almost. I keep my feet in the warm water until my skin becomes wrinkled. Then I think of dinner. I finish pampering my feet and start cooking. Just for myself. I cook whatever I feel like cooking. Whatever I feel like eating. I soak dahl in some water. I like dahl. When I was very small, I refused to eat without dahl. After soaking for a while, I put it in a saucepan and put in water to boil. Three to one is the water-dahl ratio. Then I add curry powder, turmeric, chili powder, garlic powder, some chopped onion, some stewed tomato and bring it to a boil. When the water has evaporated, I put in some creamy coconut milk like Amma used to do. Then my whole apartment smells like home. Like Sri Lanka. Like Mulberry Street. I dissolve into the smell. In a faint voice, I hear Amma tutoring kids at the dining table. She's getting chubby Charmi to recite, "Roly Poly Pudding." Charmi is about nine, and she wears pigtails tied with red ribbons at the end.

Roly poly pudding, and blackberry pie.

Peter likes the pudding, and Polly likes the pie!

Which one do you like?

Oh my, oh my, oh my... I like the

Roly poly pudding and blackberry pie.

When the dahl curry is ready, I eat it with bread and butter. The taste saturates me with memories. Strong limbs I had, then. Supple. Happy most of the time, except when Thaththa dashed dishes at the dinner table. Then we went to bed without eating. And Amma cleaned the mess while Thaththa hovered over her, belittling. Oh, what a dahl curry can do. I shake off the memories and get back to eating. Then I choke on dahl. I choke often. It's the MS. I don't eat anything super spicy. If I did, when food goes down the wrong tube, it would be suicidal.

\* \* \*

*I have what is called a drop foot. When I walk, I have to drag this drop foot. When it gets caught in the edge of the carpet, I fall. I'm usually careful, but it's hard to be careful twenty four hours of the day. And once when I was crossing the road in a hurry, the drop foot tripped me, and I fell flat on my face. Fortunately, the lights hadn't changed from red to green, or I could have been sandwiched by a moving vehicle. I carry life and death in every step. When I fall at home, I'm nervous about breaking my front teeth, so I try to keep my mouth closed when I walk.*

*My neurologist wanted me to get ankle braces. With a friend I went to a place that made ankle braces. They took all the measurements and said that the braces would be ready in a week, so I went back in a week with the same friend. Sure enough, the braces were ready. They simply had to be inserted into the shoes I was wearing. Abracadabra! Wow, they were like magic. I felt that I had such strength. Such stamina. I could stand with such surety. It seemed at that point that I almost had a new life. I have*

*been wearing ankle braces for years, now, and the wonder has surely worn out, just like I have, probably. Like my zest for life. The magic. The enigma.*

*I don't wear ankle braces at home, but I'm very careful when I cook, especially when I take pans full of hot food off the stove. I can end up setting the entire apartment complex on fire. And if I fall with the pan and all, I can be in a fatal mess.*

\* \* \*

When I was initially diagnosed over twelve years ago, I went on a diet that was especially designed for people with MS. It basically eliminated almost everything that a normal person could eat, except fruit, vegetables, and fish. No gluten, no dairy, no eggs, no legumes, nothing deep fried, no sugar... and to me, it sounded like "no life," but I went on the diet for a couple of months. All that happened was that I lost about thirteen pounds in two weeks.

\* \* \*

When I had to go to the ER last time, I told my friend, Scott, that I should probably look for an apartment right by the hospital. It was becoming my second home. We laughed, but it's the sad truth. On a good note, though, when I'm in the hospital, I can order whatever I feel like eating from the room service menu: pizza, soup, salad, and for dessert, ice cream, chocolate cake, angel food cake, etc., etc. It's a good life, at least while I eat.

One time I weighed just over 130 lbs. Not good. I was referred to a dietician. She gave me a tall book of eating disorders and turned to anorexia. She asked me, basically, to diagnose myself. One of the criteria was that the patient felt the best when weight

was at a minimum. That's me. A second criterion was that the patient felt fat all the time, even when rationally the patient was not fat at all. That's me. There was a third criterion, which I have forgotten---MS compromises short-term memory. After two criteria, though, I had told myself never to see that dietician again. What she told me, scared me. She said I was trying to control some aspect about my body that I could. She told me to destroy my weighing scale. I had paid for the weighing scale, so I kept it. And I never went to see that dietician again.

\* \* \*

Last month, I was invited to dinner at a friend's. I was looking forward to getting out of my apartment. I feel claustrophobic, sometimes. I dressed up a bit. I wanted to. Wearing shoes is becoming more challenging now, but I managed. I looked all dapper and all that. I had bought myself a fairly expensive cologne some months ago, so I sprayed myself generously. I don't save anything, really. I live in the moment. Not carelessly. I have limits.

After getting all dressed up, I went to the refrigerator to get myself a drink. My mouth was parched. I poured myself a glass of apple juice. The minute I brought it to my lips, my hand started shaking. Ah, tremors. It wasn't too invasive at first, and I could manage with rests between sips. But the tremors grew along with my fear. They grew to such a proportion that my hand with the glass of apple juice was shaking uncontrollably, making puddles on the floor. I felt defeated one more time. My life is full of these little defeats. I wanted to hide from myself. To disappear.

I called my friend and told her that I was unable to come because of something that came up unexpectedly. She believed me.

\* \* \*

*My body is under torture. In the summer when it's hot, I die a thousand times, but then I always wake up in the morning. I want permanent rest, sometimes. When the spirit is weakened by my frailties, I long to escape. For good. My therapist says I should call a friend at these times. Sometimes I do. Then we end up laughing. I'm easily amused. But sometimes, I don't even feel like calling anyone. There's no life that's irreplaceable. I feel like a tragic hero, then. Like Hamlet.*

*To die; to sleep—;*

*No more—; and by a sleep to say we end*

*The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks*

*That flesh is heir to—; 'tis a consummation*

*Devoutly to be wished!*

*Like Hamlet, I feel hopeless, sometimes. Lost.*

\* \* \*

From Mulberry Street of colorful childhood memories, I went in search of Broadway. I left an aging mom on that suburban doorsill. I left saffron sunsets amidst late afternoon reveries. I left five foreign aunties on my windowsill. I left the blood red cement floor of my suburban home that my sister used to polish to mirror-like perfection. I left Amma's aromatic dahl curry. I left little orange swordfish in the pond by the entrance. I left immaculate gardenia blossoms and lush mango trees. And I left that



worn-out, black leather belt Thaththa used to beat me with. I'm beyond Broadway now. Way beyond. Maybe I should go back to reclaim my past.

\* \* \*

Ah, but there are little victories, too. Last Wednesday, I found it very difficult to fall asleep. I was wide awake at two in the morning. I got off my bed and baked a chocolate cake. I smothered it with gooey chocolate frosting. I ate almost half the cake, myself, around three in the morning. I didn't worry about calories either. This was a little victory. For me, anyway.

