

1963 June, Colombo Sri Lanka

The British missionaries had established the Methodist boarding school in Bambalawatte in nineteen ten. It was supposed to represent a little seaside oasis of old England in the busy hot and humid capital of Sri Lanka.

A sturdy brick wall six feet tall separated the school from the coastal railway line and the shimmering blue of the Indian Ocean. The wall was topped by razor wire and broken glass – presumably to keep undesirable elements out of the boarding school compound rather than prevent the girls from escaping!

The building closest to the wall was the two-story boarding-student's dormitory. A wide veranda ran the length of the dormitory on the sea side. On the ground floor were dining room, study rooms and music rooms as well as the principal's quarters. The classrooms, tennis and netball courts and playground stretched back from this building to Galle Road.

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Five forty five in the morning.

Pink and orange streaked the western sky, chasing the oppressive hot darkness of a tropical night over the horizon. The rattle and hoot of the commuter train carrying early morning workers from the coastal towns into the business district of Colombo reverberated around the second floor dormitory.

The Portly Sinhalese Ayah, Soma, appeared at the door to the dormitory. She trudged barefoot through the dormitory throwing open the windows. The morning wind ripped off the Indian Ocean and into the room with the rows of sleeping girls. It blew salty droplets into the open windows and onto the faces of the girls. They stirred and mumbled in their sleep.

Soma dragged the large brass bell out of the cupboard. The girls leapt out of bed and raced to the washroom at the first harsh clang. All that is except one!

What an ungodly bloody hour to start the day. It was barely light. Shiro covered her face with the pillow. ‘*Nagittinne*¹, get up Shiro missy, you will be late for prayers – again.’ Soma tugged the pillow away from Shiro and shook her shoulder.

Shiro grabbed the pillow back. Cursing Soma loudly in her best Sinhalese slang, she dragged herself to the washroom. The daily routine, four years and she still hated it!

What was it the colour brochures had said about boarding school life? ‘Play games, enjoy music and have fun while you study,’ she mocked. Forget it. Being in the boarding was like the army. Get up at five forty five in the morning. Prayers at six fifteen – breakfast – line up for uniform inspection, then off to class. Lined up like the chickens in the yard – white uniformed bodies and brown legs. Except the *burgher*² girls of course. With their white faces, brown eyes and pale legs they looked like the white leghorns in the chicken coop in Watakälé.

Burgher girls, from families where a father or grandfather is British or Dutch or something else white skinned. They were proud because they were white and rich. They considered themselves closer to the British than to the Sri Lankan natives. Some of their parents owned rubber plantations. Others were business people from outside Colombo. The girls got the best beds, their choice of lockers. They boasted about this. Said it was because their parents gave money to the school.

Bah, bribery and corruption.

Washed and dressed, Bible in hand, Shiro stood at the end of the line, still buttoning her white blouse. ‘Hey, namby pamby, nimby pimby,’ Bernice Alles, one of the burgher girls yelled. She ran past Shiro ripping the green ribbon that tied back Shiro’s hair. Shiro’s head jerked back. Her hair tumbled down past her shoulder. Thick strands of black whipped around her face. She quickly buttoned her blouse. The wind whipped her hair round her face as she struggled to plait it.

¹ Wake up

² Burghers are a Eurasian ethnic group, consisting for the most part of male-line descendants of European colonists from the 16th to 20th centuries (mostly Portuguese, Dutch, German and British) and local women

‘Miss,’ Danny Toussaint, one of the other burgher girls called out to the boarding school matron Miss Shieris. ‘Shiro hasn’t combed her hair again!’

Miss Shieris glared at Shiro. ‘You are getting really impossible child. You look like a prostitute with your hair down like that’ she screamed. ‘I have a good mind to report you to the principal. Go back to the dormitory.’ Shiro stepped back at the venom in Shiro’s eyes. ‘How dare you stare at me like that? You can miss breakfast today,’ Miss Shieris spluttered.

Shiro spun on her heels. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Bernice, Danny and their other burgher friend, Dawn Cabraal nudge each other and giggle. ‘Prostitute, great job for you!’ Dawn’s spiteful voice carried across to the other girls who were watching quietly.

Shiro turned and walked back upstairs. It was no use complaining about the burgher girls. Miss Shieris was also a burgher. A haggard old spinster burgher! She thought spitefully.

