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Story about Rene

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Brian Rienzie Wicklin

The story about Rene

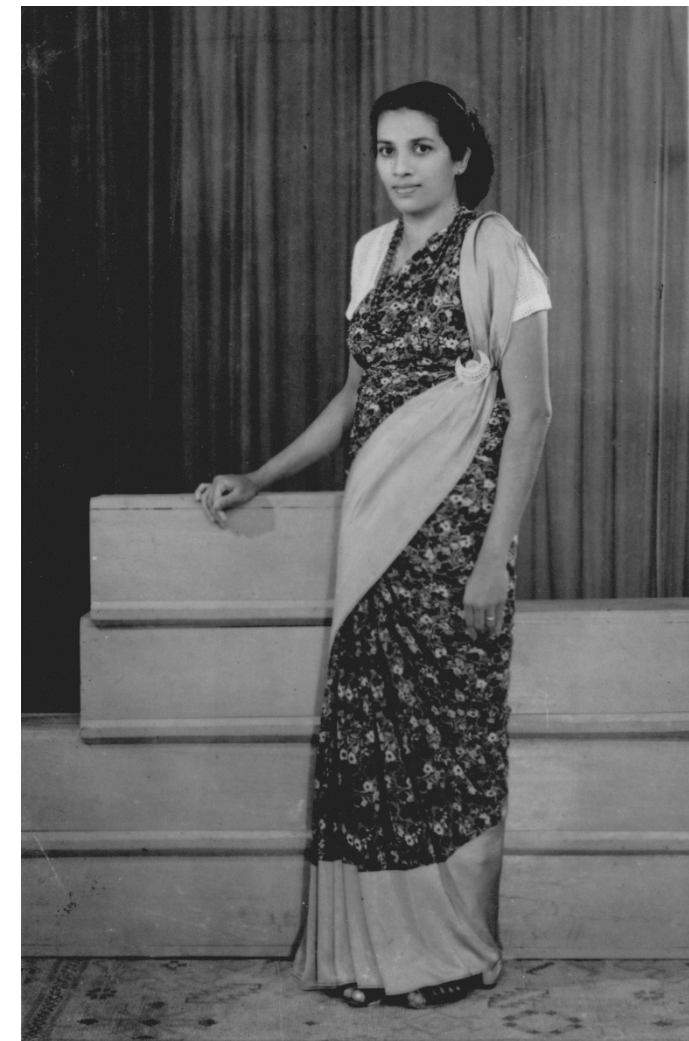
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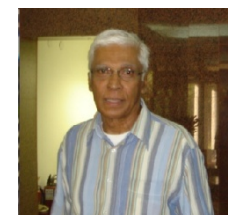
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**Erandatie Dagmar Felicia (Rene)
Amerasinghe**

Biography



Brian Wicklin was born in Kalapaluwawa, a township close to Colombo the capital city of Sri Lanka on 18th April 1939. He was the next youngest of a family of 6 children. His father was a building engineer in the government services and his mother was housewife. They were upper-middle class and held upper middle class values and had links to some of the most powerful families of the time.

His parents had a stormy relationship. When Brian was 6 years old, the family broke up and a sense of unease entered the family held social position. After the separation RENE disappeared from the country of her birth. Brian grew up in Colombo with his father until 19 and then came to Sweden on a scholarship award to pursue studies at the University of Uppsala. After graduation in 1966 he was employed most of the time at Statistics Sweden (Office of National Statistics). On leaving this office in 1997 he continued to work as a consultant for providing technical assistance to developing economies funded by international organisations such as the EU, UNDP, ADB and USAID.

He became a Swedish citizen 29th October 1969 and changed his surname WICKREMESINGHE to WICKLIN 30th July 1974.

This is his first book. He had been contemplating in writing the story about his mother RENE and her disappearance from their family life. It remained a distant dream in those early years to think about meeting her once again. Despite the odds he met her again in 1960 in England.

The idea in writing this book has been to find a part of his life that was missing and that was a problem he had to manage by himself throughout his adult life. Hopefully, this story will convey to others the need for sharing experiences about challenges and struggles as well as failures in overcoming adversity in family life.

Authors note

The writing of this story lingered in my mind for a long time. During my journey back to the country of my birth in 1998 I started to think about the contents, methods, description and style of presentation of the story in a book.

This is not a work of fiction because it is based on real facts and information. The people in this novel are all real; some are alive and others are not. The description is based on what I know and what others have told me at different times. The reader should have no difficulty in knowing when and where the author's imagination has overtaken reality and that happens in a few occasions only.

Rene was my mother's name and no one knew her by any other name. It is a Sinhala name and is pronounced "Riini" or "Reene". On her marriage certificate the name was written as Erandatie Felicia Dagmar (Rene) Amerasinghe.

In Sri Lanka as in all British colonies the adopted mother tongue of the better off families was English. It was the language we spoke at home and with our relatives and friends as well as at workplaces. English was the written language. Their children attended English medium schools it was for all practical purposes an extension of the educational system in England as was the curriculum. The native language Sinhala was taught for about two hours a week.

Sinhala replaced English as the official language of the country by legislative action towards the end of the 1950s and the transformation of school education began after the legislative acts.

The words township and village are used synonymously to identify an area where people live and not an area under local government administration.

The island country Ceylon was renamed Sri Lanka in 1972.

My sincere thanks to

Carmen, Myrna and Rohan, who are my mother's closest relatives now alive for helping me in finding my roots.

Mark and Premini and Christopher (Ajith), who are my mother's distant cousins for their help in tracing my roots as well as for providing guidance and encouragement in writing this book.

Ms Joyce Firth, who has read and helped me in improving the text.

My wife Inger, who has tirelessly read, script edited and provided suggestions for improving the contents of this book. Her support and encouragement was an invaluable source of inspiration.

Sinhala words in the English language

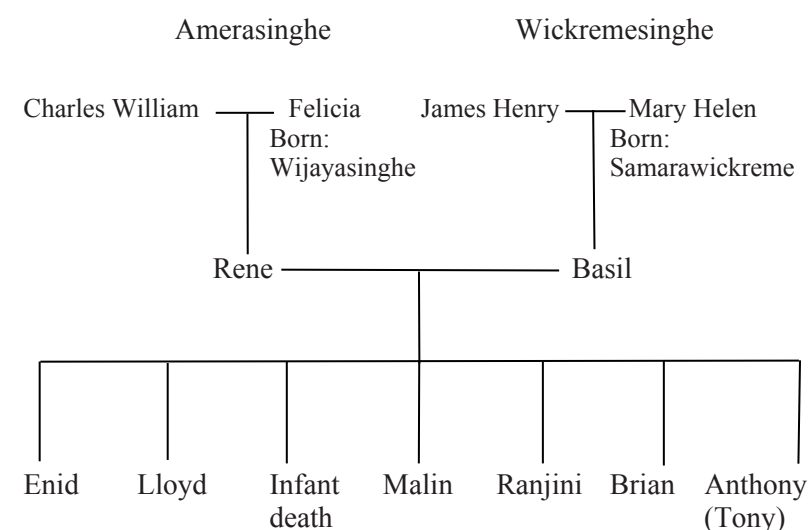
About the merging of English first names with Sinhalese surnames: In Sri Lanka (Ceylon) the merging of English (European) first names with Sinhalese surnames were common as were in most of our names and those of our parents and their parents before them. A few examples of the adopted English first names are that of my grandparents James Henry and Mary Helen, Charles William and Felicia, my parents Basil Oscar and Felicia Dagmar, my sister Enid, my brother Lloyd Osmond, my name Brian Rienzie and that of my brother Anthony (Tony) Eric. The names of my brother Malin and sister Ranjini were exceptions to this rule.

Explanations of the Sinhala words;

Sinhala words	Explained
Ayah	Female servant whose primary responsibility was in looking after the children (nanny).
Amme Pronounced Ammi	A female servant who looks after the children with the same love and care of a mother.
Bullock cart	A 2-wheeler drawn by an ox (draught cattle) for passenger transport. A mode of passenger transport before the entry of the automobile.
Dowry	Parental property that is given to a daughter at her marriage and sometimes administered by her husband as part of the family assets.
Hamu mahattaya	Commonly known as a person with a higher status. He is the master of the house.

Hansi putuwa	Armchair to lie down and relax. It has a board on either side, which can be extended, and enabling the legs to be placed in a relaxed position.
Gedera	House.
Mahattaya	Gentlemen with status (Sir).
Mahagedera	Big house (manor house) owned by the leading family in the village/township.
Mudalali	Merchant trader (wholesale trader) who has a shop like office in the village or township. Usually a wealthy person.
Pellengahawatte	Name of the plantation (estate). "Sinna Wana" was the name of the house. The Amerasinghe family owned the plantation (property).
Proctor	Lawyer – present day Attorney-at-law.
Saree (Sari)	Female garment worn over a short sleeve blouse and is wrapped around the waist with one end and the other draped over the shoulder.
Sudda	White person. A foreigner.
Walauwa	Manor house – home of a well to do person in the village/township.

The Family Tree



In Sri Lanka, names were written according to family traditions: Wickremasinghe in one branch of the family was written as Wickremesinghe in another.

Wijayasinghe is written nowadays as Wijesinha or, Wijesinhe.

Amerasinghe family members were consistent in writing their name.

Given a choice this is what I would like to tell my brother
Lloyd;

All happy families are one another alike, but all unhappy
families are unhappy in their own ways.

Leo Tolstoy, Anna Karenina

Love is a driving force
Fear tends to hold back

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This story is about Rene from Kalapaluwawa

All families have stories to tell. Some of them are about the challenges and others are about the struggles they have faced, and how well they have succeeded or failed in these efforts.

Each story is it's own world and this story is about my mother Rene, who lived in a small town environment and her expectations as she turned into mature years as well as her experiences when she married a well-educated building engineer. He was twice her age and was from the capital city of Colombo. Family life turned out to be different from what she had expected it to be. The marriage lasted 20 years and ended in an unusual way. She left the country of her birth without having embraced and said goodbye to her six children. He stayed behind.

To research my mother's ancestry was not easy because she just "disappeared" from our lives when she left for England in 1946. We never spoke about her and never met her relatives after her separation. The children were told that she fell in love with a sudda and then she left her husband Basil and ran away in search of him in England. This, they said, was her dream of dreams. And, they said of her husband "poor Basil". The thought of exploring my mother's family life before and after her marriage and all that happened thereafter never crossed my mind during the years 1960 to 1973. That was a time when I met my mother in England for the first time as a grown up and then continued to be in contact with her from time to time until her death in 1973. It would have made things easier and more correct to write down her recollections of family life with her parents and then with her husband and their children until the breakup of the marriage and her departure from Ceylon to England.

In The Cat's Table the author Michael Ondaatje describes a native woman around 35 years of age travelling alone on the Cunard Liner from Colombo to London and her experiences on that journey. From this description I gathered a few images about her journey from Colombo to London on board the Royal Mail liner Atlantis in 1946.

I have re-collected my childhood days from what I can remember as well as what I gathered from the stories told about my parents by their closest relatives who were, or are alive today. The traumatic times after the break up of the family is told thereafter, based to a large extent on what I remember with a few additions here and there from what others have told me.

Now and again, my children asked me how I turned up in Sweden. In 1998 they accompanied my wife and me to the country of my birth. They were introduced to my home environment and the way I lived and grew up until the age of nineteen. I left for Sweden at the age of nineteen. To put it mildly, the cultural and personal lifestyle in Sri Lanka and Sweden were very different and they knew that. And, now they understood the difference more than ever.

On my journey back to the country of my birth in 1998 and again during short visits in 2011 and 2012 I came in contact with the closest relatives of Rene who were alive and living in and around Colombo. I told them about my search anew of my ancestry and they all extended their help. What they have said I have woven into the text of this story.

Living with my father from 1946 until his death in 1958 provided opportunities to meet with his brothers and only sister and their families who were alive during those years. That has never been a problem because all of them extended their friendship and courtesy to my father as well as my brothers and sisters. My cousin Esmond, and Sam, who was married to his sister Mukta were in particular the most helpful of them all.

The role of understanding and showing compassion towards relatives is the invisible part of this story. To try to identify myself with my mother's relatives and getting to know them and coming closer to them makes you feel that you get to know them and especially my mother Rene better. It is kind of feeling, of warmth that exists among family members and relatives. In writing this story I have come close to them once again and this time around without my mother Rene. I could see where my roots came from.

The difficult part of the writing has been to imagine when facts are not readily at hand and then sometimes allowing fiction to take over.

Ancestry

Between the late 1390 and early 1500 the island country known as Ceylon was divided into Kingdoms. Kotte was one of the Kingdoms in the island. Like in all other Kingdoms Kotte had an outer area or a “Pita Kotte” where the residents lived and an inner or an “Etul Kotte” where the King resided together with his chieftains. When the Portuguese arrived many of the Kingdoms in the low country area of the island were absorbed under a single administration. Kotte was not an exception to this rule. The rest of the country under the Portuguese was left untouched. The Dutch rulers followed suit. Under British rule the kingdoms were replaced with divisions based on provinces, towns and villages. The new administrative division that was introduced throughout the country provided opportunities for the citizens to make advancements in many fields and many succeeded in moving upward along the ladder of employment in the British colonial system of central and local government administration.

Kalapaluwawa was a village (small township) within the provincial district of Kotte situated a few kilometers north east of the capital city of Colombo. It is today a unified area and densely populated and more or less considered as a suburban area adjoining to the capital city of Colombo.

There are no written records to identify the Amerasinghe’s living in Kalapaluwawa although it was known by word of mouth that their ancestry in the village dated back to 1400 and early 1500. During those times the kings granted land to leading families for their bravery in recruiting young men from their home surroundings to defend the kingdom against invaders from the other kingdoms. In return the leading families were granted land and appointed as Mudaliyar’s by the king. This is probably how the Amerasinghe family first acquired land ownership rights.

During the Dutch colonial period the Amerasinghe family chose to add a “Silva” to the surname. “Silva” was a western Christian name (Dutch and Portuguese). It was the practice among the landowners during these times to associate themselves with the colonial ruling class. The “Silva” addition facilitated family access to gain employment with the local and central government administration under the Dutch and Portuguese colonial rulers. During the British colonial times the Silva addition was conveniently dropped from the Amerasinghe surname and it remained so to this day.

In keeping with local traditions the leading families, extended their privileges in and around the village through marriage: It was the custom of the times for the male descendent to move to the home of his newly wedded wife whilst the female descendent rarely moved to the family with her newly wedded husband. The movement of family members was associated with the demands of family property management and letting. It was considered to be a convenient way to resolve family managerial issues. Sometimes the new families built their own houses in nearby or in far off places. When new houses were built they were very often similar in appearance to the original ancestral house of the parent’s family and sometimes with a few additional outward differences. The change in appearance was to mark their independence from their parents whilst retaining the main resemblances to the family home. The same procedure was followed when their children grew up and they built houses nearby or in neighbouring villages not so far away from their ancestral home. Generations of the Amerasinghe family members lived in this way in or nearby to Kalapaluwawa. Land ownership changed hands through marriage as well.

Rene’s father, Charles William and his parents as well as his grandparents lived in and around Kalapaluwawa. They were landowners and they owned rice fields, spice groves, coconut and rubber plantations.

The income from selling produce was sufficient to support their families at an affluent level and as such was considered also as influential citizens.

The grandparents of Charles William followed the family tradition and wrote their surname as “Silva Amerasinghe”. His parents dropped the “Silva” addition conveniently at the turn of the century, when the new British colonial administrative system was introduced.

Charles William Amerasinghe grew up in Kalapaluwawa together with his brother John and 2 sisters Alice and Adeline. Alice and Adeline moved to the homes of their wedded partners in a rare shift from the customs of the times because their marriage partners had family properties of their own to manage in far off areas from Kalapaluwawa.

Charles William was the eldest child in his branch of the family and being the eldest he inherited his parents property. John built his own house nearby in the property that he inherited. They were both employed in the State Railways in different capacities and in different locations.

The property that Charles William inherited was called Pellengahawatte. The name has its origins in the Portuguese and Dutch colonial periods and then mingled into the Sinhala language about a ”small forestry for produce” with cinnamon groves as the main produce. During the British colonial rule rubber trees replaced cinnamon groves as the main produce. The house they lived was known as “Sinna Wana”, which was located in the plantation. The term Mahagedera was used to identify the house of the chief occupant of the village. It was the “big house” that belonged to the most senior member of the leading family in the area they lived in and in the case of the Amerasinghe there was no exception to this rule.

Charles William was identified as the chief occupant of the village during his lifetime as was his father before him.

The term Walauwa was used to identify the home of the chief occupant and the term Mahagedera to identify the house of the chief occupant of the village

Sinna Wana was on a hilltop and was surrounded by the rubber and cinnamon groves. The paddy fields were below and alongside the main village road. Entrance to the property was from the main village road and the drive up to the house on the hill was in half circles zigzagging to the right and left. This was to ease the climb upwards and downward in a way that would prevent accidents happening like tumbling down the hill. The wheeled bullock cart that was used for travelling was made ready and stood by down below and at the entrance to the property whenever needed. It was never driven up the hill to the residence to collect or leave passengers.

The front veranda or porch of the house was wide and had large (wide) and high pillars to support the roof at the edge. There were four bedrooms and a large dining room. The kitchen was at the back of the house. It was considered as a safety measure since wood stoves were used for cooking food there was always a risk that the fire could spread. There was a well for supply of water for the toilet and kitchen needs. Different kinds of fruit trees were grown all over in the garden such as mango, mangosteen, rambutan, bananas and papaya as well as flower plants. The employees maintained the garden.

Paddy fields were harvested twice a year. The fluid latex from the rubber trees was tapped twice a day and the cinnamon in intervals of time. The harvested yield was delivered to the village merchant house. The coconut trees provided supplies mostly for home use and any excess of supplies was delivered to the village shop. Rabbits and chicken were raised in the home garden for supplies of eggs and meat for the family lunch on a Sunday and for special occasions like when relatives came on visits.