\* \* \*

*The world bursts forth with color. I look around me and see emerald greens, deep amethysts, and touches of burgundy and burnt gold. In the early morning hours when imperceptible droplets of dew land on dandelions, I breathe in fresh air to revive my body. My soul. My faith in the possible. I used to hate my cane. It reminded me of the impossible. My perceptions have changed. I look at the cane as my abler, now. I look at it with compassion. Like the compassion shown me this morning by a perfect stranger who opened the door for me. With a smile and a hello. In the evening when the world is lovingly enwrapped in a midnight blue blanket, I listen to fireflies singing. I know they do, because I can hear when my mind is still. When it's willing to believe. Then I go back to the rabbit on the moon. To Mulberry Street where I learned to stand up on my own.*

\* \* \*

***Next week, I want to swim really fast. Like a champion. In the water, I will let out my fears and doubts. Then I can swim like a dolphin. When there's no one in the***

*pool, it's like a different world. Like a meditation. Like a dream. When I come out of the pool, Sean will ask me if I had a good swim. I know he will. I will tell him it was the best so far. Then for coffee. I will take in the aroma from rooms away, and I will sip it gently. Delilah will be there. And Mark. And Tracy. They will ask me how the coffee is. I will say it's perfect. Then I will sit outside in my wheelchair and say hi to everyone who passes by. Diana will ruffle my hair. I will feel loved. Cocooned. I am for the living. For the love. I am.*

The End

CHAPTER VII

EMERGING FROM A PERIPHERAL EXISTENCE: CONTENT AND CRAFT  
OF 'FIREFLY SONG'

When I write in a predominantly white, heterosexual, able-bodied, disease-free world, originating from what was once called “The Third World,” I am acutely aware of the many labels of otherness I carry. I am, in other words, constantly reminded of my peripheral existence. My writing is “life writing” that can be fitted under the overarching umbrella of nonfiction. My location in this world is what warrants my writing. In fact, it is the underprivileged status of this location that colors my writing. I write about my brown, gay, chronically ill, disabled body stemming from the developing world. Can my writing be cathartic, can it result in empowerment, can it render a voice to the subaltern, can it voice the injustices I am subjected to as a result of involuntary labels, can it offer me a sense of redemption, and can it locate my writing beyond these labels *because* of these labels are some questions I wrestle with. How can subalterity, stemming from socially constructed labels, result in hyper visibility for a writer, especially in the academia?

I will deal with the five labels of otherness I carry (brown, gay, abused, foreign, and disabled) and their manifestations in my dissertation before I deal with stylistic issues that pertain to these labels. I will also discuss how these socially damning labels, at the same time, can contribute to profound cultural capital in my writing. Furthermore, I will specifically deal with third wave feminism and how, despite being a man, I am easy to be marginalized, silenced, and suppressed; while it is easy to disregard my body in the social world, my body via the written word, becomes a potent vehicle of the power of the subaltern, especially in the academic world in which

meaning-making is of primary concern. And that is what the creative part of my dissertation strives to achieve.

In order to better contextualize the social demonization of my involuntary labels, it would be pertinent to establish the privileged world. This is the world inhabited by white, straight, able-bodied, healthy men in the developed world. First and foremost, the accepted skin tone in today's world is white. White men and women enjoy a multitude of benefits that they can simply take for granted. While overt racism is rarely tolerated in the world today, passive racism usually goes scot-free. Being a brown man means that I have to go through horrendous visa interviews to come to a privileged location like the United States. It means that privileged Caucasian men and women can wield an unreasonable degree of power over me. While visa officers behind bullet-proof glass panels could very easily be less qualified academically, they have the power to bring my education to a dead end. Even in my own country, the advertisements usually feature white models in commercials. This is not to say that local commercials are nonexistent, but well-produced international commercials understandably feature Caucasian models. It is not a secret then, that the media in my country perpetuates Western standards of beauty. Anything other than Caucasian is lacking. To develop is to get closer to white standards.

The accepted sexuality is heterosexuality. Homosexuality is demonized in social, cultural, and religious platforms. People who are attracted to the same sex are instantaneously termed sexual deviants. The lives of homosexual men and women are debased, with the assumption that being sexual is all they are capable of or that it is the

only way their brains function. This is why I had to hide my sexuality as a young schoolboy in Sri Lanka. I had to tolerate homosexuality being denigrated, laughed at, and mocked under my very nose. The media effectively and unquestioningly banned the expression of sexual minorities. There were no movies for gay men in theaters. There were no books, TV shows, or magazines either. If at all they existed, they had to be swept under the carpet, away from “decent” heterosexuals.

A healthy mind in a healthy body is the standard the world operates by. I am chronically ill. I will never be able to achieve perfect health as long as I live. The chronic and degenerative condition earns me the label of ‘unhealthy’ for good. The further damning nature of this label is that MS is a degenerative condition that consistently deteriorates health over time. As a healthy person, one is able to walk, breathe, see, run, jump, eat, drink in a way that the majority does. I am unable to meet these expectations, so I am demoted to the periphery.

As Judith Butler points out, it is the standards of an able world that demotes the world of the disabled. It is the expectations of an able world that disables the world of the differently abled. I am expected to walk or stand on my two feet without assistance. I am expected to run. I am expected to climb stairs. And I am expected to be alive and alert at all times, paying little to no consideration for the symptom of extreme fatigue that MS brings with it. MS also affects the optic nerve, and I am unable to see clearly even with glasses. Some people with MS go blind. How can I wave at someone when I have no idea who that someone is? How can I present, study, or even enjoy a movie when I have to use the restroom every five minutes? I am miserably unable to deliver

the expectations of an able world. I use a cane, and that alone stands in opposition to the expectations of the able-bodied.

Finally, the world strives to be developed. The developed world is the standard of the winners. In terminology of the past, the world was divided into three types of countries: the first world, the second world, and the third world. Countries in both second and third worlds had to attempt to be like those in the first world. Poverty, hunger, unemployment, unrest, war, and disease were common occurrences in my country. I have seen all this with my own eyes. As a kid, growing up, my picture books were filled with perfect people: white, straight, able-bodied, healthy, and from the developed world. Most of these labels were unavailable to me. I could only dream. The standard was beyond my comprehension. It was illusive and too perfect for me to even strive towards.

In “Firefly Song,” I deal with the five labels of social construction I carry to finally establish that despite the inescapable social othering, I greatly benefit from them as a writer, and even though redemption might be a stretch in my world, it does exist when I’m able to accept my limitations and live accordingly. Not only do the socially damning labels provide me with important raw material for my vocation as a writer, but they ultimately place the end product on a visible platform, away from the multitude. Perhaps it’s a blessing in disguise. A minute blessing.

#### Brownness

First is a highly nuanced version of racial otherness. I am a brown Sri Lankan, hailing from South East Asia. The degree of brownness is important in my country. I

belong to the majority, Sinhalese. The Tamil minority, said to be darker or black, is the other in my country; however, in my high school, there were students of Tamil ethnicity who were much fairer than I was. The inaccuracy and heavily misguided nature of racial labeling, became even more nuanced when I came to the U.S. in the late nineties. In the U.S. that has very complicated race dynamics, I am essentially termed “brown.” I am brown because I am from South East Asia. I am brown because I am from Sri Lanka. I am brown because I am not Caucasian.

Racial otherness resulted in brutal slavery, the sub-human Apartheid regime, and many other highly catastrophic historical traumas in the world. In the fall when I walk into a clothes store, I see a plethora of colors that would only work for the Caucasian body. Many off-campus apartment complexes advertise their free tanning privileges. If I wear an earring or a bandana, I come across as dangerous. In a nutshell, my skin tone is next to nonexistent or if noticed, it is usually in a negative light.

When I am at the airport, it takes me a long time to get through the security checks. I could be a terrorist simply because I have dark skin. This is further complicated by my disability. I could be hiding a gun in my cane. My wobbliness could be just a game, masking heinous intentions. When I speak, another can of worms opens. What is that accent? They’d say. It is pertinent to discuss the heavily complicated shades of my accent. As a previously colonized nation, I strove for what was called “Queen’s English.” My accent is further sharpened by my past identity as an actor, a thespian. The many plays of Shakespeare I acted in further honed the British sounds in my accent; however, now there are two new factors that contribute to the hybridity of my accent: I have



been in the U.S. for exactly one third of my life and I suffer from an MS symptom known as dysarthria, which refers to many ways in which speech is affected by the disease.

Being Sinhalese by ethnicity, in my country, I belong to the majority; however, now as I write in America, I easily belong to the minority. To begin with, I am referring to this otherness in a racial sense. In a white world, my brownness stands out. It does not attract attention in a positive sense: I am the other; the subaltern. This racial otherness colors my writing. As someone who has spent one third of his life in the U.S., I am increasingly sensitive to this label, and when I practice my craft as a life writer, I often write about being brown and South East Asian in a predominantly Caucasian world.

