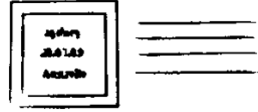


COLOURS OF THE SUN



Rozaine Cooray



20th Jan 2009
Hospital, Sydney, Australia

Dear Faith,

If only you knew me...





18th September 2008

Hotel in Hikkaduwa, Sri Lanka

Dear Faith,

I met her walking on the beach; our footsteps in one pace and in one tempo. In our own worlds, we wandered in opposite directions. The moon was out and the ocean was silvery grey.

We passed each other again but we did not look at each other. I walked and she walked. I cannot remember what I was thinking of; maybe I was not thinking of anything in particular. Oh! Those coconut palms...what beauty!

We met again and this time we smiled. Like me, she too must have been turning at the reef, so that she could still see the hotel in the vicinity. Her blond hair clipped behind her ears, her white skin looking pale in the moonlight: she must have been about thirty. I continued to amble on. But suddenly I wanted to turn back to watch her.

Without any hesitation, I stopped and turned towards the sea, so I could still watch her from the corner of my eye. To my surprise, she too was no longer walking. Just a few meters away from me, she was now gazing at the horizon.

We must have remained like this, close to each other and staring at the world's end for a long time. Time stood still. My heart and my breathing, they were the only measures of life I felt

at the time. Oh! Why could not the ocean come and take me away...?

'Do you have someone to forgive?' she exclaimed from where she stood.

I was alarmed by what she asked but I did not answer. I kept staring at the deep-sea, my eyes wide open and my ears full of waves crashing onto the shore.

The blowing was stronger now I freed my hair from its small ponytail.

A luminous branch of lightning divided the skies: then a blast of thunder. Maybe the world was preparing for a rainstorm.

'There is a myth about the full moon, water and forgiveness.' She must have been shouting, for there was this inexplicably deafening noise from the background invading the atmosphere. What was that really?

She continued, 'Dip yourself in water and repeat *'forgive so-and-so'* three times. Then dip your head again in water before you repeat *'I forgive myself'*, three times.'

I still did not speak; I did not know what to say.

Waves and more waves; froth, foam and spray. I thought of an old man and his long white beard that had grown throughout millennia.

'I have someone to forgive,' she said after a while.

I looked at her and smiled. My instinct was right; we were both crippled by a throbbing past. Hurt and sore, we were now looking at our own reflection. *Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the most broken one of all...*

There was something different about her though. She was still hurting profoundly and her eyes said it all. I had passed that stage;

I lived it yesterday for way too long. I was now feeling better than before; I was healing, slowly and quietly. Day by day, little by little I was restoring, mending and repairing my wrecked ship. I had finally learnt to be good to myself.

'I am not superstitious, but I will do as the myth goes, because, I have nothing to lose,' she said and walked towards the sea.

I knew that it was unsafe. There was no one in the distance to reach out for help and I am a bad swimmer. I had to take charge. I walked towards her amidst the roaring waves and called out.

'It can be dangerous. Come, let's hold hands and carry out the myth on the beach. We can splash water on ourselves rather than dipping ourselves in the sea. We just need to believe that it is the same.'

She looked back and smiled. I walked towards her, further into the sea and grabbed her from her elbow. A sense of relief rushed through me.

Water up to our waists, we now had to hurry. The ripples were getting too strong and I jumped on the spot as they surged in their might. I immersed myself in the dense body a of water three times repeatedly and cried aloud, 'I forgive him, I forgive him, I forgive him.' Then I stopped and looked up. The breeze embraced me tenderly and I felt like a crystal of salt.

I dipped myself again; three times over and said, 'I forgive myself, I forgive myself, I forgive myself.'

My companion did the same. She wanted to forgive her mother. I better get some sleep Faith. It is very late. Good night darling.

Mum

11.11pm



4th October 2008
At home in Kandy, Sri Lanka

Dear Faith,

The mornings in Kandy are so green and crispy like a celery stick. The trees are abundant with the freshness of a new day. Is it not funny that the world recreates itself every twenty-four hours in such cyclic clarity?

Now that is a woodpecker I hear, and a koha on the jackfruit tree (even though the koha is not supposed to be here at this time of the year). If only those mountains can talk; how do you think they manage to maintain their surreal beauty and serenity through lifetimes?

Okay! Here I am seated in the large garden of greens of different hues. Let us talk. I am all yours.