Charles William married Felicia Wijeyasinghe and she moved into the home of her husband after their marriage. It was not an unusual move; it was convenient for Felicia to move into Charles William's home rather than the other way around because he had to manage the plantation he owned. She settled down in her new home and assumed the wife's role.

Felicia was the next youngest of 16 children of the Interpreter Mudaliyar Wijayasinghe of the Magisterial Court of Colombo.

There were Mudaliyars of different ranks in the country with changes being introduced from time to time:

- Head Mudaliyar of the Governors Gate/Gate Mudaliyar
- Mudaliyar of the Governors Gate
- Gate Mudaliyar
- Mudaliyar of the Attepattu
- Mudaliyar

Every court had a Mudaliyar and his job was interpretation from Sinhalese to English and English to Sinhalese. Felicia's father was a Mudaliyar and as such considered as a learned person. He was a public servant and a court official with the status that was slightly below that of the clerk of the magisterial court of Colombo.

A Mudaliyar was a person with high ranking appointed by the kings dating back to 1400 and 1500. They had similar influence and power as an English "Squire". The title was revived under Portuguese colonial rule for enlisting nationals who would be able to serve with complete loyalty. The tradition continued under Dutch and British rule after independence.

The Mudaliyars were given land grants of considerable size and scale as well as privileges in return for their loyalty during pre-colonial times and this tradition continued during the early colonial administrations.

It was told by word of mouth that Mudaliyar Wijayasinghe had lots of property acquired on his own account as well as inherited from his father.

His father was a higher-ranking Mudaliyar than his son and had acquired properties of his own. His son inherited some of these properties. The “Joseph Fraser” Nursing Home property situated in Colombo was one such property that was owned by Mudaliyar Wijeyasinghe either through inheritance from his father or by direct purchase. “Josef Fraser” was the name of the nursing home or hospital built to serve British citizens employed in the colonial administration and the British business community in the country. Since the property was adjoining the Joseph Fraser Nursing Home it was only natural to identify the property as the “Joseph Fraser”.

Mudaliyar Wijeyasinghe had transferred ownership of the “Joseph Fraser” property to his daughter Felicia and it remained in her possession all throughout her married life with Charles William. Normally, ownership of property of the female partner in marriage is handed over to her husband for administration and sometimes ownership remains with the wife in order to support herself and any other including their children if need be. Felicia had to support two of her unmarried sisters during their lifetime and that probably was the reason why the property remained in her name after her marriage.

Later on Felicia transferred the ownership of the “Joseph Fraser” to Rene. She had the same intentions as that of her father when she in turn handed over the ownership of “Joseph Fraser” to her daughter Rene. The unwritten agreement was for Rene to continue supporting her two sisters during their lifetime. They lived in Sinna Wana from time to time.

Birthplace Pattipola

Pattipola is in a cool place in Sri Lanka and the railway station is the highest in the country. There are 2 mountain ranges on each side of the railway station; Udamala is on the east side and Totupola is on the west. The station is situated at the entrance to the Horton Plains on the onward up-country journey to the mountain areas of Nuwara Eliya and Badulla and both are well known for the tea plantations. The station was considered as an important stopover for the train on its climb upwards towards the hill country. Tourists normally pass by or and rest here when continuing their onward journey to the Horton Plains, World's end as it is called.

Charles William was at one time the stationmaster at Pattipola during the early years of his employment with the State Railways. A Station Master was among one of the best known residents. He did not have a long journey to his workplace. A Stationmasters house was located next to or close to the railway station.

Charles William and Felicia's lived in this small township during his tenure as stationmaster. The necessities of conceiving their daughter have been already in place and she was born in the stationmaster's house on 10th January 1910. Her name at the time of christening was Erandatie Felicia Dagmar. The spelling of names is sometimes made difficult because of the pronunciation in Sinhala and the names are very often written in English in the way it is heard, or sounded, but not spelled out. The written format for Rene was possibly the shortening for Erandatie (and sometimes Irandatie) and no one called her by any other name than Rene.

As with a majority of the new born she did not choose her destiny because only a few knows their foreseeable future as they depart from the sanctuary of their mother's womb. Predictable results are normally confined to the first born of the families of reigning monarchs. Rene was not among the few who knew what their future would be like at birth. It would have made a world of a difference had she known her destiny, or if she was a boy instead of a girl. She was not that fortunate.

There were no expectations for her other than the devoted care and love of her parents. She grew up in a secure surrounding and close to her parents and she learnt almost all the social habits from them during her younger days. She would not have known what urban life was because that was far distant from the surroundings of Pattipola.

Growing up in Kalapaluwawa

Charles William worked his way upwards from the stationmaster to higher positions in the State Railway. The family moved back to in Kalapaluwawa when he was transferred to his new staff position. He climbed the seniority ladder, but little is known about his upward climb in this slippery ladder of seniority. His first cousin Simon Fredric was already ahead of him in the management ladder of the State Railways. They were good friends and helpful for one another's advancement as they said during that time.

The pace of change of the urban cities had not reached the countryside as yet. Being a landowner he was considered to be a wealthy citizen measured by local living standards. Community life was peaceful in the sense that the citizens lived in harmony alongside others. There were no dramatic political upheavals or, demands from the local population.

School attendance was not easy for the children of the privileged gentry living in townships outside of the capital city of Colombo. Attendance in the Sinhala medium schools was not for them. Rene was a Baptist by birth and it was a normal practice for children of the Baptist faith to be enrolled in a school administered by the church. There were none close by to her home. She was enrolled at the St Paul Girls School near to Campbell Park in Borella, which was an Anglican administered school. She attended school in the company of her cousin Ida. Both girls travelled in the family bullock cart steered by a coachman. The distance from her home to the school was about five kilometres. Journeying from home to school and back took time. The ride was not an easy one. The road was bumpy and not always easy for the coachman to steer the bull. School attendance may have been three-day-a-week instead of five, which was not unusual in those days.

Rene was well looked after by her parents with the helpful hands of the servants. Her cousins who were the children of her John uncle lived nearby. She visited her cousins very often and played with them after school and during the weekends. Rene was interested in music and learned to play the piano at home.

It was the custom of the Baptist believers to attend church regularly and for the children attending Sunday school and be baptised as acceptance of the faith. Rene's mother Felicia made sure that she grew up with care and love of the faithful. Rene attended the church services and the Sunday school at the Baptist church in the neighbouring village of Kottikawatte. It was in this environment that she learnt the art of participating in and organising social activities and charity events on behalf of the church.

One of her fellow churchgoers at the Baptist church in Kottikawatte was Daisy De Silva – Gunasekera (Perera) from the neighbouring township of Kohilawatte. She conveyed her thoughts to her daughter about the days gone by and in one of those conversations she mentioned about her friend Rene from Kalapaluwawa. She said, Rene was a beautiful girl whom she knew from the Baptist church Sunday school attendance and that they enjoyed each other's company. Here too, Rene travelled by bullock cart steered by a coachman. Were there boys of her age, eagerly waiting the arrival of Rene? For sure they were, and also her friends of the same sex. And her friends said of her being pretty and very attractive and the envy of youngsters of her generation.

As she grew up, she was desirable since, they said, she was beautiful, tall and had a physically well built body compared to most girls of her age. She moved with grace and charm. She was comparatively rich compared to other youngsters of her age living in and around Kalapaluwawa. In other words, if a young man fell in love she was just about the right partner for marriage.

Death of her father and the consequences

Death comes unexpectedly and sometimes in dramatic form and when least foreseen. This was also true for Charles William. He died in a fatal accident when travelling in the family owned bullock cart. The wheel on one side of the carriage hit the edge of the road and the carriage was pulled down into the ditch alongside the road. The bull that was dragging the cart was also pulled down into the ditch and was injured. When Charles William tried to help the coachman loosen the ropes that kept the bull tied to the cart the bull horned him down. He never recovered from the injuries sustained as a result and he died a short while thereafter.

Stories are told in the Sinhala way when death comes so unexpectedly and in Charles William's death the story was as follows:

Charles William and his cousin Simon Fredric (SF) were both employed by the Sri Lanka State Railway and were at one time great friends. Evidence of this friendship was that SF gave his younger son Cuthbert Wellington, who went on to become the professor of classics the names that correspond with initials C W as in Charles William. Sometimes friendship does not last long. The story that has been told in the old Sinhalese way of telling stories is about a strange dream that was revealed to SF: At one point of time SF got very ill and (in those days 'Black magic' was accepted part of the customs and culture of the village and its surroundings) the "spirits" whoever they may have been had conveyed to him or to a near relative of his a message that Charles William had "charmed him" (had something to do with his illness) and that he had to protect himself with appropriate counter measures.

The cousins Charles William and Simon Fredric fell out at some point of time thereafter. And, later on it was said that what was revealed in the dream came true when the bullock cart in which Charles William was travelling tumbled down into the ditch and Charles William was horned down by the bull and he died a few hours later.

Rene had finished attending school and just turned 15. Rene's mother Felicia was now alone in providing guidance to her daughter on the verge of entering a mature age. Now was the time for contemplating about family life and how it would be like to live without her husband. She had also to manage the plantation and had no experience about these management tasks because she was all along a housewife who took care of their home and upbringing of their daughter. Now and again she had the company of two of her sisters who were not married and who continued to come and visit her and lived at Sinna Wana from time to time.

Felicia was now faced with a new challenge; that of making up her mind about either encouraging Rene to pursue higher education or, finding a husband for her in marriage. The pursuit of higher education was not generally on the agenda for girls of her generation. Marriage was the first option for girls reaching the maturity age level. Rene was entering maturity, but she feels she's too young, Felicia could have said, but did not say so. Felicia had to make up her mind and she had to do so not alone but in agreement with her daughter. No one knows the kind of discussion that was ongoing between mother and daughter about future plans. I cannot remember meeting my grandmother Felicia and will never know what sort of person she was. She may have been a very determined person or, the opposite, and allowing others to decide. If I had been more mature myself in the 1960s when I was in contact with my mother, I should have had the answer and now it is too late.

This was also the time when relatives and friends come up with all kinds of suggestions and recommendations. They believe that they are helpful during such times as these or, at least this was how family life functioned more so in those days than now. A few of the suggestions were about the well being of Rene. Relatives of her who were living close by came up with the idea of finding a marriage partner for Rene, and she could get married and live happily thereafter. Felicia agreed with the proposal of her husband's relatives living close by to find a suitable partner in marriage for her daughter. They said that this was now more important than ever before; she was alone with her daughter in the big house. She had also to manage the property without having the experiences of her own to do so. This was the situation that she was now confronted with and she had to reach a consensus with her daughter before agreeing to put forward a marriage proposal for her.

In what way an agreement was reached about finding a partner in marriage for Rene is not known with any degree of certainty. Rene may or may not have agreed with the proposal to give her away in marriage this time around. Maybe she did not agree with her mother about finding a partner in marriage at this point of time or, maybe she did. It could have been her John uncle who lived close by who had the final say. No one in the family circle would raise objections when John uncle comes up with an idea and most especially in times such as these. All I know is that the choice of finding a Camelot jr. was put in the hands of her uncle Walter Walpola who lived in the neighbouring village of Walpola. Walter's mother and Charles William's mother were sisters. Uncle Walter Walpola as he was called was a proctor by profession and considered to be a learned man. He had a habitual practice of excessive consumption of alcohol and sometime later it was also revealed that his income and expenditure records were of poor quality.



Bullock cart – mode of travel before the arrival of the motor car

Finding Camelot jr.

Little is known about how Walter started the search of finding a Camelot jr. He came up with a proposal; a young man by the name of Basil Oscar Wickremesinghe was his choice as the young Camelot jr. Basil was twice the age of Rene and had long passed the maturity level that Rene was entering into. He also had a good education and was employed as a building engineer by the government services.

Basil was not from the village of Kalapaluwawa. He grew up with his parents James Henry and Mary Helen Wickremasinghe in the provincial district of Ratnapura in the hill parts of the country. His father died before he reached the age of 50. After some time Mary Helen moved with her children to the sub-urban area called Wellawatte near the capital city of Colombo. Her main concern now was to provide her children access to good schools.

Basil Oscar grew up in this spacious house in Wellawatte together with his mother and 7 brothers (6 of them were older than him) and an elder sister. His mother was now the chief incumbent of the Wickremesinghe family living in Wellawatte and was responsible for the care of her children. This is according to family traditions of the well to do. She made sure that her sons pursued higher education and gained skills in their professions, which she considered as the surest way for them to earn a good salary and for gaining status in society.

Basil's elder brothers had started their upward climb on the employment ladder in the government services after school attendance and they had encouraged their younger brother to follow suit, and this he did.

Mary Helen wanted her male children married to “rich” partners. She did not ask for more. Her only daughter was given all the wealth of the family as dowry when she wedded a successful government employee corresponding to the civil service in modern times.

Rene was the only child of a well-to-do family from a village area and grew up close to her parents. She had no experiences about what it was to grow up in a family with brothers and sisters around her. Her cousins lived close by and she mingled with them as part of her own family. Her father was known in the village more for ownership of land and the management of the rice, rubber and cinnamon cultivation than for his professional skills acquired as an employee in the State Railways. He had died in an accident at an early age. Her mother Felicia was more interested in getting her daughter Rene married than encouraging her to continue with her education for higher level certification. Being the only child in the family, she inherited ownership of the family property after her father's death.

The match making process ended up in bringing these two persons together in marriage without having known each other. The expectations are for the couple to “grow up and live happily ever after” and this is according to the traditions and customs of the country. This was a good match and all involved in the decision making agreed with the proposal.

The brokering effort was considered a success: It was about wealth in search of education. And, it was about teaming up a young girl with inheritance with a young man with a good education on the upward climb in the employment ladder of the government services. In other words the marriage broker had the advantage when navigating his proposal of marriage; She was young, had land and property and completed school education. He had completed higher education and was a skilled building engineer with a government job.

Rene was thrilled when she was told about her prospective husband who lived in the capital city of Colombo. He had completed higher education and by profession a government employee. She thought about this proposal to be as exciting as she could imagine it to be. She would be sharing her passion for conversation and social entertainment with him and as well as with his well-educated brothers and their spouses. The idea of joining a large family was something that she had not thought about before. It was something new for her imagination. She started to think about this “feeling of coming together within an enlarged family and the kind of social environment when all of them met”. In her mind it was all about meeting the in-laws and their spouses and of being together in a large family. This was something to be excited about. In her family she was the only child and she thought that brothers and sisters would be helpful in providing an opportunity to learn a few things from each other. She did not have doubts in her thoughts when the proposal was put forward and accepted by her and her relatives.

There was nothing unusual about the choice of this “youngster” except for the fact that he was also a keen taster of alcohol and more often than not consumed it excessively. This was not the only weakness he had. He was fond of indulging himself with a sexual partner whenever he wanted, with whoever was available. Gentlemen's waging was another of his extravagances although not to the same extent of his craving for alcohol and women.

James Henry was keen on tasting alcohol on a daily basis and a few, but not all the children followed his example. Basil was one of them who adopted this habit and his mother had problems in trying to get Basil to give up this bad habit. She never succeeded in that effort. Basil was also fond of waging and had a bad temperament as well.

The bad habits of Basil were well-kept secrets before the marriage. For Mary Helen the choice of Rene as Basil's wife was an ideal proposal because of her age and ownership of property that she would bring along with her to the newly wedded family. Basil like all of his brothers was to leave his home in Wellawatte and settle down with his wife in her home in Kalapaluwawa after his marriage.

The proposal of Basil as Camelot jr. was thought to be an ideal choice by all who were involved in the decision making process. No one came across the idea about asking; was Walter Walpola acquainted with Camelot jr.? After all, they were both good at drinking alcohol and could very well have known each other through acquaintances with similar habits. We do not know the answer.

What more can be said? The thought about sharpening his arguments for and against his choice of a marriage partner for Rene was not on top of Walter Walpola's mind. In a court case a lawyer is expected to sharpen his arguments when presenting evidence in front of the judges. This was not a court case. He was not compelled to do so. Her thoughts and ambitions were never sorted out or discussed with her. This was not an unusual way of doing things when it comes to matchmaking; the normal procedure in Ceylon at that time was not to discuss these matters with any other than the parents and guardians of the wife/husband to be. The question that remains unanswered is, what if he had done so and taken into account Rene's thoughts and dreams about love and passion?

Marriage to Camelot jr.

She was on the verge of entering into a family relationship with someone who was a stranger to her only a few months ago. After all it was a well established tradition in the country to start searching for partners in marriage for girls about her age. In Sri Lanka a proposal ends up more often than not in marriage between partners who barely know each other; they are more or less "strangers" to one another at first. They then start on the journey of getting to know each other and then having children of their own. What were her expectations about joining hands with Basil and building up a family together with him? She did not reveal any doubts at that time.

Felicia like all mothers spoke with her daughter about the traditions and customs when getting married and about the obligations that follow the enactment and the fulfilment of womanhood.

Like all other girls in her environment to get married at a younger age was thought to be a positive experience than marriage at an older age. She never contemplated on any other direction after accepting the proposal to get married. Her thoughts were about a likeable happening.

Basil was twice her age and a total stranger? She could have said, "I would love to get married to him. He is a handsome man and mature and I can learn a lot from my Camelot jr." or, backing away, she could have said instead "I am not prepared for marriage" or, simply, "I do not want to marry you" or, "I am not in love with you" and that would have ended this story as a short story or no story. She said, "yes" to the marriage proposal.

The planning for union was under way. She was excited about the marriage and about living with Camelot jr. in her home; Sinna Wana in Kalapaluwawa.

On the 12th February 1925 she walked down the aisle at St Pauls Milagiriya to meet join him in front of the alter. He was her chosen Camelot jr. and very soon her husband. She was 15 and not so mature as she thought she was. This was her last chance to say yes or no as her final decision. Rene did not hesitate in signing the marriage certificate with the priest as her guardian angel watching over the ceremony.