This lack of the vantage point of being Caucasian, colors my writing. The position I write from, then, tends to be miserable, sad, wanting, lacking, traumatized, and silenced. On the page, this becomes inviting, credible, contestable, powerful, and attention-worthy. Even though in the social world, I am “brown” in a derogatory sense, in the world of my literary endeavors, especially in the academic world, I gain much cultural capital: universities, even high schools, study the effects of brownness and what it does to a person. This same minority status staves off competition, and in that sense, provides me with a rare sense of privilege. I am the other; therefore my writing is more marketable and more appealing to publishers and agents. I stand out in a white world. There aren't many of me in universities. I am, as a result, more employable.

In the creative pages of my dissertation, the many tiered bodily manifestations that result in marginalization and ultimate traumatization are dealt with in the six chapters that culminate in redemption, which is, in fact, minute, debatable, and

tenuous, especially in light of the potency of societal othering. The six chapters, chronological within each chapter, narrate stories that relate to their titles. Even though there might be a seeming disconnectedness and overlapping in the arrangement, the material within a chapter has been carefully selected to avoid repetition and sustain the interest of the reader. When it comes to the last chapter, the life story of the narrator is fleshed out through the five preceding chapters' chosen sections of the life being narrated. It is in this chapter (at the very end) that the tenuous phenomenon of redemption is dealt with in a somewhat subtle manner.

In the life writing involved in the dissertation I draw from a number of theories such as critical race theory, queer theory, postcolonial theory, disability studies, and trauma theory. The intricacies of the critical backbone of my dissertation surface through the intersectionality of the various theories employed and the complexity that results. The life writing is thus better understood through a close examination of the overlapping of the many damning labels the world imposes on the narrator. Hence, the traumatization the narrator is subjected to is not simply a result of individual labels, but rather, the further complications that result when these labels intersect with each other. The individual labels that relate to being a brown man, a gay man, an abused man, a foreign man, a disabled man, and a dying man, complicate the narrator's perception of the world and the location of marginality the world offers him in their individual lenses, but the severity of the trauma can best be explained through the intersectionality of these labels and how they propel the narrator towards the final chapter, which is "A Dying Man." The death referred to here is not simply one that is

expedited by the disease itself, but one that is accentuated by the trauma of being marginalized and traumatized by multiple damning labels.

The narrator's awareness of labels has a cumulative effect in that the narration starts in a society that is predominantly homogenous in nature. The very first chapter, *A Brown Man*, relates to the narrator's skin-tone that induces, even in the community he grows up in, pointed redefinition that has resulted in a long civil war in Sri Lanka. Being from the Sinhalese ethnic majority, however, the racial division, the validity of which he questions, the narrator does not face dehumanization. The introduction to other colors present in the world through visitors that the narrator comes into contact with as a result of his father being a travel guide, lays the platform for an understanding of racial division in the world. The title becomes more tangible when the narrator comes to the U.S. where race dynamics operate in insidious and complicated ways. The fact, the narrator becoming enamored with a violent and selfish Caucasian man is central to the racial understanding the first chapter extrapolates. Chethiya is swift to notice the color of people, including the nurse who aids Dr. Clifford during the spinal tap and Julio, Kyle's best friend, who is Hispanic. The racial lens that has a snowballing effect must be treated, not simply as a peripheral lens in the following chapters, but a lens that is present throughout, rendering emphatic agency (or the lack thereof) to all other labels.

#### Homosexuality: Sexual Deviance

There's another element that redefines the narrator's body in a stricter sense, and that is his sexual orientation. His body is not just brown, but it is the house of, to use traditional religious terminology, abominable sin. The issue reaches further

proportions as a proselyte who has embraced Christianity, the orthodox denominations of which attributes this biological feature to the devil or Satan.

The degree to which this marker identifies him is mammoth. It affects the circles he moves in, the clothes he wears, his hobbies, his reading, his writing, his aspirations, wishes, dreams, his potential employment, and basically his entire life. It is a quintessential element of his being that he cannot sever from. Needless to say, his sexuality is only a small part of who he is, but the potency of this identifier is such that it rarely avoids contention. As Jeffrey Weeks asks in his introduction to Guy Hocquengham's *Homosexual Desire*, "[t]he problem is not so much homosexual desire as the fear of homosexuality: why does the mere mention of the word trigger off reactions of recoil and hate?" (Weeks 692). This is a truth the narrator has to be very cautious about in the social world.

A greater part of this tension originates from misconceptions of a sexual kind. The homosexual is often understood as a sexual deviant; whose behavior is dominated by sexual considerations. More often than not, a homosexual's life is understood as a life that centers round sexual choices; all other elements of living are demoted to nonexistence:

"The tension of the confrontation between a homosexual and an individual who considers himself normal is created by the instinctive question in the mind of the "normal" individual: Does he desire me? As if the homosexual never chose his object and any male were good enough

for him. There is a spontaneous sexualization of all relationships with a homosexual. (Weeks 695)

While the social world is marked by heinous hate crimes, on the page, sexual otherness becomes a wealth of knowledge to comprehend the nuances of the human condition. I write about my ambivalence and the resultant trauma of growing up, a traumatic relationship with a white, American, gay man, my wishes, dreams, and desires, and my future as a gay immigrant. The socially dehumanizing label becomes worthy of analysis, especially when considered with other labels such as racial otherness, disability, and chronic illness. When I introduce this label to the already compromised brownness, my visibility in the social world plummets even further. How am I supposed to act? Foucault says that gayness is written all over the body of a gay man. So I watch my speech and the adjectives I use in the presence of a heteronormative world. I will not use adjectives like fabulous or gorgeous. "That's so girly" or "that's so gay," they would say. I am a Christian. I go to church. I am wary of the extremely friendly church congregation. I often wonder how their smiles might disappear if they knew of my sexual orientation, so I operate on the 'don't ask; don't tell' policy. Will parents refuse to enroll their kids in my classes, will overtly masculine men beat me up if they found me in a lonely spot and knew of my sexual preference? Will I not have things to talk about in a heterosexual, male gathering? Will they find out? What will they do, if they did? Is it safe to walk into a regular bar frequented by hyper masculine men? Is my dress sense "gay"? What about colors? Cologne? Hair?

However, this same label gives much credence to me as a writer. How does a brown, gay man view the universe? How does he view life and living? How do these disabling othernesses contribute to his hyper visibility as a writer, especially as an academic writer? Does he think about death? Is self-annihilation a better option than occupying this highly negative location? These are some questions the world might not have answers to. And this is my strength as a writer. I can contribute to the meaning-making apparatus by virtue of this othering definition. This is what makes my writing different from the mainstream. Yes, there are brown writers and yes, they are brown, gay writers, but there aren't many brown, gay, abused writers. My writing, therefore, offers a new lens of seeing the world: a brown, gay, abused lens. The presence of three othering labels, promotes my writing, and improves my visibility as a writer. Meaning-making becomes rarer and more nuanced in my world, and my contribution becomes important. Maybe there are a few brown, gay, abused writers, even though I don't know any.

The second chapter (A Gay Man) starts at the initial stages of the narrator growing up in a conservative, patriarchal, developing country. This chapter, first of all, subtly articulates the controversial debate between sexuality being the result of nature versus nurture. The narrator grows up in a house full of women and attends an all-boys school that operates on highly patriarchal values. In the sexual awakening that is preceded by gender-bending tendencies present in the very initial stages of development, the narrator is aware of the othering that sexual minorities are subjected to. The bounds set by patriarchy assume a menacing character when the narrator is

compelled to choose between two unfavorable options: being true to his sexuality and come across as a deviant or live a lie, adhering to established rules.