Shiro’s best friend Lalitha Perera touched her hand as she walked back to the dormitory. ‘I’ll ask Soma to get you a sandwich,’ she whispered. Shiro didn’t smile back. Lalitha was a quiet new girl in her second term at the boarding. Shiro had found her crying in a corner of the dressing room. She was a sad little thing. Sneaked around so quietly that no one even realised she was there. ‘My step father doesn’t like noise in the house,’ she had explained softly to Shiro. ‘I have to hide when he comes from work. Otherwise he hits me and things. Mummy sent me to the boarding because I told her what he did.’ Shiro befriended her. Lalitha adored Shiro.

Shiro climbed the steps and stood on the long open balcony outside the dormitory. The harsh morning sun glinted silver over the ocean. She watched as the angry white foam of the waves venting their wrath on the hapless sand of the beach. Each wave took a little of the beach away with it. Shiro felt like the beach. Every day a bit of her wore away – gone who knows where.

Her eyes moved to the wooden fishing boats, nothing more than tree trunks bound together by coir and rope, their canvas sails wearily flapping. The call of the fishermen carried faintly to her. ‘*hodi di helai helai la³*,’ they chanted together as they dragged the vessels and nets out of the water. The bare brown bodies glistened and steamed in the morning sunshine. If she squinted, she could see the fish leaping and struggling in the nets. The fishermen survived –

³ A call of the fishermen – enabling them to row together.

against the angry waves and the dark of the night. Shiro clenched her hands by her side and stood straight and tall.

‘What are you doing here?’ Mrs Shieris screeched at Shiro. ‘I told you to stay inside the dormitory. So! Now you are making eyes at the fishermen also?’ Grabbing Shiro by her arm she dragged her into the dorm. ‘Now sit here.’ She shoved Shiro on her bed. And wait till the after breakfast bell. Then you go direct to class.’ She shook her fist at Shiro. ‘Disobedient brat! You think that because you are fair for a Jaffna Tamil and have curly hair you are more beautiful and clever than the other girls,’ she cackled. She grasped Shiro’s hair. ‘I have a good mind to cut it off.’ She jerked Shiro’s head back. Shiro remained silent. She would not give the witch the pleasure of seeing her cry.

‘Miss Shieris,’ the crisp command was unmistakable. Miss Shieris dropped Shiro’s hair and stepped back. Miss Grace Rowling the British missionary principal stood straight and tall at the door of the dormitory. Her starched print cotton dress reached to below her knees, the neckline of the dress high with a pure white lace collar. Her golden hair set in delicate curls shone in the morning light. She looked like an angel. She advanced to stand by Shiro. ‘Shiromi, go to *my* office room at once.’ Shiro got off the bed and went out into the corridor, and back down the stairs towards the principals’ office. She heard Miss Rowling’s voice, sharp and edgy, ‘Don’t you *ever* touch that girl again.’

Shiro waited impatiently in the principal’s office. The minutes ticked by. She studied the painting on the wall. ‘La Promenade’ it read with the signature of the artist ‘Claude Monet’. The girl was in white. Her dress, her hair whirled around her. What was she looking at so tenderly? And why was the little boy watching her? Shiro held her blue skirted uniform down. She shut her eyes. She felt the wind blowing in her face and hair, the raw rough grass under her feet. She wanted to be back in the tea bushes. There she was safe, with people who loved her, mum, dad, Lakshmi.

She jumped at the sound of Miss Rowling voice ‘It is a lovely print isn’t it?’

Shiro swung round. ‘Sorry miss,’ she muttered.

‘No, don’t apologise Shiromi,’ Miss Rowling’s voice was soft, gentle. She put her hand on Shiro’s shoulder. ‘Sit down girl.’ Miss Rowling pointed to a chair at a small round table. Shiro waited until Miss Rowling took her seat in the chair across from her before she sat down.

‘Soma,’ Miss Rowling called. Soma came into the principal’s office with a tray. On it was a plate of sandwiches, egg, fish, and mincemeat. Soma placed the sandwiches on the table. She then placed plates and cutlery before Miss Rowling and Shiro. Placing glasses by the side of the plates, Soma poured orange juice from a jug into them. Shiro stared open mouthed at Soma and then at Miss Rowling.

‘I know you were sent upstairs without breakfast, Shiromi,’ Miss Rowling said softly. I thought we could talk over breakfast. Here,’ she picked up a silver fork and placed three sandwiches on Shiro’s plate. ‘The egg and mincemeat are Soma’s speciality.’ Serving herself, she picked up a sandwich with her bare hands and started eating. Shiro followed.

They had each eaten four sandwiches and drunk half a glass of juice when Miss Rowling spoke again. ‘So, Shiromi, do you want to tell me what you did that made Miss Shieris so angry?’

Shiro swallowed. She took a sip of juice. ‘I stared at her miss.’