Were there any doubts about how well prepared she was the marriage obligations? What were her expectations about the wedding night? Her mother had explained a few things that she needs to know and thought she understood what was said. How would she feel when embracing her newly wedded husband for the first time? How joyful and painful can the experiences be? There were so many other girls who married when they were around 15 years of age and she had not heard of complaints. Or, were complaints were never made because of fear and embarrassment?

This was their wedding night and they did what all lovers have performed throughout the ages. She thought; it was about enjoyment of love or, humiliation, maybe could very well be the outcome of this exchange. Rene was not sure that she understood what penetration was all about - delightful or harmful? Basil, was the senior partner in their relationship and she expected him to take the lead and prove that it can be properly done and not painful for her. She was pleased when it was accomplished. Basil had a powerful sexual desire, but more often than not had early results to the frustration of the opposite sex. Rene thought that she was experiencing this type of result without knowing what the real outcome was.

Or, did it unfold as a dream come true? The joy and love of being together and enjoying what happiness is all about would have fulfilled the dream of a lifetime for her even if it were for a short time. Felicia had told her that it is the start of something extraordinary in the life of youngsters.

Reaching happiness and love of a lifetime would start on this wedding night was what she was expecting as all females do when they daydream about their wedding night. For Rene the dreams and expectations were no different. This night of experience was something that Rene thought about; everything and all things were going to be possible with her Camelot jr.

She never fully understood how this painful experience could be called a joyful event when it was fully complete. Sex was an enjoyable experience she thought and not a painful one.

Rene remained desirable for Basil as he was dreaming about his own dreams about living with Rene.



Wickremesinghe family in front of the ancestral home in Ratnapura Town, ca 1910

Connecting with Camelot jr.

What she held in abundance were her social accomplishments that she had taken from her mother and relatives as well as friends living nearby to her home. Rene had attended the church services and Sunday school at the Baptist church in nearby Kottikawatte. There, she learnt the art of conversation and social customs from her friends and fellow churchgoers. Rene was helpful in promoting and organising charity events in her home environment as well in and around the church premises. She was good at writing and speaking and was able to communicate with those around her with ease. Rene neither started nor entered into disputes.

In her letters that she wrote to friends and relations after leaving the country of her birth Rene was able to convey her feelings about her engagement in the social life without creating doubts about her intentions. Engagement in social activities was considered to be an important part of social life, especially among the younger generation of church going females. The Baptist Church played a leading role in promoting cultural activities and encouraging youngsters of the faith to participate in making a success of these events.

The 1920's were the years, long before the ideals of women emancipation took hold of in Ceylon. In England, women emancipation had started to gather momentum and Rene was made aware of these developments from what was reported in the newspapers and heard during the ongoing conversations after the church services. Families met and talked about social events after the church services, as was the custom then. Rene was known to possess a liberal spirit and wanted to live as an early practitioner of a broad pursuit of free women. Her personality did not fit with the accepted Ceylonese standards of constraints imposed by society for young females and found it both ridiculous and too confining for girls of her age.

At least this is what she conveyed to friends and relations. She was a determined young person of her age said her friends and relatives.

She continued the practice of being active in social events after her marriage.

Rene visited her mother-in-law and the Wickremesinghe family of in-laws and their spouse at “Wycklyn House” in Wellawatte for social events. Basil was with her. The grown up nieces felt she was closer to them than their own parents. She was much younger than all of Basil’s in-laws.

Basil continued successfully to acquire professional skills as Inspector of Works for new construction of buildings undertaken by the Public Works Department (PWD), which was a government agency. He was recognised for his skills in hiring sub-contractors and conduct of inspections including follow up work that was necessary to ensure that the quality of construction was in compliance with the specification given in the contract. He was given the responsibility for managing the construction of the Independence Building – a building in which the then Governor General representing the monarchy was to hand over the independence documents from the British colonial administration to the newly elected government representing the citizens of the country. It was a prestigious project that had to be completed on time. And the building was successfully completed on time. Sri Lanka became an independent country and a member of the Commonwealth of Nations in February 1948.

Basil was transferred to different workplaces in districts that were outside of the capital city of Colombo during the early years of their life together. Rene and the children moved with Basil to live in different districts depending on where the workplace was located and length of the assignment. They rented the house they stayed in. How she managed the family plantation Pellengahawatte back home is not known, but a good guess is that they travelled over a weekend to help her mother sort out things.

Connecting with Basil was something that Rene had thought was easy and she was thrilled about the idea of being able to discuss freely her thoughts with those of his. This was at the beginning of her marriage. She felt as if she was growing up and she wanted to enjoy so many other things with her husband rather than only serving her husband and looking after the children at home.

It was during these early years of their marriage that Rene began to sense that she bore no association with Basil. She looked after the children and made arrangements with the kitchen staff about the food that was to be prepared and served each day. He continued to go to work and return home after a couple of drinks with his pals, including the sub-contractors at the workplace before coming home in the evenings. Sometimes he went to bed and slept for a couple of hours and then woke up to have his meals. There was not much of an ongoing conversation between them. This was his lifestyle and he was not able to change his lifestyle.

Rene began to understand that her husband was not the person she had expected him to be. It was difficult for her to talk with him and to make him understand the need to be cooperative when living together. She started to make her views known to her cousins who lived close by about her “rocky” relationship with Basil. It was around this time that she started wondering how to manage her family all by herself and to bring to an end her marriage.

After serving in the provinces Basil was transferred back to Colombo to supervise new public building sites in the capital city that were started by the government. The family moved back and settled down in Kalapaluwawa. Basil travelled daily to his workplace in the morning and returned in the evenings after work.

He was successful in his career with the Public Works Department. A sign of his status as seen in his upward climb along the employment ladder was the ownership of the car. It was widely admired by the villagers as Basil drove from Kalapaluwawa to his place of work in the mornings and back in the evenings. A driver was employed for the purpose of driving the car as well.

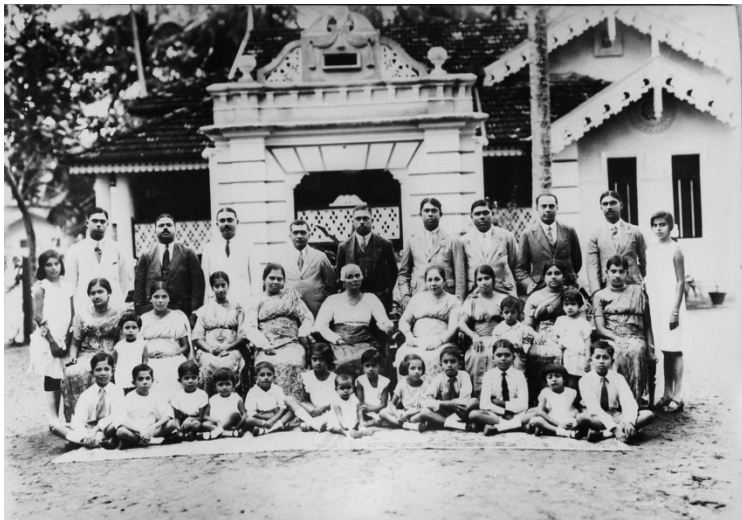
Gradually Basil became an acquaintance of the Mudalali (village merchant trader). He entertained his business colleagues before and after the conduct of transactions in this office and it was here that he entertained well wishers from the village as well. Consumption of alcohol was at the top of his mind when Basil visited the Mudalali and he readily and ably provided the desired alcohol in quantities that were requested at any particular point of time.

Gentlemen's wager (gambling) was also a habit that Basil was fond of and the Mudalali accepted bets about the results of horse racing events arranged at the Havelock racecourse in Colombo and the racing events in England. The settlement was cash on the spot or on "account". The winning bets were rewarded according to the official odds given by the organisers of racing events and published in the daily newspapers. Losses were paid in cash if Basil had any on hand at the time. If he had no cash on hand the debts were settled against payments for deliveries of paddy, latex from the rubber trees and spices harvested from the groves from Pellengahawatte. There was no organised system for accounting other than by word of mouth. Rene did not understand the accounting system practiced between the Mudalali and his client the Hamu mahataya from Pellengahawatte, at least not for a considerable period of time.

Did she communicate her ideas to her husband about the miscalculations in the books maintained by the Mudalali? Did she request changes in the bookkeeping records separate from her husband's involvement in his extravagances? Yes, she did so and she was able to change the procedures adopted for payment, but this was after a considerable period of time. Unfortunately for her there were no other handling agents or merchant houses in the village for the handling of deliveries from Pellengahawatte.

Rene and Basil did not live on the margins of the money economy. All who knew them knew this. Rene had inherited the house and properties from her parents. Basil did not gain ownership of the Amerasinghe properties or be given management responsibility for them. The property remained in Rene's possession as she had by consent agreed to support her two aunts who lived now and again in Sinna Wana before and after her marriage. The income from sales of rice, rubber latex and spices from the home plantation was remitted to her by the village merchant trader, the Mudalali. She received payment during most of married life, although with diminishing returns as Basil was wagering away not only his own salary, but also a fair share of the income accrued for deliveries from Pellengahawatte.

Basil did not possess an inheritance like Rene. Instead, he had a handsome monthly salary from his employer. Accountability was for himself and no other and that is how he continued before and after his marriage. He did not have the habit of sharing his thoughts about how far his monthly salary would go for home expenses or, care of the children and how much would be left over for leisure time spending. Instead, he practiced what can be called as the handing over of cash on request to his wife. Cash on request enabled her to make payment of school fees, purchase of clothes for the children and maintenance related expenses for their home. There was no shortage of cash in his pockets and there were no big amounts requested.



Wickremesinghe family in front of the ancestral home “Wycklyn House”, Wellawatte, 1928

Disappointment with her marriage

What was foreseen as the start of a fairy tale like story about love and happy ending turned out differently. The relationship was not comfortable with either of them because they had different interests in life. Rene and Basil were wide apart from one another in maturity, intellectual capability as well as cultural and social tastes. She wanted to do things in mutual consent with her partner and that was about discussion and agreement on what they could do together. He was not accustomed to communicating with his partner. For Basil, his wife was seen as a partner for satisfying his sexual desires and not more. To put it more bluntly, one could say that his willingness to grow and to adopt and change for the better together with Rene was simply not in the making. For Rene the choice of Basil or, for that matter the choice made by her family or, of her better angels turned out to be the reverse of what she was looking for in married life. Finding a partner to be liked and likeable and shared interests are the dreams of all young girls growing up in the villages and towns in Sri Lanka, or in any other part of the world. She was beginning to understand that she was not that fortunate in the selection of her Camelot jr.

She was searching in his face for some kind of signal that could communicate to her that after all he loved her but he was not able to express himself. When he was looking at her it was about something else. She tried to say something to him and encourage him to be her companion and maybe to say just three words that I love you. These words would have maybe given her a glimmer of hope and if only he said so, nothing else would matter. She had high hopes of living with Basil and sharing life in the most enjoyable of ways where conversation and social engagements were seen as the cornerstones of the relationship.

He was to lead the way and she was to be his supporting partner. The children were to be the result of happy encounters and for them as parents to provide the feeling of being close to their children. Unfortunately, this was never in the making. Basil turned out to be the opposite of her choice of “a sing your heart out dream” for Rene in this marriage. He had a taste for sex, alcohol, tobacco and sometimes beetle chewing that fitted well with the description that was said of Basil as a “one of a kind of youngster” by one of Rene’s cousins who happened to have observed him during a family get together at her cousin Shelton’s home.

Basil never resorted to physical violence when he was under the influence of alcohol. When he was under the influence of alcohol he fell asleep. And, he fell asleep in his bed if he found his way by himself or, was escorted to his bed with whoever was nearby to him. The hansi putuwa was the resting place if it was daytime and if there was one close to him.

Love is a feeling that is understood or not understood between partners. It is about sharing of all kinds of experiences in conversation with each other along the ageing ladder. The sexual experience is an important ingredient in a marriage and Basil understood this, but he did not understand that it was not the only ingredient for helpful results in a partnership. The all-powerful desire and satisfaction of enjoying sex together and in consent with his wife was absent in his life.

These were the times when the husband went to work and the wife looked after the house and the care of their kids besides the matrimonial obligations. The servants looked after all that had to be done in the home environment such as cleaning and cooking as in the houses of the English nobility. The kitchen staff prepared the food for breakfast in the morning, lunch at noon and dinner in the evening.

Then there were the male and female servants who performed the day-to-day cleaning both indoors and outdoors as well as attending to the children. The gardeners looked after the outdoor fields. There were male and female servants and some were young and others older. They had their own clashes about their own behaviour in the servants’ quarters.

When Rene grew up in her home, she witnessed how her parents were talking with each other. For Basil, he had little or no such experiences when growing up in his family of 7 brothers and a sister. His mother, Mary Helen was more or less “authoritarian” in her way of talking with her children. She had no other experience to fall back on. And, for Basil, he had inherited his parents’ cultural and social behaviour pattern.

The home that Rene and Basil shared was like a place where 2 different personalities were living. For her the dreams of a happy marriage seemed to be all but a dream. The ascending returns for love and companionship seemed to be never in the making. Rene had no anchor with whom she could fall back on to discuss and resolve family problems.

Was this the making of a crushed dream?

Rene and Basil had 6 children and in all there were 2 girls and 4 were boys and a girl who died in infancy. The first child was a girl born nine months after the marriage in 1925, next and nearly 5 years thereafter a boy in 1930, then a girl who died in infancy and then a boy in 1933, a girl in 1935, and after a lapse of nearly 4 years a boy in 1939 and the youngest was a boy born in 1940. The birth intervals of the children in the marriage are puzzling. Can this be an indication about the erratic sexual behaviour of Basil or some other is not known with any degree of certainty? All I know was that Basil had extravagant sex experiences with the female servants at home and female workers at the premises of the new construction sites.

The servants in the home were the witnesses to the exceptional behaviour of the Hamu Mahathya residing in the Walauwa. The gossip that had surrounded the family life of Rene and Basil in the village became a never-ending story. They were not pleasant. Word of mouth spreads fast in the village.

The trials of strength between love and kindness and no love and no kindness were present in abundance in family life. The clash of interests was evident for all our relations who came to visit us at Sinna Wana. Seldom did the children have a feeling that their parents were in a friendly conversation. Instead, they became the un-willing witnesses to a relationship that was getting to be beyond repair. It was like a drama playing on a screen and the sound drumming up to say that the relationship was breaking up.

The children were all excited when there was fun and play in their home. These were rare occasions like when entertaining visiting relatives and friends. The choice of new clothes or the newly washed, fresh clothes that the children wore on these occasions was a delight for them, as was the taste of rulang cake, kevum, kokis and other Ceylonese delights that were prepared and served. The opportunity to play with cousins of about the same age and with different toys than their own was the most delightful expression that was seen in their faces. Such occasions were rare.

Marriage was running out of time

Rene expected more than what Basil could have offered. Her husband was not the companion that she was able to build up a relationship with. She could not share her concerns with her parents because they were no longer alive and with sisters and brothers because she had none. Her mother's family members lived far away from her reach and she had very little or no contacts with them anyway. Rene disclosed her anxiety about living with her husband to her Amerasinghe cousins who were living nearby. She confined to them about her concerns and consequences of the troublesome relationship she was confronting. There was no hope of betterment in sight as she explained to them about the painful truth to which Rene was now exposed. It was so from the beginning and it continued all along as she saw it. Their marriage was not about exploring how love and companionship go hand in hand through marriage, or how passionately one can feel about the other in a relationship. Instead, one could speak about misbehaviour by one individual and not the other.

In her home Mary Helen made sure that conversation was about information given to her and advice passed on by her. It was patriarchal. There was no possible way in which Rene could enlist her support during those early years of her marriage when she was alive.

Basil was not a teenager and had passed that age long ago. He had reached manhood and was a mature young man who was more interested in the human vices than in participating in social events. For him and for those of his age the company of females was of a single interest. He did not understand the responsibilities that go with marriage in order to enjoy its fulfillment. His temperament was also exceptional, although not as famous as his taste for alcohol and search of partners for sex.

She had no one close to her who was able to help her understand about growing up from girlhood to womanhood. Rene had not passed the age of accountability, although she had passed the age of achieving menses. In appearance she was tall and well built and looked to be of mature age, although well below the legal age limit for marriage in modern times. Rene expected Basil to extend his experiences and share with her his dreams about love and companionship. Her dreams were like those of all young girls when dreaming about the opposite sex. It was about having fun, maybe exchanging love letters and enjoy talking about all that is there to talk about and of sharing her dreams of the happier days yet to come.

Rene continued with her involvement in organising social and cultural events as she had done before her marriage. She was in conversation with the villagers, friends and relations who came to Sinna Wana in search of a friendly conversation or seeking help in resolving family matters as they said. The kettle was always boiling and tea was served with sugar and condensed milk during these conversations.

She entertained the children of Basil's brothers and a sister. They were many and they all enjoyed the cultural and social orientated entertainment that Rene provided whenever they were visiting Sinna Wana. She liked them all and two of her nieces had mentioned to their parents that they were invited to go to the cinema together with Auntie Rene and her eldest daughter Enid and how thrilled they were watching the film "live" on a big wide screen in front of them. They said the same about the food, desert and sweets that were served, as well as the joy of playing games together with their younger cousins.

Basil accompanied Rene and the children during their visits to her cousins who were living nearby. They were enjoyable times for her and also the children.

Basil was exceptionally fond of meeting Christie, who had the same kind of extravagant relationship when it came to drinking alcohol as he did. They both drank and soon found themselves sleeping on a nearby hansi putuwa for the remainder of the visit until it was time to go home. The most positive outcome was that there were no encounters of physical violence by any of them under the influence of alcohol.

At home the scene could be anything other than pleasant. Sometimes when Basil was drunk and got home someone had to help him in and lay him on the bed. For Rene it was a nightmare to live with a husband who behaved in such way. More so because the servants lose respect for Basil and it goes without saying also for Rene and their children. Then, when Basil started to draw the attention of a young female new recruit the scene became even more chaotic. Whenever he considered it appropriate Basil slept with her. He woke and went from his bed to their living quarter and there he enjoyed having sex with this young girl and he returned slowly to his own side of the wide bed he shared with Rene and their two youngest children in between them. This was not always the case because he could have fallen asleep after the act and woke up the next morning beside her. Sometimes when he woke up it was in the early hours of the next morning. Rene witnessed all this but was unable to resolve the issue with Basil.