In creating this dichotomy, I have utilized a somewhat disjointed or fragmented sentence structure that parallels the fragmentation or rupture of the psyche.

Antithetical to the opening paragraph, the narrator's growing up years is far from being innocent, pure, or picture-perfect. On the contrary, it is turbulent and unsettling.

Domestic violence induced by a father who is both violent and loving, a civil war between two ethnic groups, poverty, and the colonial history of the country cater to a childhood marked by uncertainty, a certain degree of servitude, and escalating trauma.

Against this backdrop, the narrator's sexuality can only be demoted to the periphery as a result of which he has to envision a way out. The process of applying to foreign universities and ultimately winning a full scholarship to study theater becomes an exciting episode in the life of the narrator. Stylistically, the two years in the first college he attends have been dropped for the most part in order to address issues of marginalization and traumatization. The two years in Iowa, therefore, are not fleshed out fully as the narrator does not confront sizable challenges of identity.

It is in the state of Washington that the narrator experiences severe traumatization. It is in Washington that he meets Kyle in a chat-room. The unmistakable ethnic difference that eventually grows into gigantic proportions of supposed incompatibility, demotes the narrator to claim ultimately a position of shattered dreams and acute traumatization. In this chapter, I have used more dialogue than other

chapters, in order to present to the reader important information to assess the validity of the protagonist's and antagonist's motives.

The scenes under each chapter have been carefully selected for two primary reasons: firstly, the scenes have to fit under the chapter title and secondly, they have to propel the story without giving away too much too soon. And furthermore, the story overall, should reach a height of traumatization towards the end to reach the contestable state of redemption. The final chapter, therefore, brings out the only sense of redemption available to a crumbling corporeality and a defeated spirit: acceptance. While some might argue that acceptance is defeatist in nature, a damning prognosis of a chronic, degenerative, and incurable disease does not leave one with many choices. The two available choices in a nutshell would be: accepting wavering and ultimately degenerating limitations and choosing to live with those limitations or voluntarily ending life. In "Firefly Song," the narrator chooses the former.

Due to cultural conditioning afforded by a rigid patriarchy, Chethiya does not act like a typical gay man displaying signs of femininity and flamboyance. While Foucault maintained that a gay man's sexuality is written all over his body, the manifestations of gayness in Chethiya is not blatantly obvious, which can perhaps be partially explained through the chapter, A Foreign Man. The fluidity of intersectionality thus works in indefinite and unquantifiable ways. The dehumanization the narrator faces, becomes complex and extensive as a result of the many other labels his personhood elicits: intersectionality.



## Disability

I am also disabled. I use a cane to walk. I am clumsy, and I fall often. The “able” world greatly limits my life. If I cannot drive, I am supposed to walk or take the bus. “One block is not much,” they will say. I choke often, sometimes on my own saliva. Choking is not an acceptable trait of behavior. “This is an important meeting,” they will say. As Judith Butler points out, it is the “normal” or able world that limits me because of the expectations it places on my body. As I suffer from multiple sclerosis, I have countless symptoms that stand in contrast to a “normal” body. I use the word “normal” in quotes because it is the majority that dictates what a “normal” body is. I limp, fall, walk crookedly, choke, utter gibberish, fail to see (even with glasses, sometimes), become numb or fatigued, and use the bathroom often.

This very same disability that greatly limits my life in a social context, adds to my cultural capital as a writer. I am a brown, gay, abused, and disabled writer. Yes, there are brown writers, there are gay writers, there are abused writers, but it is rare to find brown, gay, abused, and disabled writers; there are some, of course. This intersectionality can add much to the pursuit of comprehending the human condition; how does being brown, gay, abused, and disabled writer affect a life? How do I perceive the world, how is my writing colored by these socially negative attributes? how do I view life? how do I come to terms with the social limitations of carrying all these labels at the same time? how do I locate myself and respond to a Caucasian, straight, un-abused, able-bodied world? And how can I contribute to knowledge construction are some of the questions that arise from this location. I would say that the presence of

these features enhances my location as a writer, and especially as a writer in the academia, because it places me above the majority. I am different and my understanding of the universe is different, as a result. My writerliness is thus heightened. I have a unique selling point, so to speak.

In the preface to *Bodies that Matter*,” Judith Butler asks, “given this understanding of construction as constitutive constraint, is it still possible to raise the critical question of how such constraints not only produce the domain of intelligible bodies, but produce as well a domain of unthinkable, abject, and unlivable bodies?” (Butler xi). The latter is my body, at least one such, and that is the body responsible for producing my writing, in the process of which my marginalized body, knowingly and unknowingly works itself into my writing.

I use a cane to walk. My walking is impaired. So is my vision, bladder function, balance, speech, heat-sensitivity, and many other areas. I am disabled on multiple levels. While the U.S. federal law dictates that I be given assistance for the use of many public services, my life goes beyond the public. On a larger scale, then, as Judith Butler maintains, it is the expectations of a “normal” world that results in my marginalization. My multiple disabilities are interpreted in such a way because the normal or able world deems them so. I am supposed to walk a certain way, sit a certain way, sleep a certain way, eat a certain way, etc. Alas, but I have difficulty on multiple areas! These normal expectations are beyond me.

## Fatality

My illness will not go away. It is incurable and degenerative. My lifespan is limited as death is a very palpable part of my life. This label of chronic illness and ultimate fatality further plummets me in the social world; however, in my writing world, this label increases my visibility and consequent recognition. I am a brown, gay, abused, disabled, dying/chronically ill writer. It is a rare occurrence, and I can contribute to the heavily complex human condition through multiple lenses. The complex intersectionality of my othering labels offers a new lens of seeing the universe. This is what I can offer the world, and these labels come into contact with each other in my writing. Even if I might not be purposely bringing them in, it is next to impossible to disregard these labels and their meeting in my writing. The chronically ill have a highly compromised view of the world. As I am well aware of the irrevocability of the disease from my world and particularly, how it can manifest in an increasingly debilitating manner, it is easy for me to question life and the value attached to it. It is a new lens that I can offer the world. As a writer, this limited world become highly visible, rendering a unique understanding of the human condition.

As multiple sclerosis is a disease that is still under much research, little is known about the condition, let alone curing it. Due to the manifestations of the disease, a patient suffering from it can embody a plethora of symptoms from difficulty/impossibility of walking to blindness and heavily compromised speech. As the authors of *Living with Multiple Sclerosis* write, "...MS does not necessarily occur in isolation. People with MS can develop other problems, such as arthritis in the joints or

disc problems in the back, which may interact with the symptoms of MS to make diagnosis and management very difficult” (Kraft 16). Consequently, the world recoils from people with MS; it is similar to xenophobia where people avoid what is unknown to them.

Along with the disease, MS can bring about many kinds of pain, physical, emotional, and social. This is what the social world does to a patient: it exiles her, shies away from him, avoids her, and excludes him. Pain itself is a difficult phenomenon for expression or conceptualization. When little is known about the disease, it is doubly so: “Pain has long been understood to resist expression in words. At its worst, pain is unchosen, extreme, and without purpose; It obscures memory, thought, language, everything but itself” (Jurecic 43). This difficulty of articulation, however, operates very differently when the subject is a writer. The world wants more of what it does not understand. The patient’s body and mind become highly sought-after commodities; for research aimed at finding a cure, and even more importantly perhaps, to comprehend the human condition from the perspective of someone whose challenges oppose a traditional understanding of normalcy.

My embodiment is my trump card as a writer/performer. The potency of this location stems from the visible disabilities: balance, partial paralysis, dysarthria, etc. The subject lives through the trauma and is therefore worthy of attention. When I read in public, while the many symptoms of the disease weigh heavily on me, I can be certain that I have the audience’s attention when I approach my position with difficulty. I believe this embodiment empowers me. Nancy Mairs, a writer who also suffers from

MS, writes about her body and its embodiment in both positive and negative ways:

“Mairs writes both with and against theoretical models of embodiment that, to quote Kristin Lindgren, “too often depend on an abstract idea of a normative body” (Mintz 26). The “abstract idea of a normative body” deserves further elaboration. The idea is abstract because the patient does not understand it, let alone the world, and because the “normative body” depends on the majority’s definition.

