

Between Two Skies

“Would you like yorkshire pudding or watalappan?” the flight attendant asked. I looked at the record I held, bearing the words *‘Oh Darling Clementine’*. I was instantly transported back to a distant kitchen. A euphoria of songs rang in my ear as sweet flavours burst in my mouth.

I remembered our record player singing its favourite song *‘Oh my darlin’, oh my darlin’ Clementine...’* I had been looking out the window and watching the flowers of the cannonball tree fall, dancing in time with the song. I recalled taking the watalappan from the oven as my wife yelled, “Kids, the watalappan is ready!”.

“Dad!” they whined, “why are you eating all the watalappan?”

“Yes, I loved her, how I loved her” I sang in response, my mouth half full. My family pretended to groan but happily joined in, singing soon after.

“Excuse me sir!” the flight attendant repeated.

I was immediately snapped back into reality.

“Sorry, n-none, thank you!” I replied in my accented English, choking back tears at the memory.

I collected my thoughts and ran my fingers over the inscription written on the record by my children ‘Dear Dad, I hope you listen to this when you feel homesick’, dated 05/11/1989. A whole year had passed since I’d last seen my family, to whom I was returning today. Since I had last seen my home country, Sri Lanka.

I remembered the day I left home for London to complete my radiology scholarship. I had left excited about this new adventure. This had been an opportunity of a lifetime, and now doing my dream job felt like a dream come true. Now, it felt like a nightmare. I initially had been looking forward to starting college and meeting new people. However, as the months went on, the days grew longer, and I felt more alone. Every day I was laughed at for the way I ate, the way I talked, and the way I dressed. I started eating my meals privately, avoided speaking and hid in my room whenever possible. Each night I listened to '*Oh Darling Clementine*' for hours, trying to pretend I was home, dancing with my family. I could only afford to call home once a week, and I would cry when I first heard my family's voices and once again, when I had to hang up all too quickly when it became too expensive. I would try to hold onto the warmth of the telephone; however, shards of coldness pierced me once I stepped outside. London's iciness revealed its true nature. The world I had once thought to be welcoming and liberating was instead judgmental and alienating to the people it deemed 'different'.

The pilot suddenly announced we were landing, and I began to feel nervous to arrive home after so long. I thought about how I felt differently about Sri Lanka now. I had never truly appreciated how I had been treated in Sri Lanka with a sense of belonging. I felt a wave of hope that someday the rest of the world would become the accepting place I had once envisioned.

Looking out the window, I noticed the sky had changed. In London, the sky always looked grey and sad, constantly on the brink of crying heavy tears. But as we approached Sri Lanka it seemed to have a warm and inviting embrace. I was home.

A smile spread across my face when I finally stepped off the plane and saw my family in the airport waiting for me. One tune was playing in my head as I walked towards them, *How I missed her, how I missed my Clementine*".