I have come a long way since I last wrote to you. I came to the mountains to our ancestral home in Kandy. I tried to think whether it was the same as we left it, or whether it had changed since our departure. The landscapes emanated a radiance of spirit and it reminded me of what it was like to be a child, years and years ago.

Here I am writing to you with my first fountain pen; a gift from my Achchi on my eighth birthday. I am now experiencing this peaceful silence no words can describe. It feels like coming

home to be rehabilitated from an age-old addiction. I guess the tree never leave their original ground. I guess they could only extend to the lands surrounding it.

I went from room to room, smelling the nostalgia. The smell of blue ink, crayons and oil paints from the drawers of my study table, the perfume of the dried flowers in my parents' room, the distinct scent of Achchi in her evening eau-de-cologne, the curry powder, cardamoms and cloves from the kitchen...Oh! It transported me back to my childhood, to a house full of my own melody and laughter, delight and disappointment and those endless narrative plays and relentless dreams.

I have realized one thing. In my emptiness, I have now managed to find fulfilment. All that I think of now is this manuscript I am writing to you. I do not know where to start or how to end it. But all I know is that it is time for me to write everything that I have ever wanted to tell you. Maybe it is true; Achchi once told me that there is a time and a place for everything.

There is a crazy feeling that refuses to leave me. You might think I am out of my mind, but I will tell you anyway.

This is it; I believe there is magic within me. I feel that I just need to make space for it to manifest in my life just like a waterlily noiselessly unfolds its petals. I have never felt surrendered like this. I am letting go of everything; everything that was both in a way good, and in a way bad.

I feel totally stripped of the seemingly elegant clothes I wear to cover myself from the world and somewhat naked like the Venus blown ashore on a sea shell, in one of Botticelli's most celebrated works.

I guess, the most precious of feelings visit us, not much with gusto and glory but with plain simplicity. I believe it is through this lucidity and bareness of soul that I now realize...it is time to come home. Really come home...

I am coming home, Faith; I am coming home to you.

With Love

Mum

06.40 am



5th October 2008
At home in Kandy

Dear Daughter,

I am a woman of great faith and courage. I mention this now so that I would not forget. We normally underplay our strengths, and focus too much on our weaknesses. We feed on the pain that had caused us to wake up from the nightmare, but do you not think that having a nightmare is better than having a restful sleep where our fears remain dormant? Nightmares wake us up and to be *awakened* is to let our light shine brightly.

I would like to tell you who I am and where I am coming from. I was born in Sri Lanka and was educated in a convent in Kandy till I was fifteen years old. I was the only child of a wealthy couple who were both doctors. We all lived here, in my father's ancestral home. At the time, my Achchi (that is my paternal grand-mother) was also living with us and my Seeya had passed away even before I was born.

My father is a Sinhalese and my mother, a Tamil. Achchi said that they had met in the university. I cannot remember my mother's parents. I was not even one year when they were killed in a road accident. My father did not have any siblings and my mother had just one sister; Aunt Lila.

We were living in the times of war. From the time I remember,

nobody in the house spoke about it; nobody watched news or maybe they did when I was not around. But I knew somehow the conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese was making headlines. As I grew older, I encountered friends who had an opinion on war. I did not argue with my friends though; I knew I was of 'mixed blood' and could not take sides. Besides, since I started school as a child, this was a secret that I had to preserve in a little jam bottle as per Achchi. No one knew that my mother was Tamil; so I thought.

Now the religion: my father was a Christian and my mother, a Hindu. From the time I remember, Amma never sighted a Hindu Temple. When I asked her one day why she did not go to the kovil, she said that God is everywhere and that it did not matter where we go to worship Him. I asked her why God was always a 'He'. She said that I asked too many questions and if I wanted to, I could call God a 'She'.

'Amma, why are you so angry with me whenever I ask you questions?' I asked her one day. I must have been about nine.

'I can't say a word, without you thinking that I am shouting at you out of anger; this is the way I speak,' she replied. I did not revolt and as usual, I withdrew to my room to sketch my confusion and emotional anguish in intense colour of the visionary flags and streamers of true freedom. That was how impressionism was born within me, long before I read and studied about what was going to become one of my favourite genres of art.

Maybe it was their lifestyle, or maybe it was their passion; but whatever it was, my parents chose to pursue their dreams in mastering in surgery. I commended their pursuit of happiness, except

that I preferred to be out of the picture altogether.