As with everything, there is also the flip side or the counter argument: “...not all disability scholars are persuaded of the viability of lifewriting as a mode of resistance to social oppression; some have objected that the focus on the personal obscures larger political issues that mediate disabled experience” (Mintz 27). Even though some scholars are wary of lifewriting as an effective tool of resistance, my understanding is that that it is emphatically so. While I may be restricted by my body, my expression via the written word is rarely compromised. I find power in the written word, and even more in the public reading of it. I can write about my challenges, about the inaccessibility of services, about the responses of the ignorant, about the power of life, and the preciousness of the moment.

#### A Foreign Man

I stem from a developing nation. In this world, human suffering is more tangible, more accessible. In Sri Lanka, I could see beggars and stray dogs everywhere. I could see and travel in buses packed beyond capacity. The odor of suffering bodies, the stench of impoverishment, and the voice of the masses being stifled by the native elite in Gayathri Spivak’s terminology were common to me. I was right in the midst of it all: the hunger,

the suffering, the explosions, the injustices, the blood, the sweat, the bombs, the barbed wire, the torture, the hunger strikes, the suicides, the curfews, and the power-cuts were in my daily vocabulary. Even though my visibility in the world is greatly diminished by these labels, as a writer, I have a rare voice, and I can robustly contribute to knowledge construction.

Sri Lanka is a predominantly Buddhist country that came out of Asia's longest-running civil war only a few years ago. Formerly known as Ceylon, Sri Lanka has a rich history that spans back over two thousand five hundred years. The conflict was between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority who were fighting for a separate state on grounds of marginalization. I grew up with the war, and have traumatic memories. My cousin's leg had to be amputated from the waist after stepping on a landmine. My best friend when I was growing up was of Tamil ethnicity. My parents have given shelter to friends when they were displaced due to the war. As a young schoolboy, my education was sporadically on hold because of explosions, curfew, rioting, and ethnic tension.

I am Sinhalese by ethnicity. I was also Buddhist where my religion is concerned even though I became a Christian in 1998. The population of my country is diverse. There are Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, and Eurasians (stemming from past colonial roots). The skin tone of a regular Sri Lanka is brown. The Eurasians are much fairer and the Tamils are said to be stereotypically darker or black. Buddhism is a selfless religion, the highest point of which is absolute selflessness, known as Nirvana. Due to colonial occupation, class becomes a loaded concept in my country, and the language one

speaks locates one in the highly stratified social ladder. In fact, not only the primary language spoken, but the accent, defines one's social class.

The information I have shared above is crucial to understanding my writing and its complex class, ethnic, religious, and cultural undertones. When I write about my body, for instance, I am sub-consciously aware of the original privileged status, and how, over time, the accumulation of othernesses results in a degradation of definition. Writing in the United States, my brownness clearly becomes a damning otherness that is lumped together with many other skin tones known as "colored."

I am an islander. My already compromised racial otherness plummets further when this layer is added. The redefinition takes a huge turn in the United States. I am foreign, exotic, South East Asian, brown, and speak with an accent. Even my accent is heavily nuanced: an Anglized Sri Lankan accent that is compromised by disarthria (MS-induced speech difficulties) and the rhythms of which are influenced by being in the U.S. for almost thirteen years.

The vantage point that was available initially has disappeared to be redefined in multiple othernesses. In my writing, however, one of the many adjectives attracts much attention, and that is "exotic." To a Caucasian, American majority, I bring in many elements of unfamiliar otherness. While in the social world, I am an easy target of xenophobia, my many layers of otherness contribute to the comprehension of the heavily compromised human condition. In "Firefly Song," I write about going to school, dressed in pure white school uniforms, about Dad's role as "head of the household," about starving children, about water lilies sleeping on blue-green waters, about

women's roles being restricted to the kitchen, about pitiless corporal punishment, and the upward social mobility aided by language.

Finally, my national identity, works against me in the social world. I am clearly the other. In my developing country, there are many people who struggle to make ends meet. There are families who have to live off a meager sum of fifty dollars for an entire month. Poor women go to other countries to be housemaids in the process of which they get habitually raped and abused. Even though I am from the middle class in my country, in the greater picture, I register as a Sri Lankan, dominated and abused by the world. It is ironic that I am reading for my doctorate in a developed country, the super power of the world. In the world map, I am simply a disembodied subject, disembodied in more ways than one.

According to Marxist theory, I am from that part of the world that provides the developed world with the "field for investment": "... a group of countries, generally first-world, are in the position of investing capital; another group, generally third-world, provides the field for investment, both through the comprador indigenous capitalists and through their ill-protected and shifting labor force" (Colonial 83). The world needs my labor, and by virtue of my national identity, my labor is predominantly said to be of a physical nature. The irony, however, is that my physical labor is completely nonexistent.

My subaltern position is further aggravated by patriarchy, domestic violence, and the overarching umbrella of imperialism. I am the exotic subject that needs the pity of the able world to survive. Though personally this is not at all the case, in the senseless



and mechanical lumping of nations, that is precisely how I come across as. I am classified as a subject worthy of pity and salvation.

In my writerly world, however, I come across quite differently. I am the exotic, and this time, in a positive and powerful way: little is known about me or how I live. How do I respond to the mystery of life? What do I need to survive? What are my skills? How do I make sense of the world? How do I respond to exploitation? How do I respond to the developed world? How do I eat? Sleep? Spend my leisure time? Do I have leisure time? The world needs answers from me. I have knowledge, and knowledge is power. My body is replaced by the written word and the numerous oppositions to my body are redefined in a positive light. I am able to move, surprise, shock, anger, and disturb my reader. I attempt to, in a single word, unsettle my audience. The greater objective of this unsettling is to make my readers feel the senselessness, the injustice, the hurt, and the trauma a body can suffer.

When I write, especially in the U.S., I am aware of the common lenses. I am aware of the need for elaboration; further explanation. My exoticism does not stop at that level, though. It has many other layers within it. The backward, developing, pitiful nature of my location carries with it gigantic issues of patriarchy that warrants domestic violence, child prostitution, child soldiers, and child labor. All this is attributed to me because I come from Sri Lanka, from the developing world.

Thus, my location brings about othering, negative, limiting, and erasing connotations owing to the many different lenses of marginalization I addressed: brown, gay, abused, disabled, from the developing world., and chronically ill. These same

differences that result in erasure and negative redefinition operate in contrary ways when it comes to my chosen vocation: that of a writer. The same xenophobic lenses operate in a very different way in my writing: the world needs answers from the unknown. And this is what I attempt to do in “Firefly Song.”

### Beyond the Third Wave

A word must be said about feminism. The third wave of feminism came about as resistance to male domination and the erasure of diverse, ethnic, and other lenses of womanhood. The third wave of feminism, therefore, resisted the female subordination in diverse spheres of life. It is a movement that continues to the present day, that aims to address womanhood and change via national, cultural, ethnic, and transnational borders.

The reason I brought up third wave feminism is to address the need for a new theoretical apparatus to address the multiple lenses of otherness I carry. These othernesses ultimately contribute to traumatization and retraumatization. It would not be acceptable for anyone to be subjugated or dominated in the twenty first century. It strikes me as a starting point to articulate erasure and subordination on multiple levels, in my case on six different levels. I am silenced on six fronts due to my race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, abuse, disability, nationality, and chronic illness/fatality. All these marginalizations ultimately result in traumatization.