Rene went to her cousin Shelton's home to get his help in conveying some sense into the sexual extravagances of Basil. He was living close by but was not able to help her in dragging Basil away from where ever he was in the middle of the night. And, he had no experience in finding a legal solution. Uncle Shelton was never able and never succeeded (and no else would have either) in getting Basil to behave in any other way or, of removing Basil from the servant's quarters at critical points of time. One can imagine the scene when Rene was pregnant.

Separation was the option that Rene was now facing and she sought for help with Basil's brothers, but they were more interested in non-intervention than intervention because the separation was not on the agenda of the leading families of the times then or for that matter even today in Sri Lanka. Male members of almost all upper class families in Sri Lanka and the European nobility were engaged in infidelity but they did so discretely. Basil did not adhere to discretion and that was what was creating problems so differently.

When servants see the commotion and bad behaviour from the Hamu Mahataya who is their employer, they lose respect for all those whom they serve. Sometimes the male servants approach the male children of the family and the female servants with sexual advances. Rene had to face the damaging consequences.

The marriage was running out of time!

Tragic end of the marriage

Haminonah was a young female servant (ayah). She was like all young servants ready to serve in whatever way she was told. Basil had observed the young girl and showed considerable interest in her. It turned out that Basil was so fond of her that he was found sleeping beside her not once but many times.

Rene asked her cousin Sheltons to find a way out for her from the ongoing state of family affairs. It was not an easy task unless you are determined and strong and has the support of many other relatives as well. Shelton was not able to find a way out for her. She then turned to Basil's elder brother Cyril who now had risen to a higher position on the ladder of fame in the colonial administration (civil service). Cyril was not able to get Basil to change his behaviour or to provide support for taking legal action that would end his marriage in a separation. "It was not the custom of the privileged and upper class of the native population to become involved in scandals and divorces" he said. Cyril made it clear that separation was not possible as it cast doubts on the integrity of the family members. Rene had to find a way out of the marriage if she were to live a life without her husband. She would then have to take the responsibility for all or any of their children by herself. I have no idea about the way she was thinking about ending the marriage. For her there was no other way out of the wedlock. She was unhappy with her situation, as it had unfolded.

In a turn of events the Japanese extended the war zone in South East Asia and carried out air raids close to the capital city of Colombo. No one knew about the targeted areas and the air raids sometimes reached the area around Kalapaluwawa.

Rene's "John Uncle" who lived close by had built an underground "bunker" close to his house to provide shelter for his family and relatives living close by when the planes flew across the plantations. It was during one such air raid that "John Uncle" had to catch and drag Lloyd, who was my eldest brother into the bunker when he saw him running across the field playing cat and mouse with an airplane piloted by the Japanese.

In one of these air raids the Angoda mental hospital that was close by was hit and destroyed for whatever reason and the inmates fled all over the villages creating all kinds of problems for the dwellers. These were turbulent times and no one in the villages around Colombo understood the reason for these extended air raids. The British defense forces entered the island in 1944 and the Royal Air Force (RAF) put a stop to the Japanese air raids. Japan started the withdrawal from South East Asia soon after. The British forces set up a camp in different parts of the capital city and its surroundings and one of the camps was set up close to the rice fields belonging to Pellengahawatte.

Rene continued with her engagement in social and cultural events in her home environment and in the church premises during these times. She was fond of music and dancing. She taught Enid the eldest child to play the piano at home and she practiced playing the piano during social gatherings at home. Not long after the British set up camp near the rice fields Rene met with the officers who came to Sinna Wana on a courtesy call. She extended her courtesy in turn by inviting them for afternoon tea and later on also for entertainment in the evenings at Sinna Wana. Dancing was introduced during the evening gatherings. The word spread that Rene was entertaining the English – suddas, as the Englishmen were called - to Sinna Wana and dancing together with them and always so close to one another. This was a non-accepted standard of social conduct in the village society. Basil was absent from these events, or if he was around, he was drunk and slept wherever.

The news spread among the villagers about the dancing and the near physical contact partners had with each other. As seen from the villagers' eyes the sudda was embracing Rene and the dance steps were seen as something more than moving across the hall to the tune of the piano music. And, for the villagers, this was seen as something far different to dancing. They thought otherwise; it was the not an appropriate social behaviour for the wife of the Hamu Mahattaya of their village to be seen "hugging a sudda". Ugly rumours about these events were passed on by word of mouth among the villagers. The Suddas were invited to Sinna Wana for social events during daytime and sometimes seen dancing in the evenings and, it was said that Rene was happy when entertaining them in her house.

Rumours are sometimes exaggerated and travels fast; this was the case with the fast circulating rumour that Rene maybe was interested in something more than entertaining the suddas to social events. Had she any other intentions? We will never know. She did not reveal any secrets if she had any to anyone. Basil never accepted the social events and the news that Rene was entertaining the suddas and seen dancing "cheek to cheek" and with possibilities for something more than that made him furious. What kind of discussion was going on between Rene and Basil about these extended social events was not known to anyone. As a grown up I was told that the one and only mistake Rene ever made in her lifetime was her decision to entertain the British to our home. She did so without the consent of Basil.

The villagers and the Mudalali were speaking about these events and it became a habit to gossip about Rene's behaviour at Sinna Wana among the villagers and to break the news to Basil on his way back home from work. In this type of situation word of mouth spreads fast and reaches almost all in the village as well as those in the nearby villages.

The Mudalali was an important source for spinning news across a wide spectrum of listeners and Basil came to rely more and more on the Mudalali for transmitting news and of seeking comfort about his thoughts especially his unfortunate decision to marry Rene considering her present conduct.

One late evening when the RAF officers were entertained to an evening party at Sinna Wana one of them was seen dancing with Rene. It was seen as if Rene was embracing the sudda when they moved across the floor. Suddenly, there was a loud noise. A gun had been fired. The officer who was dancing with Rene fell down and he died on the spot. No one knew who was responsible for the shooting. There were two stories that were told about this shooting incidence. The first was about another officer who shot the other because of jealousy of one against the other for planning to seduce Rene. The second story was that someone in the village who was protégé of Basil was recruited in planning of something that would put an end to the social behaviour of Rene. Whoever did the shooting, according to the second theory missed the target and killed the sudda who was dancing with Rene. A villager by the name of Mr. Appuhamy was said to be associated with this incident. He visited Basil at his home at 16/3 Kassapa Road now and again in the 1950s. What type of conversation took place between them during these visits will remain a secret for all times. Incidentally, Mr. Appuhamy's son was the owner of the village shop that I met in 1998 during my journey back to Kalapaluwawa.

The villagers were sympathetic to Basil. The behaviour of Rene was considered a disgrace to family life around Kalapaluwawa. In inviting the "suddas" when Basil was not at home was a signal, or a sign of infidelity on the part of Rene as the villagers said. The one thing it did, however, was to dramatically change her life settings and that of our family.

The scene directly after the shooting was that of shock and agony among all who witnessed the scene. This was an experience not like any other for Rene and also for her eldest child Enid, who were nearest to the scene of the "accident". It appears that no one had seen anyone moving around with a shotgun in and around the premises or running away from the premises after the shooting. I have no re-collections at all about what happened after the shooting. One thing is certain: It would have taken a long time for the police to arrive because of the distance to travel from Colombo to the place of the incidence. My guess is that the RAF officers took command of the situation in the immediate aftermath of the shooting until the police arrived.

The primary responsibility for the investigation was in the hands of the police. The police were not able to identify a suspect and the Wickremesinghe family representatives made it painfully clear that justice could not be done when there was no suspect who was viewed as accountable for the shooting incident. Closure of the case in judicial terms was made known after the final investigation in which it was said that there was no evidence beyond doubt for convicting anyone who could be identified with the shooting.

There are no records of casualties recorded by incident among the British armed forces archives during the two World Wars. Casualties by name and place is recorded in the historical files that are available on the website of the British armed forces. It would have been interesting to read the reports prepared by the commanding officer of the British troops about the probe; what were his conclusions, about the shooting incident, name of the victim and possible motives. I do not possess the name or identity of the casualty to go further.

People in the village knew each other and if any one of them owned or possessed a gun the villagers would have known about it. A non-resident could have carried out the shooting, but no one had seen an unfamiliar face moving around the house before or, after the shooting. It was evening and dark outside and that makes it easy for anyone to move around or to run up or down the village road without being identified. Had another RAF officer used his own weapon to shoot the other over a dispute? The dispute could have been about who was in love with whom and if both were vying with one another for drawing the attention of Rene or her daughter Enid? A servant in the house maybe, could have carried out the shooting on orders from Basil, who at that time was in a hospital for some kind of treatment, they said. How did he get hold of a gun and where did he go after the shooting? All this sounds more likely as a strong case for a detective like Mr. Hercule Poirot in Agatha Christie's novels to handle and resolve the mystery than for the police.

This extraordinary and sorrowful event brought to an end the marriage between Rene and Basil: she was separated from her children and was not allowed to meet them and he was given custody of the children. Rene was in fear of her life from there onwards. She was scared that Basil in the end would attempt to end her life in any way he could. Basil thought that Rene would now be more obliged to live with him in the way he thought was the correct way of living. That did not happen.

The Hebrew saying, "He who sows the wind will reap the whirlwind" describes very well the consequences, although of a different magnitude when the decision was made to entertain the British officers stationed in and around Kalapaluwawa to Sinna Wana. This decision came to haunt Rene forever. Was it something that she did with purpose for whatever reason she may have had in her mind or, the results of an unexpected and unplanned decision? We will never know.

She was active in organising social and charity events before her marriage, but that was in a completely different environment. She was young and it was among those whom she knew from the surroundings of her home and church. Now she was married and had an enlarged family with her husband and six children, of whom two were entering teenage.

The home was in turmoil after the shooting to put it mildly and no one in our family ever uttered about the incident thereafter. Enid was an eyewitness to whatever happened that evening as she was playing the piano as she always did during such gatherings at Sinna Wana. She was at an age that she could very well have remembered the details, but she never did mention a single word about this incident to any of her brothers and sisters. My mind is completely blank about this episode in our family life except for a few vague recollections about policemen or men in uniform in and around the compound of the house at that time.

Was the family divided after this incident? We will never know and those who knew something are no longer alive. I was just about five and would have been in a terrible state of mind about what was happening around me similar to the night when a burglar came into the bedroom and took the jewelry and cash from the almirah.

Rene and Basil did not share the same house any more. Who left first and second will not be known, but one other thing is safely known: Their trust has been violated for the last time and Rene had to move away from her ancestral home and live as far away as possible from Basil's reach.

A cousin wrote to me: I am glad you opened up the subject of the shooting. I did not want to hurt your feelings about the shooting. Your mom was giving a lavish party to the RAF officials. The party was going on till late in the night. Your father gave a contract to a gangster to kill your mother. When your mom was dancing with a young officer, he took aim, but missed your mom and the young man dancing with Rene was killed, instead. Your father and the gangster went free. It was very tragic. It shocked all of us.

A statement that can be given with a 100 % accuracy after this incidence was about uncle Walter Walpola from Walpola: The marriage broker did not live long enough to witness the tragic undoing of his one and only marriage brokering effort.

Break up of the family

The custody of the children was handed over to Basil with the exception of Enid, who opted to live with Rene primarily because she did not want to live with Basil. It was a chaotic situation. The Sinna Wana and Pellengahawatte were no more. All I remember about this time period is about moving from one place of shelter to another with Basil and my younger brother Tony together with the ayah.

Rene took Enid with her and moved into the YWCA living quarters in Colombo and lived in a single room. The mother daughter relationship was strong as ever.

Anne Lorage lived in the YWCA living quarters about this time as well. She was employed at the General Post Office (GPO). The 3 of them met during meals and became friends and talked about their life experiences. Anne celebrated her birthday anniversary at the YWCA in the same year they met. She had invited her close relatives and friends to celebrate her birthday anniversary. It was then that Anne introduced Rene and Enid to her cousin Charles and his wife Edna and explained to them about her friends who she said were in a desperate situation. They had gone through a terrible time and were alone and also frightened by the recent events that took place in their home in Kalapaluwawa. The Charles and Edna were living in Frances Road, Wellawatte close to the capital city of Colombo. The Lorage's were liberal in their thinking and spirits and they invited Rene and Enid to stay with them until they sorted things out.

Rene planned her departure for England in a few weeks time and it was now easier than before to go ahead with her travel planning. The Lorage's extended their friendship by inviting Enid to stay in their home for some time and at least until things were sorted out after Rene's departure.

Was Rene successful in obtaining a legal separation from Basil in 1946? I have no idea how she could have managed to get the divorce settlement if at all she did manage to get it. Maybe she had the backing and direction of my cousin Esmond, who was a lawyer by profession before he joined the Ceylon Daily News, or Charles Lorege. Looking at the passenger arrivals list on board the Atlantis her surname had not been changed.

She had sold her properties that were in her ownership. Part of the money from the sale was provided for her children as well as for her 2 aunts in the form of trust funds for each of them. The remaining part of the money she kept to herself. A lawyer was contracted to administer the trust funds. His task was to manage the trust funds that provided a secure income to the beneficiaries who were the rightful owners i.e. her children and two aunts. The lawyer did not manage the trust funds in the way Rene wanted to and he did not follow the content of the “will” of his client, either. Instead, he took care of the money himself. He ended up in jail for a short time period for cheating his client, but the children and the two aunts were left with absolutely nothing of the entrusted funds.

In the meantime, Enid was successful with her application for employment at the N.A.A.F.I shop – a shop exclusively catering to the needs of servicemen in the British armed forces stationed in the country. I have no idea as to how she came into contact with her employer. Maybe it was during their stay at the YWCA and through friends of Anne Lorage. By then it was also clear that she had met her own future husband; Glenville Kemps a senior staff member in the shop in which she found employment with.

The preparations for Rene’s departure were made with the help of the Lorege’s. She had to leave for the Colombo harbour in time for embarking the Royal Mail ocean liner Atlantis bound for Southampton. She was afraid that Basil would organise dis-order at the harbour and prevent her from entering and boarding the ship.

Glenville Kemps was briefed about the situation that Rene was facing and the possible threat of Basil entering the harbour to prevent her from leaving the country. Glenville brought with him his brothers and sisters as well as all of his friends to the harbour entrance and there Charles Winter who was a close relative of the Lorege’s met them. Charles Winter operated the cranes that were used for unloading and uploading of goods from the cargo ships at the Colombo harbour. He had negotiated with the management staff of the port authorities and obtained a permit for friends and relations of Rene to accompany her along the gangplank to the passenger entrance of the ship and bid her bon voyage. The normal point of saying bon voyage to passengers was at the entrance to the gangplank. The procedure was for passengers to walk along the gangway and then enter the ship. The arrangement for escorting Rene to the ship entrance was an exception to the existing procedure. Rene was dressed in trouser and coat - a suit like dress - to make her look like a man at least from a distance. This was intended to prevent Basil and his friends from identifying Rene from wherever and for whatever reason he may have thought about. Basil arrived at the harbour with some friends, and for whatever purpose he held in his mind. He was outnumbered and Rene was safely escorted to the ship entrance and able to depart without a further incident.

Rene was leaving for England forever without having embraced and said goodbye to her children. A return ticket had not been purchased. She climbed up the stairs and walked along the gangway to the entrance of the ship. Only those who followed her in those last few steps were able to say a final goodbye to Rene.

She had no contacts with anyone in England other than an address shown in the passenger arrivals list; “Eldon Lodge”, Cookridge, Leeds, Yorkshire. Could this have been the address of a foreign associate she met in Kalapaluwawa? The “Eldon Lodge” in Cookridge is no longer on the postal services address register of houses and we will never know the answer. She boarded the ship not knowing what to expect on her arrival in Southampton, 14th August 1946.

At that time it was extraordinary for a woman of her age, or for that matter for any woman of any age from Ceylon to travel alone on board a ship bound for England. Travel to England during these times was confined to the famous and leading families in achieving political objectives here at home after visiting England, or for their children to pursue further studies in England and to find high ranking employment opportunities on their return home. Rene was not pursuing this option and she knew that departure was for good and no return was planned.

As she boarded the ship and looked back towards the jetty, her thoughts were about the family life in Kalapaluwawa with her parents and the Amerasinghe’s as well as the Pellengahawatte plantation and the house on the hill Sinna Wana. They were no more. Her heritage was destroyed and no longer in her mind at least at this moment of time on the last day of life in the country of her birth. Her marriage to Basil Oscar and the life they spent together was no longer on her mind. She was thinking about her children not knowing how to provide comfort to them. She thought about how she conceived them all one by one in her own womb and then delivered them to the world in which they grew up. They were to grow up without her guidance and not knowing who she was for the four youngest and a troublesome memory for the two eldest.

Enid was the eldest child and she had just about finished her school going at Ladies College. School education was until the school leaving age of around 15 to 16 years of age. She was a good at playing Jazz music on the piano. At home, she played the piano and her favourite piece was “In the mood”. Rene encouraged Enid to develop her talents for music and singing during after school hours. Now, Enid was to be left alone, she was to be taken care off under the guiding hand of the Lorege’s and thereafter by Glenville’s mother until she married and settled down with her husband.

Lloyd was all by himself and was never able to reconcile himself with either Basil or Rene. He had no close contacts with his brothers and sisters. Basil had not followed up with the enrollment procedure required for Lloyd to gain entrance to a school as required for the male youngsters reaching school age. The longer Lloyd stayed away from this procedure the more difficult it was for him to gain enrollment. I have no recollections whatsoever about Lloyd during the immediate aftermath of the tragedy and family seperation. He would have witnessed the tragedy unfolding and the shooting that ended family life. He never ever mentioned one word that was negative about the family or the environment we were living in Kalapaluwawa when I met him a long time thereafter.