As a child, I think I was lonely and I remember sitting all by myself in my room (like my parents did, when they studied) to make pastel and charcoal drawings. Art was my first love. I am not sure how it found me: this little skinny creature who would crawl up the mango tree to find her citadel where three strong branches met, to sketch the elusive beauty around her. I am not sure how it happened and why it happened. I never asked for it. But maybe that is what was worth living for. It was almost like I had found a way out and a way in; a tiny splash of colour that can shout out my existence.

I mostly grew up with nannies who were all, for some reason, disciplinarians. My friends were Araliya trees (these trees bear the most fragrant of flowers in colours of white, yellow, pink and dark red) close to the fence. Then, there were five coconut trees, two cashew nut trees, one mango tree, a guava tree, an avocado tree and a patch of vegetables: cabbages, beet roots, beans, pumpkins and lady's fingers. It now makes me smile to think of my childhood garden.

I was fond of the butterflies that hovered around the flower beds and I had a special affinity towards the yellow ones; they were my favourite. I would break small branches which caterpillars would feed on and trap them in large jars. Achchi and I would then watch them grow and change their shape, size and colour. I was spellbound by this natural phenomenon since the age of four or five, when Achchi explained the insect metamorphosis in utmost detail.

Achchi had a strange list of qualities. She would use big words

and concepts to explain what was in her head at the time, regardless of the recipient's age. So, listen to this; by the age of six or seven, 'quantum leap' in evolution was in my vocabulary and so was the 'ethereal beauty of transcendence,' like trees producing scented flowers, stones becoming crystals and earthbound animals acquiring feathers or wings to fly.

'See Mariam, all these at one point decided not to be commonplace but to progress into something different, to become more pleasing to the eye, to be full of fragrance and in the case of birds, defying the law of gravity.'

'What is the law of gravity Achchi?' I would ask, amused and bemused.

'Oh! You'll learn that in school one day. You are too small to understand Newton,' she would say with an air of self-importance.

'Who is Newton Achchi?' I would ask.

'Newton is a scientist who once sat under an apple tree. That's enough Mariam. No more questions,' she would say.

Achchi and I would have released many butterflies into her orchid garden. Not everyone was allowed in her little garden that thrived on the balcony protruding from her room to the outer skies. Right below it was a veranda that boasted the traditional Kandyan architecture of our big colonial house with old wooden floors and stairs.

I used to make mud cakes next to the play house Mari Akka (my nanny at the time) and I, once built with sticks and weaved coconut palms. Mari Akka was a pro in building models for my child-play. She also taught me how to stitch flowers on handkerchiefs and dresses for the *thatta doll* — as I called it (thatta doll was

a pink, plastic, average-size doll which had two sparkling blue eyes and no hair). Mari Akka stayed with us for two years as my nanny and then she had to go to her village to get married. I did not even know where she was from.

I used to climb Araliya trees after coming home from school, during my 'play-time' as suggested by the nanny. I watched the Hanthane for hours whilst talking to my imaginary friends. Then there were all kinds of birds whom I spoke to.

I am not sure what your world is like. But I hope that you have had some make-believe play with some fascinating friends from a world that only *you* know. You may ask me why; but read on little girl; you will find out why it is important, soon.

The Hanthane was quite exquisite with the sun in concert with the mist in the late afternoon. I had to blink and blink, and clear my eyes to get the best view of the Knuckles Range in the furthest distance, to make my wish. My wish was to be liberated. I still wonder why I felt like I wanted to run away from home at a very young age; I am certain that my childhood was not that imprisoning.

My friends invited me occasionally to their place for birthday parties; I went just once for a party when I was nine years. Ever since then, I wanted to have my own birthday party at home and invite friends over. Achchi said that we do not celebrate birthdays. We had one celebration for the whole year: Sinhala and Tamil New Year in April. We also had a Christmas tree and a crib in December but I now realize that this was just to please me.

I was almost eleven years old when Achchi passed away. I woke up in the morning to find out that she had died in her sleep.

She was suffering from severe arthritis and low blood pressure. The night before she died, she related the biblical story of Jacob, the only human who ever physically fought with God. Half way through the story, she told me that she was not feeling well and that she would retire to bed early. I brought her a glass of water for her medicines. I told her that she should sleep well and not wake up early next morning to see me go to school as she would always do. She nodded, as I kissed her forehead.