If we address women’s subordination with a movement that has now reached the third wave of feminism, we should possibly address subordination that takes place on other areas of life as it pertains to other genders, races, ethnicities, health statuses,

nationalities, (dis)abilities etc. As Spivak argues, the woman is often subjected to a “violent shuttling,” rather than simple erasure: “Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization” (Colonial 102). I believe that just as much as women are violently shuttled, so are the occupants of multiple locations of marginalization and traumatization as a result. As a brown, gay, abused, disabled, chronically ill man stemming from the developing world, I experience this “violent shuttling” on a daily basis. The phenomenon can be especially challenging when the “shuttling” is passive, having worked itself into a deep-rooted ideology.

Feminist scholars readily recognize and problematize gender-based discrimination: “The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read” (Colonial 104). The female was suppressed, erased, and barred from a productive and visible participation in matters of importance. This observation engendered legitimate and necessary intervention to begin to give better agency to the female. It is a necessary step towards a more equitable world; however, feminist scholars confront only the gender or sexuality based discrimination. To better contextualize feminism, it is important to pay attention to what feminist scholars observed: “Early on, feminist scholars realized that the canon taught in schools was overwhelmingly male. To be a woman graduate student in the 1960s was to hear recognizably male points of view, some of which were noticeably misogynist, declared to be universal” (Literary 528). In relation to the marginalization of female graduate students, I would like to bring to attention that

being marginalized on one front is probably much easier to deal with than being marginalized in six. This is why I propose that marginalization/traumatization needs to be assessed in terms of the potency as well as the multiplicity of fronts.

It is also important to recognize the economic ramifications of the presence of a surplus people, the othernesses contributing to the definition of “surplus people.” The world operates on a profit-based model according to Marxist scholars:

Institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people. As members of such an economy, we have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals. As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion. (Literary 630-1)

In this profit economy, then, we have to make sure that voices are not silenced due to the significance placed on power and dollars.

These are the issues that “Firefly Song” undertakes to examine through Chethiya’s life. In this creative section of my dissertation, I employ sections that parallel the fragmentation of the life of the narrator in multiple ways. The sections in italics are from the perspective of the narrator in the present day, looking back. The italics, therefore, denote currency, urgency, and the present state of the narrating “I.” The use

of colors, smells, textures, sounds, and smells are important as MS compromises many bodily functions; as a result, the senses are heightened, probably on the same principle that enables a blind man to hear better. The use of dialogue, especially in the second chapter (*A Gay Man*), helps the reader assess the situation/s and arrive at conclusions independent from the narrating "I"'s prejudices or biases. A word must be said about fatality and redemption. Even though MS is not recognized as a fatal condition, when bodily functions are severely compromised, MS patients can be very susceptible to accidents. Furthermore, suicide rate among MS patients is high, owing to the degenerative nature of the disease: MS is, therefore, a lingering death sentence.

While the narrator's situation is a bleak one, there might be a sense of redemption when he is able to accept his situation and treat his fellow human beings with love and compassion; the same compassion the world shows him. It's about the joy of little things. After dealing with marginalization and resultant trauma, the very end of the last chapter is written in future tense (as opposed to past and present tense throughout), the narrator looking forward to tomorrow. His condition could be a traumatic one as time passes, but as the narrator says, he is for the living, for the love, he is.

## CHAPTER VIII

BRINGING TRAUMA INTO THE CLASSROOM: ONLINE CREATIVE  
WRITING CAN CREATE BETTER WRITERS AND MORE EMPATHY

The creative writing program at Illinois State University prides itself on hybrid or experimental genres, and it has earned a national reputation by producing writers who reside on the cutting edge of the field. ENG 227 or Introduction to Creative Writing is predominantly taught by graduate students in a traditional classroom setting. In such a setting, the all-important discussion component of a writer's workshop can be effectively executed, as the students can have their questions addressed by the instructor and their peers, as they arise. The field of creative writing as well as ISU's reputation in the field is steadily expanding; however, maintaining the robustness of an effective writer's workshop in a virtual environment, especially augmented by the presence of non-traditional students (i.e. fulltime parents and working students) who could be new to the rigor of creative writing or the rituals of academia, becomes a challenge. The balancing of the two (i.e. offering online options of creative writing classes and maintaining the rigor of the program) is crucial to the success of the creative writing program at ISU, but is this juggling predestined to end in a fiasco? Offering online options of classes is key to the success of any program of study in this electronic age. In fact, the practices of literacy as well as creative writing undergo profound changes in an electronic age in which writing transcends the written word; therefore, online classes address important questions of literacy, creativity, and formulation of ideas in our time.

As I come from a creative nonfiction background, specifically emphasizing trauma studies, it is my belief that students in an introductory creative writing classroom must learn to attempt to rid the world of injustices and inequalities. We all,

whether we like it or not, have had our fair share of trauma, but some, unfortunately, have had to and continue to deal with injustices more than others. Communities marginalized owing to gender, race, class, sexual orientation, disability, illness, age, and national origin, are time and time again, silenced, oppressed, erased, and dehumanized. The creative writing classroom is a perfect venue to attempt to heighten the younger generation's sensibilities, and it can, indeed, happen in a virtual environment, too.

#### ENG 227 online for the first time at ISU

The perfect approach to the highly digitized nature of modern pedagogy, literacy, and creativity is to offer an online option of ENG 227 in which students do not have to worry about balancing their busy work schedules with an inflexible class schedule. But can creative writing, especially an introductory course like ENG 227, be effectively taught in a virtual setting? While there are concerns about the workshop method working today even in a traditional classroom setting, how can the primary building blocks of a writer's craft be offered to students in a virtual environment? Can the crucial discussion segment of a writer's workshop be replaced by a discussion thread? Can students learn the essential foundational elements without the presence of a real-time instructor? How can their learning be measured?

This was the overall scenario when ENG 227 was offered to students for the first time as an online option at Illinois State University. After having spent the previous semester designing the course, it was in the fall of 2012 that I taught ENG 227 online for the first time. I will discuss the many challenges I faced as an online instructor, teaching an introductory course in creative writing. I will discuss how I overcame these challenges



to finally establish that ENG 227 can indeed be taught as an online course effectively. To further fine-tune this argument, I will attempt to prove that the ideal and primary course objective was to not only produce better writers, but to open students' minds to the multitudinous social injustices rampant in the world. This is where trauma theory comes into play. I will argue that an online option of ENG 227 can produce writers who are better at the craft as well as more profoundly aware of a need for a more empathetic treatment of their universe.

#### Virtual identity

Establishing my own identity as well as the identity of my students was an initial part of this creative journey, but identity formation is a long and arduous process in an online classroom. The significance of an early establishment of identity is crucial, however, in this online space. To cater to this necessity, I designed a writing exercise in which students had to introduce themselves to the class, beginning with the phrase, "I never thought...." Prior to this exercise, I had established that the virtual space of the class was a safe place and that no derogatory comments at any level damaging to personal pride and dignity were tolerated. This was also a subtle way to introduce social justice to the classroom. In fact, as a course objective, an emphatic lens of social justice had to be maintained in the final portfolio, which students were asked to interpolate in the statement of intent.

I asked students to share some important information about themselves, including their major, where they hailed from, their siblings, and their goals/dreams, as well as some not-so-important (but crucial to developing a sense of togetherness and

camaraderie) information such as their favorite hobbies, favorite food, favorite color, nick names, what they were known for in their circle of friends, etc.

It was important for me as well as the students to know about their peers. The essays were posted on a discussion thread on ReggieNet. I posted a paragraph about myself and so did the students. It was interesting to note the diversity in the classroom. To offer some basic examples, there were students from many parts of the country, from many majors, from different socio-economic backgrounds, with many different tastes and preferences. Even more importantly, I was able to see a range of writing styles as well as competence. The “getting to know each other” process, I learned, is somewhat lengthy and indefinite in a virtual setting. The very first genre we tackled was crucial to this scenario (nonfiction). In fact, the genre of nonfiction is a perfect platform to address issues of trauma and social justice, too.