Malin was enrolled first at Wesley College and then at the Royal College boarding school in Bandarewala, which was the boarding school branch of the main college in Colombo and travelled to the home of Uncle Arthur (Basil’s brother) during the holidays where he joined the company of his cousin Sirimal who was about the same age as Malin. He was fortunate to avoid seeing the turbulence and upheavals back home in Kalapaluwawa and the breakup thereafter.

I have no recollections about my sister Ranjini before the break up of the family. I only know that she was enrolled at Methodist College a famous girls school in Colombo. She lived in the school boarding home at Methodist College until she obtained the School Leaving Certificate. Basil's brother Arthur paid her school fees together with contributions from his other brothers.

Tony and I were in the custody of Basil and we moved from one place of residence to another. Ayah followed us all the time. The places we stayed in were not the most comfortable of places to live in. I remember only a few incidences such as a huge rat entering the lavatory in the place we lived through the sewage system, Basil being taken care by the local police and sent back to his "home" wherever that was in a rickshaw after he was found drunk and unable to find his way out of some place.

I was enrolled in 6 different schools during the years 1945 – 1948 starting at Wesley College and then ending at St. Claires. Kollupitiya and, thereafter, at St. Johns College, Nugegoda - for what reason or reasons we will never know.

Tony was too young to start school and when he did so it was from 16/3 Kassapa Road. He was enrolled at Royal College.

Her life after the break up

She was about 35 years of age and the mother of six and as attractive as any of her age. She was travelling alone. Had she a purpose in visiting a foreign country? Was she thinking of meeting the "sudda" or any other? She left no message and we will never know the answer.

The property in her ownership was already sold and there was no jewellery in her possession that she could sell. She took whatever she thought was needed for payment during this journey as well for the payment for her stay in Great Britain during the first weeks and months of her stay. The rest was left for her children and the two aunts. She was planning to get employment and manage her living with the salary she expected to earn from employment.

She was scared of Basil and she had in her mind the thought that Basil could do whatever he could do to end her life. After all the shooting of her dancing partner was a reminder of what could have happened to her and this was fresh in her mind.

This was a journey that was going to take her to a different place that was different to her home environment in Kalapaluwawa. Will she ever again ride in the wheeled bullock cart to visit her relatives living close by? Did she think about the past? We will never know.

Rene had to find secure a safe surrounding to live in and in a far off place that involved travel on board the Atlantis and travel across the oceans. The ship was recently converted into a hospital ship and maybe there were wounded soldiers who were on their way back home. Did she think of ever again coming back to the country of her birth? Meeting her children and the children of their children? No, her thoughts were of getting as far as possible from Basil. She was getting accustomed to the thought of travelling to England.

She knew about the rupees and cents of Ceylon, but nothing about the pounds and shillings that were used in England. The feet and yards that were used to measure length and the pounds and ounces to measure weight were the same at home and in England because they were the same although she had never used these measurement rods in her home environment. There were local scales for measuring distance and weight. She was leaving a country where the sun kept you warm all throughout the day when it was not raining, and dreary as ever in the nights. She was going to live in a country that was warm only during a short summer period of about 4 months and cold in the long winter period of about 8 months in the year. In the autumn the leaves fell off the trees and the trees woke up again in the spring of the next year with new leaves and the new flowers.

On board the ocean liner many of the fellow passengers would have discovered her presence as an attractive, good-looking lady for her age. Two of her fellow passengers in the adjoining cabin were a Baptist minister and his wife. Sometimes they were together at the same dinner table and at times she was alone. Most of the time she was alone at the social events organized for the comfort and entertainment of the passengers in the evenings. Did she come to the ballroom in the evenings in order to look at the dancing couples and did she get an invitation to dance? She was fond of dancing and in coordinating social events and entertaining visitors at her home in Kalapaluwawa. She could very well have been the envy of her fellow female travellers for the attraction she created in being good looking and being alone. Maybe, there were male travellers who surrounded her as they came to the dinner table seeking her company as a friend and companion. Some may have had other ideas.

She was neither famous nor as wealthy as some of her fellow travellers on board the ocean liner. Some passengers made the journey back and forth every year and others now and again during different times of the year.

The journey was long and sometimes boring, the sea breeze was refreshing as well as boring to experience it day in and day out until the ship approached a harbour for the stopover planned according to the pre-arranged travel schedule. Passengers who were disembarking, said good-bye to fellow passengers as they left the ship on arrival at their final destination. It was a stopover for some to leave and others to come on board for the onward journey to Southampton. Newcomers were always welcomed aboard the ship as was the custom of saying goodbye to those who left the ship.

Rene was one of the first female members of the Wickremesinghe and Amerasinghe family that left the country of her birth. She was in search of a new beginning in England - the rich and mighty colonial power, the Raj as the Indian community called this all-powerful colonial power of the times. Rene was strong in her feeling and believing that this journey was, perhaps the best option for her for the rest of her lifetime. It was far from the comfortable manner of living to which she was accustomed to before her marriage to Basil.

How she managed to travel from the port of arrival in Southampton to Cooksridge or to London will remain a mystery. What I do know is that she eventually arrived London and found accommodation in Hammersmith. It was an entirely different atmosphere, socially and economically compared to the way of living back home. The city of London was recovering from the damages of the Second World War. She had seen and supported the settlement of British officers in and around the property in Kalapaluwawa and knew how the camps looked like. She entertained the soldiers and officers so that they could sense that they were wanted in the country.

Maybe she was looking for possible contacts with acquaintances of that time now living in London. Maybe, she thought so. We will never know. She searched for the YWCA and there found herself boarding facilities and considered this to be her home as it was in Colombo soon after the break up of her marriage with Basil. She had no relatives or friends in London. Everything was new and the social customs of the English were so very different than the Ceylonese way of living. The English breakfast, lunch and dinner servings were so very different to the food she was used to. The sanitary conditions associated with western civilization were a complete turn around from what she was used to. She had also to find work to earn a salary and pay for her living in England.

Rene was enjoying her new won freedom that was free from fear and harassment of Basil. She now had new friends and some of the opposite sex. She enjoyed the social evenings out and dancing on Saturday afternoons in the tea houses in London. For her it was like coming to a new world.

It was during a Saturday afternoon dancing that she met James (Jim) Henry Rufuus Clark who was tall and good-looking. He was compassionate and she loved being with him during the dancing afternoons. Based on her own feelings about the right type of man with whom she would once again share her life with the choice of a new husband was Jim. He was 3 years older than her. They both lived in Hammersmith.

A re-union of a different kind was in the making when Charles and Edna Lorege visited London sometime during the period 1948 – 1949. He was on a government sponsored study tour to find ways of organising higher education in Sri Lanka in compliance (mutual recognition) with the quality standards of counterpart universities in England. Charles was at that time the Deputy Director or, Director of Education in Ceylon.

They met Rene and she introduced Jim, her fiancé. This was a re-union of genuine friends and much more because it was a pleasant environment far away from fear of harassment from her former husband. What more can be expected when good friends meet? In the presence of Charles and Edna they were married. It was the second marriage for both of them. The marriage was in 1949 when they were living in Hammersmith.

The Lorege's moved permanently to London in 1956 after Charles retirement from the government services. And, shortly thereafter, and unexpectedly Charles passed away. Rene and Jim moved to the apartment of Edna as paying guests and lived for some time.

Later on Rene and Jim moved from London to Isle of Wight. He had found work as a male nurse in the hospital and Rene settled down to a housewife's role. She learned how to garden and prepare the food in the English way. It was so very different, yet more exciting than her experiences in Kalapaluwawa.

Children's life after the break up

Those early years after the break up of the family were traumatic for the children. Enid was with Rene all the time until her departure for England. Whatever happened to Lloyd no one knew. Malin was enrolled at the Royal College boarding school in Bandarawella and Ranjini was enrolled at the Methodist college boarding school.

Basil moved around from one place of shelter to another with his 2 youngest kids, Brian and Tony and Haminonah (ayah) who looked after the three of us. What was the agreement between Basil and the ayah? Looking back it is difficult to understand how Basil could have communicated with her with any degree of certainty because of the language barrier. Basil learned the Sinhala language as a secondary language in school. English was his mother tongue as he grew up in his home in Wellawatte. English was the "adopted" mother tongue of the well to do in the colonial times. His knowledge of Sinhalese was sufficient to convey a message and a slight conversation and no more.

Haminonah followed Basil wherever he lived. Haminonah never made a distinction between her fondness and love for Basil and the fondness and love in caring for the children of Rene and Basil. She had no education and grew up in a home that did not know what school enrollment was all about and without the slightest knowledge about knowing what guidance was for her entry into the age of maturity. She like all others of her background found achievement to be confined to looking after the children of the more fortunate citizens of her country in whatever way that was needed. The exchange of services was for food and lodging and for a few fortunate of them some cash at the end of each month. Termination of work for whatever reason was also the uncertain outcome if things went badly for the family that employed her.

How she secured entry into Sinna Wana I do not know. This could have been through friends and relatives who were supportive of her finding work at Sinna Wana or in a nearby well to do family home. I cannot remember her or any of the other maids and male servants who were engaged in household work at Sinna Wana.

At some point of time during this period of uncertainty Basil was able to move into one of the houses that was left vacant at one end of the “Joseph Fraser” property. The ownership of the “Joseph Fraser” property was in his hands. This was the dowry Rene brought with her to her new family formation. The transfer of ownership was completed a short time after his marriage. That is what I was told by a relative of ours in the late 1990s.

As was the custom of the times, tenants who had been living in a house for considerable periods of time without knowing who the true owner was able to continue staying in the premises without paying rent. The legal basis for this type of tenure was the period that was considered as “continuous stay” and proof of their living over the period “continuous stay”. It was not an easy task to evict tenants under such circumstances and a settlement had to be reached. Basil had to come to an agreement with the tenants and this was done in one-way or another and the outcome was that Tony and I were finally able to live in a decent house with Basil and Haminonah for some time to come but not more. The postal address was no. 9 Tannery Path.

Then, soon thereafter we had to move out of no. 9 Tannery Path and into a temporary shelter that was constructed with mud walls and coconut leaves covering the roof. For what reason we will never know.

At the other end of the “Joseph Fraser” Property there was another house and it was believed that it was the owner who lived in the house. How this was possible we will never know. The remaining part of the “Joseph Fraser” was open landscape and barren.

The legal boundaries of the “Joseph Fraser” as well as ownership of the two houses within the property were disputed by the tenants as well as by Basil. The two families settled the ownership question of the houses, including the proper boundaries of their plots (properties) through some kind of a mutual agreement with Basil. In what way the agreement was finally patched up is not known. The rest of the “Joseph Fraser” Property remained firmly under the ownership of Basil and with clear boundary lines.

At a later time point the property was demarcated and one plot of land was passed on to my eldest sister Enid on which a house was to be built for her and her family (Kemps) at some future time point. Another plot of land was handed over to my elder brother Malin. Two new houses were to be built on what was remaining of the Property. The financial conditionality for the construction of these 2 new houses were as follows: The first house together with the plot of land on which the house was to be built was sold and the buyer agreed to make advance payment for the land ownership and construction of the new house. The payment in advance enabled Basil to finance the construction of not only of this new house, but also his own in the adjoining plot. The second house was built on completion of the first. The two houses were similar to one another in shape and size. The first house had a slight outward difference of the front walls compared to the second. Basil, Haminonah, Tony and I moved into the newly built second house identified by the postal address no. 16/3 Kassapa Road, Colombo 5. The road leading to the property was only a footpath at that time. The road by car and bullock cart was from another direction and was alongside a wall that was bordering the “Joseph Fraser” Nursing home.

Enid married Glenville Kemps in 1947 and they settled down at in the Kemps family home not far from no. 16/3 Kassapa Road. The Kemps family of 3 brothers lived in the same house together with their spouses and their mother who had lost her husband.

A few years after her marriage Enid and her husband Glenville moved to their newly built house on the plot of land they now owned in the “Joseph Fraser“ property.

Some years later, Malin sold his property rights to the plot of land he owned.

Mistress in waiting and her family

From the time of the family break up and until mid 1960 I grew up with my brother Tony and my father together with Haminonah. She was totally committed to him and no other. Her name was written as G.L.D Haminonah. The initials G.L.D begins with the surname of her father followed by the initials of her usual names. She was one of the servants, ayah or nanny who was employed as so many others at Sinna Wana. She was young, beautiful and attractive as well as desirable and without having any demands for her own gains. She had not gone to school and could not read or write. As was the customs of the time young girls and boys from the rural areas searched for employment with the better off in the more urbanised areas. Job seeking was by word of mouth type of request from someone to another and then conveyed to the chief occupant of the village. It was considered to be a giant step forward to gain experience of working in the Mahagedera no matter what the terms of payments were.

Haminonah was the perfect female to match the sexual desires of a well to do Hamu Mahattaya who was fond of drinking alcohol. There was nothing unusual about this if the relationship was kept discreet as in most families among the well to do. The practice of infidelity was a common practice among his brothers, but they did so discretely. There was not much communication between Basil and Ayah other than the pursuit of happiness in sexual intercourse. Basil had her attention dating back to his adventures in the servant's quarters in Kalapaluwawa. He did not use condoms because there were none and they were not known during those days. How Basil managed to avoid making Ayah pregnant during these early days is something that no one understood except perhaps Basil himself, who had learnt the art of checking out on time or even before the start.

I never understood until around the age of 14 that Haminonah was also his mistress. It was when I saw Basil get up from his bed in the middle of the night and slowly walked away towards the adjoining room. There were no doors separating the rooms in the house we were living. I heard the excitement and enjoyment of sex and the whispering voice about the path she wanted him to feel her and the excitement about the sexual act between them. I was afraid of being detected by Basil on his way back to his own bed in our room. It was dark. He would not have seen me awake or me pretending to be asleep. He just walked across and crept into his bed. She was not employed under a contract or paid a salary, but she continued to perform her duties as our maid and his mistress. Why she followed us for so long and throughout this awful journey of moving from one place to another with him and looking after his 2 children was strange and no one ever raised this query. It is puzzling when I think about it because she could never have had any pleasure living with Basil other than the sexual excitement she experienced with the Hamu Mahattaya. She had also other duties to be performed such as cooking food and looking after my brother Tony and myself. He was not quite sober during most of his leisure time and there was no leisure time conversation whatsoever that took place between them either. I would guess that the pleasure of sharing life with Basil would not have been attractive if she had an alternative choice of employment. In bygone days there were few or no opportunities of employment for making a living for those who came from the rural areas and with no school education. Living with Basil was far more attractive compared to whatever other option that was available for a better living and raising her own family.

She organised the purchase of groceries and prepared the food that was put on the table. Payment for the daily purchases were made was not made until the end of the month. How she managed the payment is something that I never understood.

When she had served the food that was prepared, she went back into the kitchen area and remained there until all of us had finished eating whatever was served. Cleanliness was not on the agenda.

She also washed our clothes and there were always the washed clothes to put on when going to school and after coming back from school although there was not many to choose from.

As far as I remember there was no conversation between both of them on any subjects other than the night time adventures.

She had character and mutual sense of honest conduct. She remained in the background or more accurately in the kitchen area and never made any attempts to come forward when Basil's relations or friends came to visit us at our home at no. 16/3 Kassapa Road. She was well aware of her place in the house and drew an "invisible" boundary line that functioned like a curtain drawn across the house to mark the area beyond which was off limits to her and for us.

Amme had drawn the demarcation line in the home. Her family members never crossed this boundary line. Basil rarely moved across and remained most of the time on the right side boundary line. My brother Tony and I moved across as and when required and not more.

As time flew by Ayah gradually became Ayah Amme and then Amme. She gave birth to two children and they grew up in her care. She enforced the same rules of conduct for her children as for herself about the demarcation line she had drawn in sharing her life with Basil.

One thing is absolutely clear and that is Basil never held these two children in his arms or talked to them. They grew up on their side of the demarcation line and the two children were never ever introduced to Basil's relatives when they came on visits to our home. Neither did they follow us when we visited Basil's relatives during the traditional Christmas visits, wedding and birthday party celebrations.

Amme cared for the children of Rene and Basil like her own in providing the food and clothing in whatever way it was possible. She understood the basic needs of extending her protective arm around them and this she did with kindness and grace. Her protective arm was there to prevent harm on them in the best manner she could. This much she was able to provide. She was not able to provide guidance about what is wrong and what is right when Tony and I were growing up into manhood or about school attendance and education because she had none herself. There was no discussion with Basil about consent because there were no ongoing conversations with Basil on anything other than what he desired most. The language was a barrier in preventing a meaningful conversation between both of them, but then there was nothing more to it than that. The language was a barrier in communicating with her for both Tony and myself, but we managed to make ourselves understood with her and she with us.

Amme would have taken care of Lloyd and brought him close to all of us if that was possible. It was not an easy task for her because she could not communicate adequately with him. He was entering his teenage and longing for the love and guardianship of his father and mother, he did not get any. He opted to stay away from us all and how he managed to do so is something I never understood or will ever know.

The parents of Amme had separated. Her mother came to visit her daughter at 16/3 Kassapa Road and then lived in our house from time to time. She helped in the kitchen and no more. Amme's father had re-married. He came and visited his daughter and lived in our house from time to time.

She had three brothers and one of them had secured a job at the Public Works Department through recommendation from my father. He visited his sister now and again and then returned to his home wherever that was. Her second brother was doing all kinds of odd jobs and he visited her now and again. Her youngest brother had moved into our home like her mother. He was employed somewhere. He stayed in the kitchen area.

One day I read in the newspaper that her father was the lottery winner of the "Galle Gymkhana". It was splashed across the first page with a picture of him. He had bought the top prizewinning ticket (number) in the national lottery draw. The reward (jack pot) was a huge amount of money. Things had changed overnight for him and his family and a sure sign of this change was seen in the new clothes he was wearing. The change was all of a sudden and like all winners of the lottery he bought and put on new clothes and had purchased a new and decent house to live in with his second wife and their three children. Like all lottery winners' things change the opposite way as speedily as the winning draw. After about 1 - 2 years all the new riches had simply vanished. The winning money had been spent and nothing was left over and he was alone now without his second wife and their three children. It is one thing to win a lottery top prize and another to manage the newly won money. As far as I know there have been no winners in any country who have been successful in the task of managing newly won lottery rewards because they did not possess a natural endowment for such tasks and this is primarily due to a lack of education and training.