A twinkle in her eye and a smile so childlike.

That night she did something exceptional though; she blew a flying kiss as I was about to switch off the lights in her room. I smiled back and immediately jumped and pretended to catch the kiss in the air before pasting it onto my lips.

That was my last memory of her. Later when I studied Boucher's art, the elegantly attired Madame de Pompadour reminded me of Achchi. Though this mistress of Louis XV, reclining on a couch in a sumptuous dress made out of a rose covered fabric, looked years younger, her sharp nose and tight smile were unmistakably similar to that of Achchi's. Achchi too loved frills and fancies, ruffles and bows and long flowery dressers and would indulge in the luxuriousness of her outfits, even when she did not go out or expect any visitors.

Achchi's death was hard on me. She was the only living being whom I could at least remotely relate to. I felt sad but I did not cry. I did not want to see her in her coffin and so I disappeared in to the garden, mostly to some tree top, watching people in and out of our house.

People people people... Why did they bring flowers now?

'Where were you the whole day?' My mother asked me before the funeral. 'People were asking for you,' she was almost yelling.

'I was in the kitchen with the new maid,' I replied, timid and scared.

'Don't you lie to me Mariam. I have enough and more things to look into at the moment. Wear this dress.' She was clearly shouting at me when she handed me a white dress with a big black sash.

'I can't. I am not going to the cemetery,' I cried.

'Don't be a baby. Wear this dress now and I'll hold your hand all the way. We both have to be supportive. It's Thaththa's mother who died. And, this is the last time you are ever going to see Achchi.' She tried to be empathetic... *liar liar...stop pretending Amma...*

'I can't,' I cried out loud.

'What is this Mariam? Please?' Mother said exasperated. 'I am going to call your father and you better deal with him.'

My mother left. On bed, clutching my knees to my chest, I sobbed and I experienced the tears of death for the first time. I felt very lonely and scared to live without the loving shadow of Achchi that defended me against the parental objections and complaints. As someone once told me, grandparents and grandkids have one enemy in common... 😊

It was not my father who came to get me; it was my mother's sister, Aunt Lila who came into the room and immediately embraced me for a moment.

'I know this is hard for you Mariam. But we have to suffer certain losses. Death is another stage of life but obviously in a

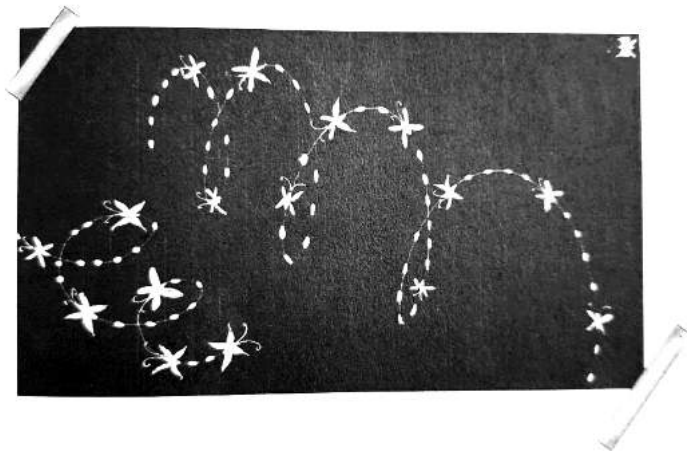
different form that you and I cannot understand, or even see or touch.' She stopped and looked at me closely.

'What do you mean aunty?' I asked, slightly mystified by her philosophy.

She spoke.

'Nothing can be destroyed; they can only be transformed...like your butterflies. The egg changes into the larva, the larva changes into the pupa and the pupa changes into the butterfly. Nothing is destroyed, only that it had changed shape, size and colour.'

Changing *shape, size and colour*...That was it. I knew that from our little insect experiments in the orchid garden.



'Maybe you should let her fly now, like you let the butterfly go...' said Aunt Lila. The metaphor seemed very appropriate. I looked at her and nodded.

Silence and more hugging. Nobody had ever hugged me the way she did that day. Oh! Anyway we were not a hugging family.

'I have another problem,' I said looking at the dress.

'What is it? I am sure that it is a problem that can be fixed,' she said with a smile on her lips.

'I hate that dress. I am eleven years old and Amma still wants me to wear embroidered dresses with pleats and bows. It is very out-dated Aunt,' I said with disgust. I was sick of complying with Amma's conventional fashion tips.