#### Readings

In preparation for the three genres taught in this course, I assigned readings from *A Best of Fence* (second edition) for nonfiction and some fiction, *Everything is Illuminated* for fiction, and *The Norton Anthology of Postmodern Fiction* as well as other selections that were made available to students as attachments for poetry and hybrid genres. The readings were extremely important to the work they were doing, and I used them to lay a solid foundation for every genre. Every week when I emailed students about that week’s work, I picked roughly three postings by students on the readings to discuss important elements in the work. The idea of truth, the distinction between writer and narrator, and degree of detail were a few such issues that were elicited from

student responses. The selection of student responses afforded me the chance to discuss important aspects of the writer's craft. Furthermore, it was important to let students know that I was carefully reading the responses they were posting in order for them to be motivated and consider the reading responses to be an integral part of their work.

Week after week, when I alluded to student responses in my weekly emails, I could detect that the quality of their reading responses was becoming more thoughtful and invested. It was, as a result, easier to pull a few reading responses to further comment on when continuing the discussion on the online discussion forum. The readings were carefully selected to complement the genre that was being worked on. For instance, when working on the nonfiction genre, I had students read sections from *Fence*, written by various contributors, dealing with their work in *Fence* over the years. Students were able to relate to the authenticity of these articles and also the flimsiness or the absence of a narrative arc. The thread running through all these articles was each writer's relationship with *Fence*. In a sense, therefore, these nonfiction pieces of writing were fragments or snippets. The writing assignments for each of the three genres were given to students in an attempt to put into practice what they were reading about. After having read several pieces from *Fence* and being constantly reminded that the virtual space of the class was a safe space where students could share personal information (if they so desired) without being judged or denigrated, a democratic and supportive classroom environment was created. In the future, in order to bring in trauma to the

classroom more emphatically, I would capitalize on creating a “safe space” where students could openly discuss/share challenging moments from their lives.

It was important to remind students that reading was an undetachable part of a writer’s craft. I reminded students that a writer drew from her reading, the raw material to work with. We were able to discuss at length topics such as truth, experience, embellishment, downplaying, altering, and injecting the mundane with exciting sensory details such as color, texture, smell, sound, and taste. The nonfictional articles in *Fence* helped students be familiar with the idea of “truth” or actuality that writers of nonfiction work with. The idea of point of view or perspective was a very important tenet students were exposed to as well.

The progression of the three genres was important to the trajectory of the course. As we began with nonfiction, students had the opportunity to draw from what they knew or had gone through. This choice had the secondary effect of allowing the community to know each other better. But too, the nonfictioner’s habit of slightly altering or downplaying material to arrive at desired responses was an important lesson. A primary function of creativity in creative nonfiction was gradually imparted to students from readings from *Fence* as well as other supplementary readings that were made available in PDF format.

#### Creative nonfiction

As I come from a creative nonfiction background, it was very important for me to familiarize students with this genre before going into other genres. The notion of truth in nonfiction and how it manifested in different ways in the hands of different writers

was a key element we discussed through the discussion forums devoted to weekly readings. Initially I required that students comment on the readings per se, but as the weeks went by, I asked them to also comment on a peer's reading response. It was thus easy to make the discussion forums a robust space where important ideas were considered and commented on. In the future when I draw from trauma studies, I intend to make these discussion forums even more dynamic and engaging.

### Fiction

After tackling the genre of nonfiction, it was fairly easy to go into fiction. The book students read for this genre was *Everything is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer. The basic building blocks of a piece of fiction including plot, characterization, and setting were illustrated with Foer's work. And furthermore, the book has a pronounced element of trauma and marginalization, both of which blended well with my dissertation.

### Poetry

The last genre we tackled was poetry. Having laid a firm foundation in the other two genres, it was somewhat easy to arrive at the genre of poetry with qualities such as economy of language, imagery, and emotional punch encouraged. For the poetry readings, I scanned from the first edition of *Fence* and made PDF files for students so that they didn't have to buy an additional book. I also realized that emotional intensity was a feature that they could benefit from with more work. My assignment requesting that students write and revise in order to perfect the art of saying more with less was very well received and executed.

## Performance

A writer has to perform her work through readings in order to market her work as well as immerse herself in the culture of writing. This is something I tried to address in my ENG 227. After students wrote their first creative nonfiction piece, I asked them to create a YouTube clip recording themselves reading either a part or the whole of their nonfiction piece. I did, however, make the mistake of telling them that it will not be graded. While more than two thirds of the class completed this assignment, there were a few students who did not take the trouble. Before they did the reading on YouTube, I created a handout with the essentials of performance including breath control, facial expressions, tone, and eye contact. I was very happy with the readings they had done; however, if I were to do this again, I would make it mandatory and for credit.

## Non-traditional students

An interesting phenomenon of ENG 227 online was that many students were non-traditional students who either had fulltime jobs or were going back to school after a lapse of several years. It was evident from these students that their writing skills required a little more work than traditional students. The fascinating quality of these students was that they were extremely eager to learn. Judging by their revisions, I can easily say that these students were able to benefit greatly from this online ENG 227 class, as they most religiously considered the feedback I and their peers gave them. This quality would be an asset when bringing in trauma to the classroom.

A great joy in this semester of teaching ENG 227 online was the rekindling of interest in students who were going back to school after a lapse of many years. Not only

did they benefit the most from the course, they were also able perhaps to rethink their involvement in and fascination with the field. Some of these students were able to take massive strides in their work, standing in testimony to the efficacy of teaching creative writing online. My only hope as an instructor is that the seed planted in these students would grow into bountiful fruition in times to come.

#### Peer-review and instructor comments

Even though ENG 227 was an online class, I had assumed that most students were on campus on a daily basis. As a result of this misconception, my comments on the nonfiction pieces were made on hard copies to be collected by students. Even though the majority of papers were picked up, there was a fair number that was not collected. This, I later realized, was because these students had fulltime jobs. After having realized this attribute of my student population, I was able to send my comments electronically or through snail mail for the assignments that followed.

#### Technology

I used YouTube as an effective tool in preparing students for the role of a professional writer. In the future, I want to prepare them further in making their web presence more emphatic, using technologies such as twitter, Facebook, Linked in, and other tools at their disposal. In fact, when teaching this course again, I want to make submission to electronic journals/magazines a requirement. I do recognize that I have to prepare students for rejection as it takes time and experience to get submissions accepted by journals/magazines.

Through this online ENG 227, I tried to encourage my students to aspire to professional standards, and the YouTube reading was a step in this direction. Another important lesson students could learn from these readings was their own understanding of their work when actually read out aloud. I gave them leeway to change their pieces as they deemed necessary after giving my comments, as well as hearing their own observations about the process of reading aloud. It was interesting to note that students had revised their pieces to make them ready for performance. A very common area that received revision was awkward phraseology that they discovered in the process of reading aloud.

I'm confident that the inclusion of this as a course objective is both feasible and useful. In this respect, Myers' insight into the professionalization of writing was highly illuminating:

As the century wound down, New York emerged as the center of American publishing; and as it did so writing faded out as an avocation for gentlemen and began to be professionalized – the “commercial motive,” as Woodberry called it, replaced the “internal impulse,” the purely aesthetic motive. (Myers 57)

Reminding students of the new ramifications surrounding creative writing of our time was important, even though placing much emphasis on this factor is probably the subject of a more advanced course.



## Hybrid genres

In keeping with ISU's stellar reputation for hybrid or experimental genres in creative writing, I tried my best to encourage students to mix and match genres in order to problematize traditional generic territories and come up with genres that erased clear-cut boundaries between them. Though I was limited by time constraints, I encouraged students to experiment with traditional genres in order to create their own. I used Claudia Rankin's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* as an example, the beginning chapters of which could be accessed for free on Google books. While I did not receive many final portfolios showcasing hybrid genres, there were a few that clearly drew on the strengths of each genre. Lyrical prose that encapsulated the salient features of poetry and prose was a clear example of my students' bent towards these contemporary generic possibilities. I'm determined in the semesters to come to devote more time to hybrid genres and perhaps make it a requirement in the final portfolio.