Her father was more or less in a desperate situation now, and he came to visit us now and again and then slowly began to settle down into our household. It was a terrible tragedy to see him moving around in the garden, sleeping under the tree in the backyard and using any open space as his toilette. We had to clean up and that was it. We got rid of him and how that was done remains also a mystery as with a few other visitors who came to visit Amme and then attempted to move in permanently before eviction.

The youngest of her brothers got married and moved to his bride's house. And, then in comes his brother-in-law to visit us now and again and then to stay overnight in our home. Then he came every evening and stayed overnight and went to his workplace in the morning, wherever that was. Amme prepared and invited him for dinner and breakfast. He was crossing the demarcation line like no other in her family. This continued for some time and in desperation I called on Malin to intervene to get him out of the house. It was not easy. We succeeded in the end. Did Amme understand why?

Her second brother was practicing all sorts of odd tasks and he visited us now and again. Like all of her brothers, he had no education whatsoever. One day when I was bathing with water drawn from the well (we had no tap water inside our home at that time) when he suddenly turned up behind me and started to hug me from behind. At first I thought he was scrubbing my back and then Amme saw something else happening from wherever and came running and started screaming at him to get away. He was attempting to abuse me sexually and she saw this was going to happen.

Along the road I walked each day to reach the bus halt to travel to school in Nugegoda and back, an elderly man living in a house along the road followed me. I had no idea why he did so. One day Amme saw this man attempting to talk with me as he followed me home. She came out and shouted at him to get away from me. Amme's action was similar to that of a loyal mother. She understood more than me this man's intentions whatever it was and she intervened resolutely.

Achieving one's own happiness

Rene disappeared without forever having the chance to say bye-bye to her children. The three youngest of her children would not have understood for what reason or why she would hug and say bye-bye if she had been able to do so. They were too young to understand all this mess. Her three eldest children understood the tragedy of it all and that Rene and Basil had in fact gone their own way.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s the three youngest children received Christmas gifts from Rene through relatives of her coming back to Sri Lanka from England or delivered by the postal services. Thereafter, no more was heard from her.

The stories told to the children was that Rene fell in love with an Englishman – a sudda as the villagers called the Englishman - and then decided to leave Basil and the children and she ran away with him to live in England. The three youngest children were fully convinced that this was the absolute and nothing but the truth. They heard it so many times and over and over again “Rene did not care for Basil and their children. She ran away with the sudda”. Poor Basil they said and Basil had now to care for the children. He was not prepared for this task, but was fortunate in having Haminonah to take care of them in whatever way she could. The three elder children knew the truth, but they never discussed the family break up with the younger ones for whatever reason. Possibly they were scared of Basil for speaking about their mother and in this way remaining out of harm's way. After all Rene was not around anymore and even if was she could do nothing to prevent the children from coming in harm's way.

Enid had a few photographs of Rene in her home in her almirah. She showed them to the three youngest children once in a rare show of compassion - sharing with us her sorrow and feeling about our mother who was now living in England. She was explaining to us who Rene was and that she hoped to join her sometime in the future at least during a brief visit to England. Enid had been 15 or 16 years of age when the marriage ended. Mother and daughter both enjoyed each other's company. Enid was interested in music and reading just like Rene. Enid had just completed her school education at Ladies College in Colombo, which was a famous school for girls in Sri Lanka when the family broke up. She was about the same age as Rene was when her father died and the family was contemplating in getting her married instead of continuing with higher education. Some relatives who knew them well told me that both of them were more like friends than mother and daughter,

Enid married Glenville in February 1947. She left the home of the Lorege's together with Basil, who escorted her to the church and to the alter and then "handing her over" to her husband to be as was the custom of the time among the Baptist and Anglican community. It was here that Basil showed a rare show of compassion with his eldest child.

Malin attended Royal College boarding school in Bandarawella with the encouragement and help of Basil's brother Arthur. During the holidays he came to the home of Arthur and stayed there in the company of his son Sirimal. They were about the same age. I have no re-collections of Malin and his whereabouts until I met him again at no. 16/3 Kassapa Road and that was when I was about 15 years of age. When Malin had completed his school leaving examinations he recruited as a produce broker by John Keells, a business house specialising in tea, rubber and raw materials brokerage. He became a successful produce broker and later on established his own successful business house.

Ranjini was enrolled at the Methodist College as a day student at first and then soon thereafter as a boarding school pupil. Basil's brother Arthur paid most part of her school fees and the other brothers made their own contributions that enabled Ranjini to continue her attendance until the school leaving age. At the beginning and this was when the family split up; she continued to remain in the boarding school during the holiday periods because she had no home to come to. She was very good at sports and captained the college netball team. She did well in school examinations. My recollections of her during this period of time was when I had to accompany her from the boarding school to our home at 16/3 Kassapa Road and back during selected weekends and longer breaks. When she left school she secured employment as a cardiograph technician at the General Hospital in Colombo.

Tony and I lived with Basil and Amme after moving around and then moving into the newly built house at 16/3 Kassapa Road. It was to this home that I had to accompany Ranjini during weekends from the Methodist College boarding school. It was the home that Malin visited now and again from where he was living. He never lived at 16/3 Kassapa Road.

Later on Tony was enrolled at the Royal College with the recommendations from Basil's relatives and Malin's previous attendance record. He continued his studies and was successful in the entrance examinations for pursuing studies at the Medical College. Tony graduated and completed his obligatory practice of his profession in the different hospitals in and outside of Colombo. Not long after he obtained a scholarship to pursue further studies and practice in the USA.

Basil married Haminonah

In the meantime Basil had recovered from his stroke and was partially paralyzed and unable to talk. He accepted the outcome and was either not aware of what was happening around him or simply unable to make decisions in one-way or another.

At one point our neighbour and the owner of the first house moved away from Colombo and rented the house to three new tenants who shared the premises on a common basis. One of them was Mr. Ratnayake who always had a smile and offered encouragement for all of us. Although he had never met Rene he understood that she had departed for England, leaving their children in the hands of their father. He knew that Basil was living with Amme and that they had two children. He told us that we would find ourselves without a secure source of income if Basil would pass away and recommended that we should get Basil and Amme married to enable the state pension transfer from husband to wife to function without a break. It was all the more important now because Basil was paralysed after the stroke and hardly able to say any words that anyone could understand. The immediate risk was that he would pass away any time soon.

The procedure for registering the marriage was not easy because Amme could not read or write. Submission of the application for pension for Amme in the event of Basil passing away was not an easy task. She had no knowledge of her date of birth, place of birth and the name of her mother and was not able to sign the form that had to be filled in because she had never written a word on paper before.

The only way out was for me to fill in the answers as best as I could and then get the “thumbs fingerprint” as signature identity with ink as they do in the villages. This was also done with the active backing of the staffers at the Ministry of Finance. They understood my concerns and searched for a way of resolving the problem of a signature for Haminonah. She accompanied me to the Ministry and with the help of the staffers filled in and “signed” the required forms. The marriage was registered and payment of the monthly state pension after Basil’s death in 1958 was sent to Haminonah.

I am most grateful to Mr. Ratnayake not only for his recommendation, but more so because he spoke to us with respect and was always helpful in whatever manner he could.

Some events take a lifetime to reveal their influence.

A life is stolen

The responsibility for enrollment in schools was gender based; the father had the responsibility for enrollment of the boys and the mother for enrollment of the girls. It was not always that easy to find a school that was nearby to the home and affordable for the parents as well as one that could provide a good school education for the children. It is in the classroom that the upward climb to maturity begins for all children. Basil should have known and understood this requirement because he more than any other should have taken the responsibility for school registration for Lloyd, and he could not enroll by himself. Rene took care of the enrollment and school attendance for Enid. Lloyd was growing up without a regular school attendance. There is very little I know how he felt or what he could do by himself. I had very little contact with my elder brother and cannot remember him playing with me either.

Lloyd was a joyful boy and always in a playful mood said his cousins who were the same age and who played with him when they were young. After the break up no one knew where Lloyd was or what he was doing. All I remember from this time was that in the late 1940s and early 1950s Lloyd visited the house we stayed in at no. 9 Tannery Path in the “Joseph Fraser”. He came on a borrowed motorcycle. He was not welcomed for whatever reason and go away was the message conveyed to him. Tony and I only saw him from behind a door in the house we lived in. A few years later we told that Lloyd had left the country and went to London in the same way as Rene. The story was told that he went in search of Rene and took her side in the separation between Rene and Basil.

We had the impression that he was lucky to have left the country and had reconciled himself with his mother Rene.

A few years later we received black and white pictures from Lloyd together with his wife Phyllis and their only child David who was a year old at that time. The picture was taken in front of Phyllis parent's home. He had met an English girl whom he fell in love with and they were happily married. We were told that her name was Phyllys. Shortly after their marriage they became parents of a newborn child.

The child had come as a surprise because the birth was not planned. Contraceptives were not commonly known or used intensively and widely then as now. The expected outcome of experimental love was childbirth. The child was well looked after by Phyllis parents who cared for the child during the first 1 - 2 years.

In England, Lloyd had difficulty in keeping a job. This was after all in the mid 1950s and immediately after the Second World War. London was recovering from the war damages and employment opportunities were not plentiful. Lloyd had difficulty in getting employment and there was no source of income to support his family home and the expected result of such a situation was separation from each other. Phyllis had to find a home for the care and upbringing of their child. Lloyd was left to himself once again and this time in a foreign country so very different to Sri Lanka.

My cousin Lakshman in the meantime had chosen to be a priest in the Anglican Church of Ceylon. He practiced as a priest after gaining his ordainment in Sri Lanka and then left for England to practice his faith as well as the social duties of priesthood in an Anglican church in the Borough of Poplar in London. He wrote back to his mother and sister to convey the message to Basil that he had met Lloyd and he visited him in Poplar, that Lloyd was married and was the father of a newborn son. The family life was fine and that he was getting on well with his family. There was no mention of Lloyd meeting Rene.

The only problem was that all was not well with Lloyd in London.

Lloyd met with the "social workers" of the church that Lakshman was engaged in and Lloyd has been in contact with them regularly as explained in the letters from Lakshman to his mother and sister. Later on and towards the late 1990s, when I met the social workers in the church administrative area in Poplar I was informed by them that these visits by Lloyd were for reasons other than those conveyed to us in the letters Lakshman wrote to his family back home in Sri Lanka.

In the mid 1950's Lakshman's brother and my Godfather Esmond sent word that Lloyd was returning home to our home because he experienced problems with his health and was depressed. Basil and I went to the arrival pier at the Colombo harbour to greet him and welcome him back to the country of his birth. Lloyd was shy and almost afraid of his fellow passengers if I remembered the situation correctly. We met him and brought him to our home at 16/3 Kassapa Road. We were now 5 who lived in this house: Basil, Lloyd, Brian, Tony and Haminonah.

Lloyd spoke about the customs and manner of life in England during his stay at 16/3 Kassapa Road. There were shops that were specialized for tobacco and medicine and about the English currency system of pounds, shillings and pence. I do not recollect more and I guess my mind blocks all unpleasant episodes here as well.

My brother Malin was scared of Lloyd. He was scared that Lloyd would access his bank accounts (assets) and remove whatever was available for withdrawal. This was the way Malin thought about his elder brother Lloyd for whatever reason and I never ever understood why Malin thought about his elder brother in this way. Maybe it was because Malin could not accept the fact that he did have an elder brother?

Lloyd had witnessed the disastrous direction in the way Basil behaved when he got home and the agony of Rene not being capable to control the outcomes of his drunkenness and sexual conduct. He never spoke about these issues or, about meeting Rene or, about his wife and child when he stayed with us at 16/3 Kassapa Road. It was strange when I think about it now.

Now, in comes Lakshman again into the picture to inform us this time to get Lloyd into the care of a psychiatrist. Also, that Lakshman had the answer. He had organised a way to get Lloyd into the care of a psychiatrist. Together with Malin they took Lloyd for consultation with the psychiatrist. He was to be given "shock treatment" similar to the kind that is administered to some patients in the hope of getting them cured after the "shock treatment". We were all involved in getting Lloyd to meet the psychiatrist without knowing what this was all about except the fact that this was a cure that will give Lloyd the medication he so seriously needed to regain his health. But this was a hospital in Angoda for mental patients not for those in need of psychiatric treatment. I did not understand the idea about the visit. He was left there and we all went back home to 16/3 Kassapa Road.

A few months later Lakshman told us that Lloyd had managed to come out from the hospital and was on his way back to London on board an ocean liner. He was in a depressive state and could not find the comfort of close relatives when he so badly needed them. The end came in 1959 when Lloyd swallowed a large dose of aspirins to end his life in the streets of London. That was the statement given by the medical examiner in the death certificate. It was in 1959 at the age of 28. The autopsy was conducted and the body was shown to Edna Lorage for identification.

After a few weeks of Lloyd's disappearance my cousin Esmond called us to come to his house. Malin and I went to meet Esmond, who told us the sad news that Lloyd had died and that he was prepared to make arrangements for the cremation and to send his ashes to Colombo for burial. His ashes arrived and were then laid to rest beside his father's grave at the General cemetery in Colombo. This was in 1959.

Lloyd was the only child of Rene and Basil, who never got a fair chance of reconciliation with his parents or brothers and sisters. In growing up from being a youngster to manhood the feeling was that his family had abandoned him. There was no father in the picture in front of him and no caring mother to pull him close. He left the country of his birth and travelled to London in the beginning of the 1950s. Was he searching for his mother as a last resort? We will never know.

Rene never wanted to care for or meet Lloyd. It could very well have been an opportunity for Rene to take care of Lloyd who was in need of care and love. This did not happen. She was not capable of providing the comfort and care he so badly needed. Rene did not have sufficient funds for doing so either. In seeing Lloyd she may have been reminded of the dangerous way in which Basil exercised his sexual desires and the results thereof. We will not know the answer.

Rene was never able to reconcile herself with any of her children. That much I know from my recollections of family life and in meeting with my mother. She never spoke about Lloyd with me and never was able to reconcile herself with Lloyd for whatever reason. Rene was never able to provide any form of guidance or support for Lloyd throughout his lifetime from childhood to manhood. Not even in London. And, Lloyd died in London in 1959. She did not attend the cremation.

Brian became a man as well

The environment within and outside of 16/3 Kassapa Road was all but encouraging. I was not able to enroll in a normal school because the entrance age limit for enrollment had not been followed through, maybe because we had no permanent residence. The alternative was to attend St. Clares in Kollupitiya but I had now passed that age limit for enrollment. The financial situation at home did not allow much of a choice either. I gained admission to St Johns College, Nugegoda with the recommendations of Basil's cousin Percy. I travelled daily to and from school by bus. I always ended up as the best scholar in my class. I answered questions posed by the class teacher about "what were the headlines today in the morning newspapers" because I had seen the newspapers before leaving home in the morning. It was considered as a good habit for children to get acquainted with reading the daily newspapers.

I was also the best student in the class and was awarded a book at the end of each school year. I was always alone at these events. No one in the family was interested in accompanying me to these school events. I was also good at athletics and had won the school track events for 12 year olds.

At the conclusion of the third student year the class teacher filled in the year end report card as he had always done, but in this year he had entered "2" instead of "1" for the results obtained for each subject in the column "Marks". When the teacher realized his mistake he corrected the entries by striking down 2 and entering "1" in the adjoining column to indicate that I had in fact gained "1" and not "2" for each subject. The class teacher also signed the report card, as he was required to do. I was the best student in the class and also done well in all subjects.

When I came home and showed the report card to Basil he just removed his belt and started beating me thinking that I had done the alterations in the report card myself. Amme crossed the demarcation line and came in between Basil and me from wherever she was and started to shout at him to stop the beating. She was prepared to take the beating herself. Basil gave up. I considered this to be a brave effort of a person who cared for the children of Rene and Basil as if the children were her own.

What had to be done in our home at 16/3 Kassapa Road was done by me. The house needed cleaning and it was I who had to get the floors cleaned and polished. I had to accompany Ranjini home from the boarding school during the holidays and over the weekends and then back again to her school.

Then there were the chicken, rabbits and the cow to feed. The cow gave milk that we sold to the neighbours and those living around and nearby. The hens provided us with eggs as well as meat for the Sunday chicken curry. Basil did the slaughtering with a sharp knife and the cleaning was left to me.

Besides the animals there were banana, some other fruit trees and vegetables that were grown in the garden. The harvest was delivered to the local shop that provided an extra source of income. I had to make the deliveries.

There was not enough cash to pay for the daily food bills. This was a replay of the days in Kalapaluwawa when Basil's salary was never accounted for. Malin provided some cash whenever he visited us at 16/3 Kassapa Road.

Then came the terrible wound on my ankle, which needed medical attention. Nothing cured it and then Basil's brother Arthur, who was a medical doctor suggested that I stay with him in his Nuwara Eliya residence, which was in a "cooler" environment in the up (hill) country province. Enrollment was at the Holy Trinity School and after the first examinations I was upgraded to a higher class before the conclusion of the school year. The difference between school standards in the cities and rural areas was the underlying explanation for my upgrading.

After 2 years my wound was healed and I came back to 16/3 Kassapa Road and attended St. Johns College Nugegoda once again. This time around I needed help to adjust myself to the city school standard but was never able to regain confidence in school work as before. It was so easy to answer all questions and do well at Holy Trinity School, but a much better performance was now required at the city school level. It was hard for me to come back to the city level for whatever reason. The teachers had the same opinion: He was very good and understood the subjects taught, but he was totally uninterested in going to school. The adjustment was not that easy and the turnaround did not happen.

There were many things that were going wrong during this time. The distractions were many. The environment at 16/3 Kassapa Road had run down. I was ashamed of the way things were at home. It was a terrible time and had an impact on my school achievements. They were related, but no one understood the underlying influences of one to another. I ignored school too much and I was losing school going age.