Miss Rowling’s lips twitched. ‘Stared? How? Show me.’

‘Like this.’ Shiro clenched her hands by her side, tightened her lips in a pout and narrowed her eyes. She stared unwaveringly at Miss Rowling. Now she would be really in trouble – but she asked! To Shiro’s surprise Miss Rowling laughed – a happy tinkling sound. Soma, coming through the door with the empty tray smiled at Shiro as she picked up the plates.

‘And what happened that warranted the stare, Shiromi?’

Shiro clasped her hands on the edge of the table. She stared at her nails, cut short and brushed clean with a nail brush just last night. She shook her head.

‘Why do you not want to tell me Shiromi?’ A thread of impatience crept into Miss Rowling’s voice.

‘Because,’ Shiro took another sip of juice. Her parents had taught her to be honest, ‘because you’re white – British,’ she whispered slowly.

Now she will send me home. I will be expelled. Never mind. Shiro didn't want to be here anyway. Her father would understand.

Shiro watched the large wooden grandfather clock in the corner of the room. She watched the seconds tick by. Finally, Miss Rowling reached across the table and took Shiro's clasped hands in hers. She gently untangled Shiro's fingers and held her hands tightly. 'Shiromi,' it was sadness, compassion not anger that laced her voice. 'Can you tell me why you don't want to trust us white British people darling?'

Shiro's hands shivered in Miss Rowling's. Now she was really in for it. The words came out on a sob. 'My father said that you are here in Sri Lanka only for what you can get out of the country and us. The tea, coffee and spices. You don't really care for us natives, he said.'

'I see.' Seconds passed before Miss Rowling spoke again. 'Your father and grandfather worked in the plantations. The men and women who came there from Britain are not typical of all white British, Shiromi.' Her voice was now really sad.

Shiro looked into Miss Rowling's grey eyes. There were tears on her golden eyelashes. 'I'm sorry,' Shiro realised that she was holding hands with the principal. How inappropriate was that! She smiled at the thought of Miss Shieris or the girls walking in on this scene.

'Good,' Miss Rowling returned her smile. 'Not all white people are like that, Shiromi. Some of us want to help the countries our fathers took over – colonised. We want to make life better. Some of us want to also tell you about Jesus and love you like he did all people.'

Shiro nodded. 'Daddy said these are called missionaries. Are you a missionary Miss?'

'Yes Shiromi. I guess you could call me a missionary to little Sri Lankan girls. There are male missionaries too. We will have one here in our church soon. Reverend Robert Kirkland has just graduated from Bible College. He will be good for the school.' Shiro liked the way Miss Rowling's eyes softened as she spoke. 'Now, what else is happening that makes you so unhappy?' Miss Rowling continued.

Shiro clamped her mouth shut. She would not sneak. Not now.

'All right,' Miss Rowling sighed. 'You won't do in the girls who are bullying you.'

Shiro's eyes widened. She stared saucer eyed at Miss Rowling. 'Shiromi, I am aware that there are some girls who are bullies. A little bit of teasing will always happen. But I can't do anything until someone tells me.'

Shiro looked at the floor. The orange carpet had a design of flowers – red roses, she thought quite inconsequentially. Miss Rowling let go of Shiro's hands and stood up. Shiro pushed her chair back and stood straight, her hands by her sides.

'Shiromi,' Miss Rowling took Shiro's chin in her hand. She tilted her face so their eyes met. 'I want you to come direct to me if you want to report anything. Can you do that?'

Shiro looked away. 'Yes miss.'

The clang of the bell signalled the start of the first class for the day.

'You can go direct to class,' Miss Rowling said. 'Evening study time is a good time to see me. I am in the office working at that time.'

Shiro walked out and to the classrooms. She ignored the cat calls from the burgher girls. 'Principal's pet. Meow, meow, meow,' Dawn clawed her hands, pretending to rake Shiro's face. Bernice and Danny hooted.

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Miss Rowling sat in her study. Her brow creased in concern, thinking of Shiromi Rasiyah.

Fair skinned for a Jaffna Tamil girl, fifteen year old Shiro's oval face and almond black eyes were standard Sri Lankan teenage beauty. There were, however, two things that set her apart from the other boarders. The first was her long thick curly black hair that cascaded below her waist, blew riotously in the wind and gave her an exotic mysterious allure – a mesmerizing beauty. The other was her creativity and ability to grasp and remember concepts – the more complex the better. Unfortunately the teachers were not trained to handle a gifted child. Miss Rowling worried how best to guide Shiro's brilliant and yet rebellious spirit.

She was glad Reverend Robert Kirkland would be here soon. She could do with some support.