Aunt Lila laughed and hugged me again in delight.

Oh my God, Why were we laughing at Achchi's funeral? I thought.

'Come now. Wear whatever you like. Let's see what you have and if it is alright, we'll stick to white, black or blue so that they wouldn't have anything to talk about after the funeral,' she said still laughing and walking towards my wardrobe.

That was the day I started liking Aunt Lila. I knew that she was widowed and had no children. I also knew that she was a lawyer before she turned to teaching in a small school in Ratnapura for poor children from tea estates. In her rare visits to see us before Achchi died, I felt that she was always pre-occupied and distant; it was difficult to start up a conversation with her and if we did, she would offend someone in the house with her extremist opinions. But Achchi liked her, and I would sometimes eavesdrop on their late night conversations with a glass of brandy in their hands. They laughed like happy witches who got their spell right, and always used big words...I tell you. And oh, I almost forgot. Achchi wore her vibrant hats for their late night joints and listened to Beethoven and sometimes Amaradeva.

Imagine her spirits... 😊

Aunty Lila left soon after the funeral and she never visited us thereafter. We visited her a couple of times in Ratnapura but it was obvious that she never really 'clicked' with my parents.

The time that prevailed after Achchi's death was the best in my childhood. My parents decided to import a playmate for me from a rural village in the outskirts of Kandy. She was the little cousin of our new maid who said that her niece suffered from a learning disorder. Her name was Sulatha and was nine years old: two years younger than me. Our time together would have lasted for about two years.

I did miss Achchi sometimes, especially her biblical stories in the night. Then I thought of butterflies and Achchi having wings to fly to a world with no walking sticks, arthritis or vertigo. I could really picture her fly in her yellow satin night gown...*I think I have someone to blame... if I go insane...*

Thatha said that he could not find a special school for Sulatha. In the first few months, till I got home on weekdays, she attempted to complete all the homework I gave her to do the previous evening. I would come home eagerly to play with her or teach her math or English. But she just could not remember anything from our last class.

We would then share my crayons and make paintings. Once we had an art exhibition in our patio and invited my parents, the maid and the gardener for the event. We entertained our guests with piano and singing. Sulatha was a great singer and she sang old Sinhalese songs beautifully. Our maid prepared special snacks like laveriya, kokis and halape for the occasion.

Sulatha left when I was thirteen. She was taken by her mother to look after her younger siblings. It was heartbreaking to lose my playmate. Life became monotonous. The house was empty and quiet again. I engrossed myself in studies as I was now determined to attain high grades for all my subjects. I felt that this was what my parents wanted me to do. I felt that they loved me more when I spoke about my achievements from school.

In the first year, I posted a painting every month to Sulatha's house even though I never heard from her in return. Then we heard from our maid that her family had moved to another village. We could not find her new address and I stopped sending her paintings.

Six months after Sulatha left, we had a visitor from abroad; Uncle Cyril, who ultimately nudged my dad to take a leap to a more 'promising' future. He was a surgeon like my father and he invited us to Australia. He said that my parents should really consider this option for my sake; I think he referred to the war.

Going to Australia meant migrating, leaving everything I ever knew and going away to an alien land. Dad hesitated for two years before making up his mind. But when he finally did, I had already done my homework; I had read all I could about Australia from a series of encyclopaedias from the library at home and school.

When we move, maybe I could sneak out of the house more easily. I was certain that life was more relaxed in Australia: thanks to 'Neighbours'. I used to watch this series by creeping into Achchi's room in the night when my parents retired to bed. When there were kissing parts, Achchi would say, 'now close your eyes Mariam...you are too young for this still.'

I had enacted many a time in my noon-apple dreams, the person I would like to become when I set foot in Australia. Perhaps there were tall girls like me in Australia and I would not have to pretend to be hunched to be a part of the crowd. Maybe I would not have to play the male role all the time in the dramas or play basketball or do hurdles just because I was tall. Maybe I could just play piano, just relax and be myself—the dreamer, the painter, the pianist who could perform in public (my father hated me to be in any public performances). This was my ultimate dream of liberation.

I have to go now. I am cooking dinner for Chandrika and Piyadasa today. They look after this house in our absence. And oh! I smell the coffee from the kitchen; I succumb to thee...

Mum

05.03pm