This was the toughest time for any youngster entering his teenage years. There was no support and encouragement from the home environment to do better. Amme was not able to provide the kind of support and guidance that was needed for a boy growing up. She had no experience and no education.

All sorts of people who were close relatives of Amme were moving in and out of the house. My main concern then was how to get them out of the house for good.

Tony had gained entrance to Royal College and this was one of the best schools of the time in Sri Lanka and was given all attention and support because he was the youngest. The struggles that I experienced during this period were many; I had to do what was to be done - feeding the cow and the few animals that we possessed and cleaning the house.

Basil meanwhile, continued to behave as he had in Kalapaluwawa. One evening Amme was of the view that something serious might have happened to him and sent me to his workplace to see what was happening and to get him home. When I came to the work place - and that which I remember most - was a woman worker lying half naked on a sleeping mat and getting dressed besides Basil who fast asleep in his Hansi putuwa. At that time I did not realize that something else had taken place. We came home in a rickshaw.

The home environment was all but stimulating. There was no income sufficient to pay for the groceries. The sanitary conditions were downtrodden. The environment to put it simply was "at rock bottom".

When Basil was paralysed after suffering from a stroke no one was able to look after him when he returned home from the hospital. He needed treatment on a daily basis and everyone around us said that I had to look after him. Glenville had a proposal to cure Basil with ingenious medicine and he was moved to their home in Negombo. The Ayurvedic doctor's prescription was to provide massage with herbal oil and medication every day. It was a hopeless situation and why in the world was I to do everything? That was the question that was in my mind. I began to understand Lloyd.

I broke off from studies in 1955 to find employment if that was possible. I had traumatic experiences and bitterly regretted the misspent years.

Glenville opened up an opportunity to work at the retail store for British servicemen at their base in Negombo. He was the store manager. The wages barely paid for the journey home and back every weekend and a contribution to the housekeeping at 16/3 Kassapa Road. It was not an encouraging employment situation for a youngster around the age of 16.

Malin's business associate and good friend Mr. Selvanathan offered an opportunity to work at the Indian Bank branch office in Colombo. He made a recommendation and I was employed as a bank clerk. It was not an exciting place to work but gave me the opening to a wider world of education. This was an opportunity and an eye opener for me because it came just in time as I was getting more and more interested in education and looking for opportunities to move forwards.

I started to be interested in reading books and then onto schoolbooks and studies. I enrolled myself at the Polytechnic as an evening student for GCE A-levels for gaining entrance to the University of London external examinations. On successful completion, I then proceeded to the Polytechnic's courses in preparation for a BSc degree in economics and social sciences with the University of London External examinations. The attendance was in the evening and that allowed many youngsters who were in employment to pursue studies after office hours.

And, then came the offer of a scholarship to pursue studies at the University of Uppsala in Sweden. I did not hesitate.

In his farewell story Steve Jobs told his mother on her deathbed "it turned out to be a man of me too". I could say the same about myself.

Meeting my mother as a grown up

In London Heathrow airport in the autumn of 1960 I saw my mother for the first time since I was about 5 years old and now I was 19 years old. I was on my way to Sweden after gaining a scholarship for graduate studies at the University of Uppsala. Rene had departed for London without having an opportunity to say goodbye to her children for now and then also forever. I had not seen her since then and had a vague idea about how she looked like. She had sent a message to the airlines to convey to me that she would be wearing a saree with shades of red colour so that I would recognise her when I disembarked from the TWA aircraft.

I saw her standing and watching as I disembarked. I saw for the first time my mother Rene as a grown up boy of 19. She was beautiful and was so much like the black and white picture I had seen of her in Enid's almirah. I just embraced her for a long time. I did not say many words and she did not say many words, but we understood the joy of being able meet again and this time in such a pleasant atmosphere compared to Kalapaluwawa.

From Heathrow we then travelled to the Isle of Wight where she lived with her husband Jim Clark. I had not seen her since she had "disappeared" leaving behind only a few isolated images of her in my mind. My meeting with my mother was more than a reunion and more so because it was a dream come true for the few who were that fortunate in life. The words "to meet my mother?" It sounded strange. Am I going to meet my mother and how would this end up were the two questions that were crossing my mind as I descended the steps of the gangway from the aircraft passenger deck at the Heathrow airport?

Few are destined to enjoy such an occasion. The odds were against such an outcome. I was not fully prepared for this encounter. The feeling of pain and the emotions that were there cannot be described with words. There was also the conflict of culture between the Ceylonese way of living, to which I was accustomed, and the very different English to which my mother was now accustomed. She had adapted herself well to the western way of life in England. There were conflicts that I had to resolve, but never able to do so at that point of time and for many years to come after our first meeting.

We journeyed from London Heathrow to Portsmouth by train and then by ferry to the Isle of Wight. She explained the food habits of England and I remember her describing “the sandwiches were made up of cheese and tomatoes and sometimes with slices of roasted beef” and then the soft drinks that were sold in bottles. The ebb and flow of the sea that we were watching from the waiting room windows in front of us was explained to me as we were waiting for the ferry that would take us from Portsmouth to the Isle of Wight. I stayed with my mother in her home in the Isle of Wight for a few days. Her husband Jim Clark was an exceptional person of charm and warmth. He warmly welcomed me to their home. He was on his way to work in the hospital as a male nurse.

This was the Isle of Wight and England in the beginning of the autumn of 1960. It was cold. It was in the autumn. Was I dreaming when Rene said good night and that was the first night of the re-union between my mother and me as she put the quilt firmly around me to keep me warm throughout the night? Yes, I was and it was my mother, I re-collect. I soon fell asleep because I was too tired after a long journey.

One of the things that I should have done during the days I was staying with her on the Isle of Wight was to gather my mother's re-collections of family life as it was in Kalapaluwawa during her lifetime in the country of her birth. I never did that and the thought never crossed my mind at the time of my meetings with my mother. I was not mature at that time and that was the correct answer. Had I jotted down her re-collections about her family I would not have had to trace her background and that of her family in a more troublesome way as I have been experiencing all along since then. She could have said no, I do not believe it is advisable. Or, gone into details and told me everything that I needed to know.

I met my mother several times thereafter and also kept in touch now and again by telephone from Sweden. We never spoke about her ancestry other than in a few words when she explained that Basil was very often found sleeping with the servant girl(s) in our home in Kalapaluwawa.

Has life not been fair?

John F. Kennedy once said: "Life is not fair". JFK was contemplating about the meaning of family life. His eldest brother had died during the Second World War and his elder sister never recovered from the disability treatment administered by the doctors with the advice and consent of her father.

Life was not fair for Rene and her children. Life was not fair for Lloyd. The children did not receive the guidance from their parents about what is right and what is wrong when they were growing up. For Enid and Lloyd the two teenagers who most needed that guidance never got any portion of it. It was tragic. Basil was never seen playing or talking with his children when he came home after work or during the weekends. He was very good at giving orders and beating up the boys with whatever was at hand for any and all wrongdoings according to his standards of conduct. The girls, on the other hand were never subject to this sort of beating up. The children were scared of Basil and Rene could do nothing to prevent the outbursts of Basil's nasty behaviour towards their children. At times she was frightened herself. Lloyd was very often at the receiving end of Basil's nasty behaviour. Lloyd was at a sensitive age and he was left to wonder what it was to grow up and be part of a family. The home or rather a house to enter and live in was all he understood, then. There was no parental guidance or protection around him. Whilst Rene extended her protective arm around Enid the eldest child in their marriage, and a teenager of the times, Lloyd the next eldest had no such protective arm around him. Lloyd was left with little he could do to protect himself from the irrational and nasty behaviour of Basil.

Something had gone wrong and terribly wrong because Lloyd never was enrolled in a regular school as his sister and cousins of his age. Enid was enrolled in one of the leading girls schools, Ladies College. For Lloyd, the dream about things that he dreams about as he was entering the teenage years remained only as a dream. He was never able to attend a school like all children of his age and family status and dream of things like any other boy of his age would be dreaming because he grew up in an environment that did not give him the security and guidance of his parents. Basil should have understood better than anyone else that children start their upward journey in the school and classroom. For Lloyd it was all about the frightening experiences of watching his parents at odds with each other and the way they resolved their differences. He had a feeling that he was abandoned as a child and never pulled close to his parents.

Basil never had the habit of beating up the two girls, Enid and Ranjini for the same reasons as that for his beating up of Lloyd. And, in those years the three younger boys Malin, Brian and Tony have never subject to Basil's hazardous and ill-tempered way of treatment. They were too young at that time. In those few black and white pictures that were taken during these times the facial expression of the children convey the unmistakable impression that they somehow look scared and not as happy as youngsters of their age should have been.

Rene was an unhappy person throughout her married life. That much and more I understood from what I have heard from her relatives whom I have talked to. My mother mentioned something like that to me during those few occasions when I met her on the Isle of Wight in the 1960s. She said that she did her best to enlist the influential brothers-in-law to secure a separation, which she so desperately needed but never was able, to obtain.

She was alone in that crucial fight to find a better and an alternative way of living with her children than with Basil. She did not succeed in that effort. And, what if she had? We will never know. It hurt to hear what she had in her mind during those terrible days when she was in search of a better alternative.

Given a choice, this is the way I would like to remember Rene:

She was beautiful in the sparkle in her eyes when she talked about something she loved.

She could make others feel comfortable even when she was sad. And, she was beautiful for her looks and also beautiful in her soul.

When right and wrong are hard to tell apart

Rene was born into comfortable circumstances and then entered the troubled times with her marriage to Basil. In all of the tragedy and the challenges that followed, and when you try to make sense of it and understand it, it's very difficult to fully make sense of it, she might have said. Or, maybe she might have said, while I feel what I have experienced has been difficult and hard at times and there has been a loss, I may have gained something from it after all.

We are all born into a network of relationships and circumstances, tragedies and opportunities. We never get to choose. As I was coming into this world, my mother Rene lived in trials and disappointment. My life was also full of trials and disappointments. My father was a man who was unfaithful to his wife, addicted to alcohol and not able to control his temper. Rene was not able to communicate with him or change his behaviour so that they could enjoy living together and in pulling their children close and in providing guidance to all of them growing up into adulthood.

When I was a growing up there was no quality in Basil that helped me into adulthood. There was nothing that I could learn from him to help shape my vision of the future. Success and failure is sometimes something you get from your parents. Money, for one thing and good manners is another, or determination. Personal characteristics, good and bad, derive from our genes and success, then depend on the mixture that we inherit.

Rene did not have the bravery or the will and determination to intervene the way Amme did against the behaviour of her own brother and that of an old man following me on the way back from school. Or, when Basil removed his leather waist belt and beat me. She pulled me close to her.

Rene had noble and high ideals and expected Basil to respond in conversation and to sharpen the arguments as a path to resolve differences and also to guide their children. Basil wasn't able to grow and change and adapted himself for the better seen from Rene's perspective. Enjoyment of family life together with his wife and children was somehow simply not in the making for him. He never had any control over his income and expenditure and he never initiated activities to enjoy family life together with his wife and children. Basil more often than not, found himself at ease in the company of those who enjoyed alcohol and they enjoyed consuming until they fell fast asleep in a nearby hansi putuwa.

All of Basil's brothers were older than him except for one. All of them were married and had children of their own. Their children were of different ages and some were entering their teenage and others were much younger. Ariadne and Mukta who were about the same age as Enid shared common interests about leisure time activities. Rene took them to the cinema together with Enid and they enjoyed the company of being together with their cousin as well as in the company of an aunt who was close to them they felt and nearer to their age than their elder aunties. Rene was fond of entertaining the teenage children of Basil's brother's and they all remember how well she entertained them at Kalapaluwawa. This was as far back as in the late 1930s.

Rene was the gift outright of Charles William and Felicia and she grew up in their company. She was their only child. She continued in the traditions she acquired from her home when she married Basil. She thought her husband would bring along the traditions from his family life. She thought so at the beginning of their family life together. Rene had good social habits like in entertaining and visiting her own relatives as well as those of Basil's.

I barely knew my mother before I met her for the time in 1960 except in my dreams. To say it more differently, I was left alone to wonder what was going on around me most of my years from childhood until I met her for the first time in 1960. She was far apart from me during my entry into the teenage and then manhood. As I was growing up in Sri Lanka she was living in London and then in the Isle of Wight and that was always England or Great Britain to us; her children. There was no communication between us. She had disappeared.

After I met her in the autumn of 1960 on my way to Uppsala in Sweden I visited her now and again and kept in touch with her until she passed away in 1973. She wrote to me now and again and I was impressed with her command of the language. I read some of her letters she wrote to me after our first meeting in 1960. In one of them, she wrote and it was dated 8.11.1970:

"... when I left Ceylon I had made every arrangement with my lawyer to keep my 2 aunts (who were getting a small allowance from me then) steadily paid, and I left that money in his hand, the same as Rs 500/- to each of you. It was a blow to me when that lawyer embezzled trust funds and all I invested for my children and aunts was lost. But God knows I kept faith my aunts, wrote to say – we know you did not fail us. ...".

She did not fail; Rene left for England without saying goodbye to her children and never dreamt that she would see them ever again. As I sat beside her in the bus stand near her home in the Isle of Wight awaiting the arrival of the green double decker to take me back to the ferry and to the mainland, we spoke to each other in a soft voice, deep in sorrow and unable to provide material comfort to one another. I was a student and had no possibility for supporting her in old age. This was my last journey to the Isle of Wight to meet my mother Rene. We said goodbye and that was forever. I never saw her again alive. She died in 1973.

What is right can also be wrong and what is wrong can also be good. A final settlement was made about the property at 16/3 Kassapa Road in the middle of the 1960's. My brother Tony was to leave Sri Lanka to pursue further studies in medicine in the USA. Tony and I (communicating by post) made the decision to transfer the ownership of the property to Amme with the intention that she could continue to live there without the costs and able look after her 2 children with the pension income from the government. We thought that this was the right thing to do because she was fond of us all and looked after us in the best way she could. She was our maid at first and then Basil's partner and in legal terms also his wife towards the final stage of his life. Her marriage was primarily to ensure that the state pension for government employees was paid to her when Basil was no longer alive. What Tony and I did not know at that time and also until a few years ago was that 16/3 Kassapa Road was a part of the "Joseph Fraser" property belonging to Rene and was part of the dowry that the young wife brought with her to the marriage in 1925. During the separation process Basil managed to secure possession of the property. Tony and I did what we thought was the right thing to do, but we had no idea at all that we did it with the wrong thing.

Life has not been fair for the children of Basil and Rene. They grew up in different environments and survived all hardships, but never understood what family life was all about. All of them live in different parts of the world and have built up with their own families. They meet now and again.

To borrow a line: RFK was trying to figure out the kind of existential implications of why a just God would allow injustice to happen to the magnitude he was seeing with the assassination of JFK. The Greek philosophers had the answer: To whom the Gods given much, they have taken away much more. These are well written words of comfort for all who have lost someone close to you and gives a glimmer of hope for people who contemplate about life that is lost.

And, when the angels accompanied Rene on her onward journey on the 25th January 1973 she asked for a stopover in Kalapaluwawa and saw for one final moment her ancestral home. This was the home in which she lived with her parents and hopefully to be living there with her husband and children as companions until the final departure from life on this beautiful planet earth. Life is full of mistakes and everyone makes mistakes. Life does not come with instructions. She understood this now more than ever. And, in a few last words she would have said, "life has not been fair"

Reflections about the troublesome marriage

Rene lived in Kalapaluwawa. She did not leave the home environment when she married Basil. Instead, it was he who moved to her home in Kalapaluwawa. For Rene, the marriage was all about a dream come true and the dream was about her joining hands with her husband to live together as all young lovers do. It was not a choice she made by herself. Instead, she accepted the choice made by others who were her close relatives and family friends and all of them were living close by in the same village or, near by. She could have said, “no, not know, perhaps later” but that option was not there for her to choose from. The marriage did not turn out to be a life as laid out in her dreams about living with her Camelot jr. It was a troublesome life she was to live from the time of her marriage in 1925 and until her departure for England in 1946.

When she decided to leave the island after obtaining the divorce papers that she managed to obtain from the magisterial court of Sri Lanka she had to leave her children in the custody of Basil. She left her children without embracing and having said goodbye as she walked up the gangway and boarded the ocean liner from the Colombo harbour on a journey to England and to a different and safer world. She was gone but not forgotten.

The outcome of the marriage was almost as if written down for a storyteller with eye-view of events leading up to the break up of a family and its consequences for parents and their children. The children fought for survival in agony, pain and humiliation. They climbed back slowly from their woes to a normal life and that was against the odds of that happening.

Only a handful of children in each generation falls from privilege measured in terms of family income and human dignity and then start on a new upward climb back into an affordable life. Of the six children of Rene and Basil the second child did not make the climb upward again to a new beginning.

Little was known about Lloyd and his whereabouts during these traumatic times. Malin and Ranjini were either in boarding schools or living elsewhere. Malin came to the home of Basils elder brother Arthur during the school holiday periods. There he was in the company of his cousin Sirimal who was about his age. Ranjini remained at times in the boarding school, when she had nowhere else to go during the holidays.

Tony and I moved around with Basil and the ayah. We were too young to understand whatever was going on around us. We were too small for school enrollment. Basil had no home to offer.

In Pellengahawatte, the children of Rene and Basil grew up without the guiding hands of their parents, and no angels who came from somewhere to tell them what was right and what was wrong. Sometimes the feeling was that there was no home to which they belonged but a house they lived in. They grew up in a house in which their parents did not share responsibilities, had no shared social cultures and no shared interests between them.

During one time period, it was just compact darkness and another was a reminder about the horrible past events and then a struggle to overcome the past. The past was always a reminder that we were somehow an affluent family and comfortable living in Kalapaluwawa and then falling into a long a nights sleep and waking up at 16/3 Kassapa Road.

In London, Rene made her own choice in finding a new partner to live together for the rest of their lives. Her choice was James (Jim) Henry Rufuus Clark. They were married in Hammersmith, London in 1949. After living for some years in London they migrated to the Isle of Wight where they settled down in a home of their own for the rest of their lives.

