2020:  
A Family Odyssey 

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On the terrace of our mountain top home in Sri Lanka, beneath a cloudless night sky, Tha-Tha—my father—announces his plans to buy a telescope. In his newfound retirement, he wants to spend time learning to identify stars, he says to me. Amma—my mother—looks impassive at this news, her mind on the monkeys that ransacked the roof yesterday, breaking the telephone wires. Their repeated intrusions keep reminding us how much we rely on technology. As usual, my parents are on different wavelengths: my mother fretting about maintaining a home in a jungle, my father planning stargazing expeditions.

I have grown used to viewing family as something out of reach, in disparate continents and time zones. This has been my family’s reality from its beginning. Related strangers loosely orbiting one another, keeping their coordinates distant. Since their elopement, my mother and father lived half their married lives in different countries. In 1983, Amma, on scholarship at a university in the USSR, was on a brief trip home with a bob-cut, smoking habit, and atheist views, everything a Good Sri Lankan Wife should not be. Tha-Tha, engaged to a girl his parents had arranged through a Vedic astrologer, saw his future differently to their old-fashioned predictions.

On a weekday, dressed in plain clothes, my parents collided their fates and set a new path in motion, the church cook serving as witness to their vows. Then they took off in their own worlds, she returned to Russia, he a salesman on a motorbike. On their next meeting, their hideaway is a rental on the Hanthana mountain, the setting of many Sri Lankan romance films. He promises her they will return to this haven one day, in an alternate reality where their union is socially legitimate. Three decades later, the penniless salesman is a man of his word. He builds our family home and names it Megha, the Sinhala word for cloud. From such a high elevation and far away from
light pollution, Tha-Tha says, the night sky will be perfect for stargazing.

Amma and I exchange a knowing look. Tha-Tha’s last retirement project was to transform a section of the land below the house into a rose garden and next to it, a vegetable greenhouse. Easier said than done when our neighbours are pilfering monkeys, wild boars, leopards and snakes.

Scene One: daybreak.
I awaken to a fracas of human and primate screams. More alarmed than awake, I run to my bedroom window, which overlooks Kandy city in the distance and hangs suspended on iron pillars over the rolling gradients of the Hanthana mountain. The courtyard is two storeys below my window, and one level below the courtyard, the greenhouse. Gunawathie, our lifelong housekeeper, chases a troop of monkeys into the forest beside our home, screeching in an impressive gorilla imitation while brandishing a ten-foot pole. Strewn across the courtyard is the carnage of ceramic garden gnomes, their smiling heads dismembered. Amma fires pebbles with her slingshot, shouting filth I am certain even their monkey brains can compute. Someone had left the greenhouse door unlocked, and the trespassers had begun feasting on green beans. Outraged at getting bootied, the monkeys exacted their revenge on the Dollarama gnomes that Amma had packed with care to bring all the way from Canada.

In the 1950s, a time when most foreigners were packing their bags and taking a one-way ticket out of a newly independent island nation, Arthur C. Clarke moved to Sri Lanka. He dubbed it his new homeland. Amidst the cacophony of communal rioting, devil dancers, and birdsong, he found his lasting sanctuary. As with my family, there was no single motive that triggered his migration. Underwater, coral-filled realms gave respite to his post-polio limbs. On one excursion in Trincomalee, he found a Chola temple’s ruins on the seabed. Elephant heads carved in stone gazed at him in their watery graveyard. Works like The Reefs of Taprobane originated from these dives. Kingdoms on land also inspired some of his fiction. His Utopian stories delve into mankind’s exploration of other worlds. Characters who press on with their world-building pursuits transcend in his books. Our history speaks of a different tale.

Scene Two: 1831, Central Province, Ceylon.
British Major Jonathan Forbes has stumbled upon an unsettling discovery. The granite monolith of Sigiriya looms nearly seven hundred metres tall, a fortress carved in rock. A behemoth lion’s head towers over the officer, in silent scorn at his paltriness. This Lion Rock is fifth century proof of ingenious urban planning, with its intricate man-made reservoirs to thrive in the dry zone. Its presence shatters all pretenses of Major Forbes’s mission to civilize the island natives. Its grandeur belies his dogma of the superior white race. But his advanced brain is unwilling to compute this information. After a great deal of poking and prodding, Major Forbes gets back on his horse, and reports his findings to the Crown. As with everything their hands touch, this too will be gutted over the next one hundred years. Under their relentless mischief making, the lion’s head that has overseen the rise and fall of many kingdoms, collapses.

In the courtyard below the terrace, I hear Gunawathie ushering the dogs into their kennels for the night. Apart from the faint light reflected from the city, the night is lit up with fireflies that weave about our chairs. This evening reminds me of evenings past, before moving to Canada, when I lived under my parents’ roof. Like now, we regrouped on the veranda, legs folded or knees pressed to chests, swapping sto-
ries of the day’s events. Unlike then, we are not the same forthcoming storytellers. Migration creates rifts that go beyond mere continents—it creates rifts in families, losing all that time and space and knowing.

“Next time you come from Canada, bring me a telescope,” Tha-Tha says. The sky above us shines brilliant with the force of a thousand stars. There is an observatory on the island that Clarke set up to increase the local interest in astronomy. While he wrote *A Space Odyssey*, the first manned missions to the moon’s orbit were coming full circle. Tha-Tha, then thirteen years old and caught in limbo between Ceylon and Sri Lanka, heard of humanity’s breakthroughs and believed anything would be possible if he put his mind to it. He told me once about a palm reading done in his youth. It happened soon after he had learned that his grades fell short of the minimum that universities’ admissions required. He would not be going to college. The palmist said that his life’s work would lead him to travel all over the earth. To a boy who slit chickens’ throats, day in and out, the fortune-telling sounded absurd. A decade passed with little fanfare. And then, he and Amma eloped, realigning the stars closer to the lines on his palm.