## Cutting-edge

The USP (Unique Selling Point) of the ISU Creative Writing program is that it pushes against traditional understanding of genres that tends to compartmentalize writing in neatly packaged genres. In keeping with the ever-expanding notions of writing beyond the written word and writing that essentially refuses to belong to one genre or the other, the creative writers at ISU invent and reinvent the written word, combining multiple genres as well as other technological tools at their disposal (i.e. image, film, sound, computer technologies, etc.). This is what an effective instructor of ENG 227 should strive to prepare students for. While I was not able to devote much time to

experimental or hybrid genres in the fall of 2012, I duly recognize the importance of contributing to this facet of the ISU Creative Writing program, starting with ENG 227. This is the strength of the program, and it is where the marketability of ISU creative writers lies. Furthermore, finding writers who practice the craft in traditional genres is far from an arduous task. Finding writers who can contribute to the moving pendulum of new writing is the challenging exercise. In fact, this is where the future of creative writing lies. The challenge for the ENG 227 instructor, then, is to prepare students who can not only write comfortably in the traditional genres, but mix and experiment with different forms to come up with something new and exciting. In other words, contributing to the cutting edge of the field.

#### Final portfolio

While forty percent of the final grade was allocated to weekly readings/writings/peer-review, sixty percent of the grade was awarded to the final portfolio. Students were asked to showcase all three of the main genres (i.e. nonfiction, fiction, and poetry) that they worked on during the semester. They could, of course, include what they already worked on. As I gave comments on all three of the genres, students could earn better grades if they revised. This seemed to be the case for many, if not all, students. Some of the pieces that were worked on for class were expanded to include in the final portfolio. I was pleasantly surprised by the plethora of genres students included in their final portfolios: children's lit, horror, life writing, thrillers, detective stories, etc. Along with the final portfolio of twenty pages, students had to submit a two page statement of intent in which they discussed their aesthetic choices in

the final portfolio. In this brief two-page document, students talked about their inspirations and what they tried to achieve in their portfolio overall. An important element of this statement of intent was the concept of social justice that students were required to touch on in their final portfolio. This requirement is directly related to my dissertation as well. Throughout the semester, I kept reminding students that their writing could strive to make the world a better place by addressing some of the social ills rampant in the world. To be specific, students were encouraged to deal with/write about some of the injustices that marginalized groups suffered.

In a semester-long course (15 weeks), it was not possible to be overly ambitious in what students could accomplish. Furthermore, as 227 is an introductory course, I had to recognize that students were fairly new to the field and that they needed to grasp the basics of the field before tackling greater issues. The aim of the final portfolio, therefore, was to be able to assess a clear comprehension of the basics in the three genres that were attempted. The primary conventions of each genre and their capabilities in terms of what a reader was able to grasp were capitalized on. To add to this basic comprehension of genres, I did encourage students to blur the lines between genres and attempt to create their own unique and novel genres. As I was not able to spend much time on this experimentation, many students did not venture out of their comfort zones. There were, however, final portfolios that swayed towards the non-traditional end of a given genre.

## Social justice

As mentioned before, I tried to open students' minds to the heavy and highly nuanced notion of social justice in this class. The important element of social justice in the final portfolio made me follow a critical pedagogy in my instruction: "Critical pedagogy foregrounds an examination of power itself. Similarly, critical pedagogy constructs the classroom as a space where knowledge is not simply conveyed or passed down, but where we might teach students to pay attention to how knowledge itself is constituted, and the various conditions that determine which knowledge counts" (Lee 88). While I tried to familiarize students with the three primary genres we dealt with, I also tried to do so while emphasizing the important element of the social revision a writer's work is capable of. The idea of critical pedagogy goes hand in hand with my overarching philosophy of teaching, which, it must be emphasized, is crucially important to the work of a creative writer: "Critical pedagogy (a.k.a. liberatory pedagogy, empowering pedagogy, radical pedagogy, engaged pedagogy, or pedagogy of possibility) envisions a society not simply pledged to but successfully enacting the principles of equality, of liberty and justice for all" (Tate 92). Writers, clearly, do not write in a vacuum; many attempt to improve our world.

The element of social justice was very well received. While some students devoted the entire final portfolio to issues such as gender discrimination, homophobia, etc., some students devoted a single piece to such issues. All in all, students displayed a responsible and mature outlook in issues of discrimination, privilege, and dehumanization akin to socially constructed labels. As a writer, I believe that writers can

do much to rid our world of social evils. While writers cannot completely get rid of bigotry around them, they can surely raise awareness and take the world a notch closer to equitability. This is the philosophy behind the element of social justice that I required of all students in my ENG 227. The mere understanding of the basics of a genre and its conventions is not the most difficult objective to achieve; what is difficult to achieve is the mastery of such conventions with a firmer grasp of the greater picture, without which a writer's vocation may be meaningless and superficial.

It was very interesting to note that my ENG 227 was comprised predominantly of female students. This made me look even closer at the issue of gender discrimination in our world. It was important for me to be aware of my many gifted female students and how, despite their natural talents, they earn lower wages in competitive markets. bell hooks' work was very important when I considered issues of gender-based injustice:

As a teenager in the late sixties, living in a racially segregated Southern town, I knew that black men who desired intimacy with white women, and vice versa, forged bonds. I knew of no intimacy, no deep closeness, no friendship between black and white women. Though never discussed, it was evident in daily life that definite barriers separated the two groups, making close friendship impossible. (hooks 94)

Making my students aware of such (intersectional) complications, which were not very distant from their own times, was important. They had to be aware of such injustices and discriminations when they pen out their creative thoughts.

A word must be said about my plans for the future when teaching an introductory creative writing class. It is my wish to have a theme of a marginalized community in all student-writing composed during the semester. This way, I would be able to effectively bring in trauma studies to the classroom. For extra credit, in fact, I would give the opportunity to rectify a small injustice in students' world through writing. The trajectory of addressing trauma/social justice would come full circle this way: identifying trauma/injustices, formulating practical solutions, taking action (through writing).

#### The future

I'm greatly excited about ENG 227 in the future as an online class. As technology is advancing, it is a great way to incorporate the changing processes of meaning making available to the future generations. With my semester-long experience, I was able to figure out that an online option of ENG 227 is a great way to introduce students to the ever-changing world of creative writing. Even though I was myself somewhat wary of this introductory course working as an online option, after having taught it one semester, I can say without any hesitation that ENG 227 can, in fact, work even better as an online class. While more advanced classes in creative writing may necessitate the presence of a real-time professor, an introductory course like ENG 227 can work wonderfully well as an online class.

"In matters of classroom practice, cultural studies is no doubt most closely associated with bringing a more deliberate use of popular culture and media studies into the composition course." This statement strikes me as very current, especially in

terms of how I will teach ENG 227 in the future. How much of popular culture should be brought into the classroom? Where should I draw the line? The idea of “text” that goes hand in hand with popular culture or transcends the written word, is critically important to future creative writers. It is important to make students aware of expanding notions of text in our times, epitomized by graphic novels, digital and graphic books on CD, video collages, etc.

If I were to say it in a few words, I would say that reading, conventions, dismantling conventions, hybrid genres, professionalization, web presence, social justice, and submission would map out my future ENG 227 classes. And most importantly, the virtual environment could and would be effectively used to bring students closer to various traumas in the world and how the written word can play an important role in mitigating and rectifying inequalities and injustices in our world. This is where my dissertation and internship meet. This is where the writer in me meets the human being in me. It’s an exciting world out there for the young writer, and I’m ecstatic to be a part of this equation.

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