She had not obtained a legally binding separation from her husband and had not embraced her children or said goodbye to them when she boarded the Atlantis in 1946. The children grew up with their father and caring assistance of relatives and friends. The two eldest children knew who their mother was at that time, but not much more and the four youngest grew up with faint memories about her. At that time it was no more than a distant dream for the children to meet her again or, for her to meet the children ever again. Stories do not always end in this way.

All her children met her as grownups and some of them with their own families; first, she met Lloyd in London in the mid 1950s and then it was my turn in 1960 at Heathrow and travel to her home in the Isle of Wight. Next, came Enid with her family followed by Ranjini with her family, Tony and finally Malin with his family and, it was in that order.

I was on my way to Sweden for graduate studies. Tony was on his way to the USA on scholarship for further medical studies. Ranjini arrived in England on scholarship to gain practice and experience in her profession. Her husband and their children followed closely thereafter. Enid and her family “emigrated” from the former colony to England in the early 1960s. Malin came together with his family in the early 1970s. She met them all again, except for Lloyd, who met her in London in the mid 1950s, in the Isle of Wight.

A week or so after she had met Malin, who was the last of her children to meet her I spoke to her on the phone and asked her the following question:

>> Mummy - ahmmm and then a silence and ahmmm - you have now met and seen all of your children whom you bore in your womb and gave birth to and all of them have grown up not knowing who you were except for Enid, and they have overcome adversity and survived? Suddenly, you see them and look up and your children are grown-ups and those years have gone by? <<.

I was expecting an answer, but she never gave an answer and I thought that she nodded away saying something like “yes, hmm hmm so ...”. Was she happy to meet her children now as grown up adults? We will never know. She was evasive of her answer and I never repeated the question ever again in her lifetime.

I never asked her the question about whatever happened that night in Sinna Wana when she was dancing with an RAF officer. Her answer would have resolved the identity of the mystery man without engaging a detective like Mr. Hercule Poirot.

The children of Rene and Basil were not the outcome of their sharing enjoyable sex with each other in partnership and in mutual consent about possible childbirth. Some call the results of such encounters as the unwanted burden. This was an exercise that was painful because penetration was painful for her and not for the other. There were long-term consequences for both as a result. And, once again, that is the truth and nothing but the whole dam truth. You cannot alter the results.

Rene and her second husband Jim died within the same week of the same year (1973) and they were both buried side by side in the general cemetery near their home in the Isle of Wight. Rene was 62 years of age and Jim 65 at the time of death.

In the autumn of 1990, after a long struggle of searching, I met Lloyd's wife Phyllis and their only child as well as his wife and their only child (Lloyd's grandchild). I was told that after Lloyd had separated from his wife, his son grew up in a children's home in London without knowing who his father was. His son had always wondered how he had happened to have a tanned skin when all other children in the children's home did not have the same shade of colour in their skins. He was told that he was English, but the facts did not add up. He finally got to know the facts.

The long and twilight struggle of searching for Lloyd's wife and son came to an end as well.

On July 31st 1990 the children of Rene and Basil and their families with the exception Lloyd and his family met together in London for the first time ever since the break up of the family in the mid 1940's. The family gathering was in Middlesex in the home of Ranjini and her husband Thusitha. They all had built up families of their own, but they had not recovered from the experiences of those traumatic events that unfolded in front of their eyes in Kalapaluwawa and in the years thereafter. The children of Rene and Basil bore the scars of those turbulent times with them as they grew up into adulthood. The scars will remain with them forever.

In the summer of 1998 all of us in Sweden (my wife Inger together with our children, Alexis and his wife Elisabeth, Martin and his spouse Sofia and our daughter Sara) visited the country of my birth, the home of Aunt Nancy, the geographical area of Pellengahawatte in Kalapaluwawa where I lived until about the age of four or five and 16/3 Kassapa Road where I lived from about the age of nine until I left the country of my birth for graduate studies in Sweden in 1960. The journey signified the end as well as a new beginning for all of us and especially for my family.

No amount of words can undo the past. No amount of words can describe the pain and sorrow and the humiliation Rene and her children were subjected to in a troublesome marriage. Only one question remains to be answered when closing this story: Was Basil worthy of his wife Rene, and their children? If justice was to be done, their children will do it, I said. And, this is how it has been done; this story is the outcome of such a decision.

Looking back, I ask myself the question why a family tragedy? And, how come tragedies are outliers? How can I avoid such pitfalls? The answers are given in the scriptures; “Children who are born in happy homes build up their own happy homes as they grow up and build families of their own”.

Journey back in search of my roots

The thought about visiting my country of birth began to take hold of me around the mid 1990s and that was about the time when our children were entering the age of building up families of their own. The driving force that was pushing me on this search was twofold: Firstly, my own desire to trace my mother’s relatives and her ancestral home as well as to show my wife and our children and their spouses the environment in which I grew up - in Kalapaluwawa as a child, before the family break-up in the mid 1940s and also at 16/3 Kassapa Road in Colombo where I lived before I left for Sweden in 1960.

During the first part of this journey I searched for my childhood home between birth and the age of about four or five, which was also the ancestral home of my mother in Kalapaluwawa.

Between the age of five and nine I was moving from one house to another with my father and my brother Tony, who was about 1 year younger than me together with the ayah who was looking after all three of us.

In the second part of this journey the visit was to the “Joseph Fraser” property and the house in Thimbirigasyaya close to Bambalapitiya within the boundaries of the capital city of Colombo. The postal address of the house was 16/3 Kassapa Road. It was here that I grew up with my father Basil from about the age of nine or ten until I left the country of my birth at the age of 19.

The house at 16/3 Kassapa Road had been re-built, broken down and partly re-built again. The house I lived in at that time did not exist any more.

The second house that was built in almost identical appearance alongside the 16/3 Kassapa Road house was intact. The youngest daughter of the family that lived in the neighbouring house at that time was now its new occupant. She remembered me.

During the journey back my wife and I visited my cousin Lakshmi living at no. 16 Layards Road, Colombo 5. She and her husband Terence (Terry) Perera showed us a photograph of the Wickremesinghe family who were gathered together to celebrate her father and mother, Collin and Alice, returning home from their honeymoon. In that picture I saw my mother and father together for the first time. The first thought that crossed my mind as I was looking at this picture was “so that is how they looked like when they were young”. Then a second thought crossed my mind and that was to explore the possibility to tell a story, whilst imaging the generation that was before us. The story that I imagined writing was the story of the children of James Henry Wickremesinghe and his wife Mary Helen born Samarawickreme. They were Basil’s father and mother.

A picture that tells the story of the children of James Henry Wickremesinghe and his wife Mary Helen born Samarawickreme was written 1999.

The second encounter during the journey back was the visit to the area of the Pellengahawatte plantation in Kalapaluwawa in search of the ancestral home Sinna Wana where I was born and grew up until about the age of five. This was the house and property that belonged to Rene and where I lived together with my parents and two elder brothers, two elder sisters and a younger brother in the days that are now gone forever. It was not easy to trace the whereabouts of the ancestral home because the children of Basil and Rene had lost all contacts with Rene as well as her relatives after the breakup of the family around the mid 1940s. I was born in 1939.

My recollections were few and confined only to a few joyful events of the time that took place around our home. Scientists have said that the human mind works in such a way. The human mind tends to force out events that are unpleasant and to remember only the more happy events with the passage of time and in general this is more evident among the younger people than elder and grown-ups.

New housing schemes had changed the old landscape in Kalapaluwawa. The plantation and the house I lived in were not there any more. New housing structures had been put in place in this area and it was difficult to recognise the landscape now more than 50 years later.

It was not easy to find people who knew the Amerasinghe family members. There were only a few relatives who were now living who were able to provide information about the ancestral home. It just appeared to be a journey into nowhere when my wife and I started to trace the family roots. The absence of information about the ancestral home and close relatives of my mother Rene revealed the emptiness of the journey. And, then I came to the local shop and the faint memories crossed my mind of a possibility of getting somewhere from nowhere from the stories told in a local shop. Stories are told and enlarged and altered by the villagers when they come to buy their daily groceries from the local shop. The customers were the newsmakers and if there were no news they invented a few to make it informative in describing the movements in and around the village.

I mentioned to the local shop owner about my journey in search of the Amerasinghe family in Kalapaluwawa. The owner said he knew the whereabouts of the family members. The Amerasinghe’s he said were a “powerful family” in this village and that he was the son of Mr. Appuhamy, whom I later understood, was a protégé of my father.

When the shopkeeper says “powerful family” he refers to a landowning family with income from produce sales such as rice, coconut including the by-products, rubber and spices to the village merchant trader, the Mudalali. It was a common practice among the villagers to attribute influence with the size of land ownership.

The shop owner instructed me to drive upwards on the hill and locate two houses that were identical in appearance to one another. Over there, he said lived two brothers who were the decedents of the Amerasinghe family I was searching for. And, it paid off.

I met and talked to Rohan who was living in one of the two houses on the hill about my journey and the search of my mother Rene’s ancestry. He re-collected that Aunt Nancy spoke warmly of a relative by the name of Rene and said that I should start by visiting Aunt Nancy, who lived on the opposite hillside. Rohan said that he had no recollection of Rene and her family. He was either too young or not born at that time. I simply asked Rohan if Aunt Nancy was still alive? I could hardly believe what I heard; “yes, she is very much alive” he said. Aunt Nancy was the wife of Shelton, who was a first cousin of Rene and she was the only living person of my mother’s generation who was alive in Kalapaluwawa.

We drove across to the opposite side and up the hill to the home of Aunt Nancy. The house was identical in appearance to my ancestral home “Sinna Wana”. It was Aunt Nancy who re-introduced me to Kalapaluwawa.

Aunt Nancy told me that the kettle was always boiling in the ancestral home of my mother. The water was ready to be poured into the teacups and served to all kinds of visitors, whether they were villagers, workers, well wishers, friends or relatives. The atmosphere of friendship has been always there for all visitors. That was in keeping of a village or a small town custom in Sri Lanka known as Ceylon in the days gone by.

Aunt Nancy’s home reminded me of a few joyful get together occasions of family, friends and children at Sinna Wana that was not so far away from her home. The famous painting “Hip-Hip-Hurrah” by the Danish painter Sören Krøyer in the 1880’s reminds me of a happy scene of a joyful get together of Rene’s family in the home and garden of Uncle Shelton, and Aunt Nancy even though the setting was completely different in the “hip-Hip-Hurrah” painting.

The home of Aunt Nancy was identical in architecture to our home Sinna Wana. In those days we travelled by bullock cart from Sinna Wana to visit the homes of Rene’s first cousins; Norman, Christie, Mervyn and Ida all of whom lived close by. Cousin Ida was close to Rene in age and shared common interests. Both of them attended the same school and grew up almost like sisters in one family. The cousins were her closest relatives. My brothers and sisters were all excited and thrilled about sitting in our bullock cart under the care of the coachman and then travelling slowly alongside the village roads to visit our uncles and aunts. There, the children played in the garden and were served homemade rulang cake, love cake, kokis, kevum and mineral water. We were fond of these servings.

Aunt Nancy was now in her late eighties and her recollections were as she explained good but sometimes with lapses. I showed my wife Inger the surroundings and the style of the house, which was built in a very similar way and in appearance to our Sinna Wana. The huge pillars at the end of the porch supported the roof. The porch was open ended, wide and long. That was the clearest reminder of the similarity between the two houses.

Sinna Wana was on another hilltop and the drive was alongside the paddy fields and then upwards and towards the plantation that was once known as Pellengahawatte.

The plantation had given way to new multiple dwelling houses that had been built under government initiatives. Our children from Sweden were coming the week after and I asked Aunty Nancy if she would kindly show our children her home so that they could get an idea of the home I grew up at an early age. Aunty Nancy kept that promise and our children are most grateful for a promise fulfilled.

My mother's ancestry was recapitulated starting with the conversations I had with Aunty Nancy.

A journey back to Kalapaluwawa was written 2012-01-15.

As I look back

When looking at the two pictures of my father's family I thought that I was being made aware of my ancestry. The first picture was from about the 1910s. They were living in Ratnapura a town on the south western part of Sri Lanka. The geographical area is known for precious stone mining, although my grandparents were not engaged in the business of precious stone mining. My grandfather, James Henry is seated besides his wife Mary Helen and the children are standing behind and alongside them. His style of dressing is according to the times with western style dress upper half of coat, shirt and tie in combination with the sarong wrapped around his waist down instead of a trouser. The complete change over from the local to western style full suit was not fully accepted by at that time. The grown up children were dressed in western fashion. My father and his younger brother who were the two youngest of the children were dressed in white and shorts. In this picture I thought that I had facial resemblances to my grandfather.

The second picture was taken in 1928 when the family was gathered at "Wycklyn House" in Wellawatte to celebrate the homecoming of the newly wedded Collin (youngest child in the family) and Alice (his wife). My father and his brothers were dressed in western style full cotton suit. My aunts wore the traditional saree with the upper part thrown across the shoulder and over the short sleeve blouse. My grandmother wore a long sleeve blouse and a wrap up from waist down in keeping with the low country traditions of her hometown, Galle. In appearance, she looks a determined person and an older relative of mine told me afterwards that my reflection about her was equally precise as it could have been.

James Henry had passed away and the family had moved to Wellawatte, a sub-urban area of Colombo at the time of the homecoming ceremony for Collin and Alice. My grandmother was responsible for the caring of her nine children (eight boys and a girl). She was successful in her efforts to encourage them to continue with their higher education; the boys completed their higher school attendance and were employed in their chosen professions in the government services. Her only daughter married a successful employee in the government services as well.

In this picture I see my mother who is seated alongside Basil's in-laws and he is standing behind her. She looks much younger than his only sister and all of his in-laws. Enid, the first born, was about two years old and she was the youngest of the cousins who sat along the floor in front of their parents. When I look at my mother I get the distinct impression that she looks disappointed and slightly aloof. Rene said something like this to me in the mid 1960:s and at that time I was not fully capable of understanding what she said: When the marriage proposal was made three to four years before this picture was taken she was excited about joining a large family of in-laws and their spouses and of the social intermingling with them. It turned out to be so very different in reality to her expectations when she met them. Communication with her in-laws and their spouses was not easy as she first thought it could be. She was considered as a junior and her sociability was not in line with theirs. It was somewhat strict in terms of seniority. She felt uncomfortable with all those "old ladies" and did not find her place with them in this large gathering of family members. Basil was not helpful in supporting her as she first thought that he could. On a more positive note, however, Basil's elder nieces liked her company and they were thrilled when they were invited to Kalapaluwawa or, to watch a film on the wide screen in the cinema in Colombo. They felt they were close to her.

When I look back, I keep thinking about my personal qualities and about what I may have inherited from my parents? In James Henry I saw myself to be as charming and attractive as he was when I grew up to be man myself. When I see tall buildings I always look up to see if they are leaning or not? This was a habit that I have inherited from Basil; he did so after completion of tall buildings under his management in the early 1950s. During our tourist travel my wife tells me that I am more interested in looking at the construction of doors and door locks in church buildings than in the paintings that are hung inside. Had Basil taught his children the technique of installing secure door locks in their households? Maybe, but I cannot remember. What I can say with a hundred per cent certainty is that I had inherited his short-sighted temperament and at least so until I was about the age of 50.

In looking at these two family pictures I was under the belief that my facial outlook was like my grandfather and more like Rene's than Basil's. I remember one incident and that was at the World Health Congress in Chicago in 2000. During a recess, I met an animator. He was one among the many social entertainers. He made a sketch of my face and I was told to come back after 2 hours and he would then have the drawing completed. When I came back, I was shown the caricature painting. It was incredibly like Basil's facial impression. There was no trace of James Henry or Rene's facial impression. The effect was like a bomb blowing up inside me as I walked myself backwards to the Congress hall.

This story could very well have been the way that my mother would have written it and not the way my father would have composed it. Rene tried to compose a series of articles about her marriage and the break up in the Ceylon Daily News - the largest circulating morning newspaper in Ceylon - in 1946. The management of the newspaper stopped the insert for whatever reason.

Her nephew Esmond was on his way to becoming the editorial director of the newspaper and his father Cyril who was Basil's elder brother was a leading civil servant objected: "No, he said, never tarnish the family name and it is all the more important to safeguard my career upwards in the civil service". The same was argued for Basil and about his career as a construction engineer along the upward ladder in the government services.

Like Rene I also tend to be graceful, but only when required not more.

I never got to see Pellengahawatte and Sinna Wana again.

The passenger list

The following information was displayed in the historical records of arrivals in Southampton:

Royal Mail vessel Atlantis, arrival 14th August 1946, first class cabin no 408, passenger Erandatie Felicia Wickramasinghe, proposed address in the UK "Eldon Lodge", Cookridge, Leeds, Yorks. Occupation housewife.

In the adjoining cabin, no 407, her fellow passengers were a Baptist Minister William George Wickramasinghe and his wife Rosta Delicia. He was not related to Basil.

The name of the house "Eldon Lodge" in Cookridge has been changed a long time ago I was told by the city inhabitants. Can this be the address of a British associate she met in Kalapaluwawa?

A note about the ship Atlantis: The Royal Mail Steam Packet Co launched the ship Andes in 1913. It was re-fitted as a 1st class passenger liner and renamed as the Atlantis In 1929. Atlantis was converted into a hospital ship and used for repatriation duties between 1939 and 1946. It was re-conditioned to carry 3rd class emigrant passengers from UK to Australia and New Zealand in 1946 and was scrapped in 1952.

Ancestry documents

Who's who in the Amerasinghe and Wickremesinghe family are given in 2 research documents:

A picture that tells the story of the children of James Henry Wickremesinghe and Mary Helen Samarawickreme, written 30th July 1999.

A journey back to Kalapaluwawa is about my journey back to discover the ancestry of my mother Erandatie Dagmar Felicia (Rene) Amerasinghe from Kalapaluwawa, written 15th January 2012.

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