Soon after my birth, Tha-Tha charted out a plan for moving us somewhere safer. He accepted an entry-level sales job in the Arab Gulf with a starting salary more meagre than the one before. Amma played her hand in this decision, encouraging him to look beyond the only world he’d ever known. She reminded him of their firstborn’s future, hanging in the precarious question mark of Sri Lanka at the height of its civil war.

Amma began teaching soon after resettling, her trusty Steinway piano in tow. She had practised on it since her childhood. Her father had seen it on sale in the paper, in an ad placed by an English woman leaving Sri Lanka soon after its independence. When we moved, she brought the bulky thing along with us. My bedroom in our house sat directly above the piano room where my mother taught her students. I wrote my homework every day to live renditions of classical music, at times accompanied by loud scoldings and louder sobs. Amma’s reputation blossomed as one of the country’s best teachers. Private schools wanted her to teach at them, and her home-schooled students ran up a months-long waitlist. Meanwhile, Tha-Tha operated on a Herculean schedule: travelling for work, lecturing at an adult learning centre and providing for his young family.

Growing up with peripatetic working parents, my constant companion was Gunawathie. My parents had sponsored her to come live with us in the early 90s, and she spiritedly grew into the backbone of our family unit. A matronly, no-nonsense figure, she stood in as substitute parent for my younger brother and I: cooking our meals, scheduling the driver, cleaning up after my thoughtless errors. Each month, she wired the bulk of her pay to Sri Lanka for her children and a husband she never lived with. A grandmother now, she continues to live with my parents, rather than return to her biological family; one of the many questions I wonder about but cannot ask. I can simply observe her cheery exterior and steadfastness to routine, each morning watering the roses on Megha’s steep terrain and pruning their thorny canes.

On the rare occasions, when our diasporic family comes together, we probe for the elusive happiness from those storytelling days of my youth. Tha-Tha’s attention, however, swings to a subject that, of late, makes my heart palpitate thinking about it: my vocation.

“I’m working on a novel these days,” I say to the man who made up stories ad lib whenever he put me to sleep in my toddler years. I want to take all our disembodied history, reaffix its appendages, and let it walk on its own into the future.

“I hope to become a writer,” I say, but the look on
his face makes clear he doesn’t agree, and my hope for a happy evening together drops like a cold stone in my stomach.

Tha-Tha begins, “When I was your age, I would—,”
I cut him off before he can launch into the familiar narrative he has told us a thousand times so we may never forget all the sacrifices he made. I immediately regret this. I dread these reminders, when I know them too well. In the summer of my sophomore year at college, I returned to the Gulf for a reporting internship. The old house was hardly recognizable. My father, who relied on others to make his meals or bed, had sunk into the typical bachelor life. The squalid interior was the mirror opposite of the kempt home my mother maintained in Canada. Foolishly, I’d asked about the mess the night I arrived from the airport, and bitter words erupted.

“Can’t you see I’m lonely? I have nobody here to help. And I work as thanklessly as a dog, all the time.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it that way.” In the weeks following, I scrubbed and cleaned when he wasn’t around to see. I worked hard on the spots that had festered and stuck like mould over the years of neglect.

I stare up at the dark sky. Locating the right words to use with family is harder than mapping constellations.

“I’m sorry,” I say, now, but the damage is done. He clucks his tongue on the roof of his mouth, and I see the muscles tense and twitch beneath his cheeks. We all know these heated exchanges are a big reason my brother is currently holed up in his bedroom, preferring to be light-years away from familial tension.

Our immigration papers to Canada took five years to get approved. Amma applied this time, keen to give us Western-World belonging. Giving up her hard-earned stake as a reputed piano teacher, she tried to start over. Instead, in her middle-age, all she got was part-time work at a Tim Hortons, behind a counter with other invisible brown women. One whole summer, soon after she and my brother arrived in Canada, I helped them drop teaching flyers over white picket fences. On a newcomer high, she bought an upright Yamaha, which became more of a furniture piece than a teaching instrument.

Those early years of adjustment were the hardest on everyone, when Tha-Tha would visit for two weeks every six months. At the end of these visits, she would hover at the front door, waving until his airport taxi was out of sight, then spend the rest of the day shut in her bedroom. She gave up playing the piano for good and whenever I asked her why she wouldn’t say.

Years later, at her citizenship ceremony, she holds up her certificate like a victory badge. She has made it, with a job as Montessori assistant and a circle of suburban mum friends she can call on. She wants to stay in her paradise but no, Tha-Tha made up his mind not to move to Canada. At my age I’d move there to work as a taxi driver, why on earth would I do that, he said. And so she packed up the house for the final time and joined him. She stationed herself at Megha, on standby against invader monkeys and memories of a lost Canadian Dream.

“When I was in the garden today,” Amma interjects in an effort to change the subject, “I saw this mother monkey carrying her little one in a strange way. I looked closer, to see it was dead, yet she was carrying it from tree to tree.

“It’s their way of mourning,” she says, “it can go on for weeks. They pretend their loved ones are still with them in spirit.”

A long moment passes. I tell Tha-Tha that I will get him that telescope on my next trip home. I say I look forward to gazing at those little bright dots, thinking of us all trying hard to see the same thing.