

Repentance

Dr. Kumar
Pathirana?"

**Yes, Speaking. Who is
speaking there please?"**

"I'm from *Galgamuwa Ihala Ketiya*. I'm not your relation, but I have to break some sad news, sir. Your mother passed away this morning. For the last few days we have been trying to contact you ..."

"What? Are you sure? but it's .. it's ... how can it happen that soon?"

I think I received those calls while I was conducting lectures. Why didn't I care to ring back to know who it was? 037 – *Kurunagala* was my home town where I spent my whole childhood and a part of my youth. Am I such an ungrateful brute to forget my..."

My reverie was disturbed by another phone call. This time it was a familiar voice.

"*Pathiraya*, good morning, has any of your relations in *Galgamuwa, Ihalaketiya* passed away? The DMO

there is a batch mate of mine. Can you remember *Colombaya*? That's him. He asked me whether I was going to the funeral."

I felt a lump in my throat. I know his batch mate *Colombaya*. He was not only my co-worker but also my soulmate at *Ihalaketiya* Central College. My memories flew back to the time when I was studying at *Ihalaktiya* Central College. In spite of all the financial difficulties, my life went on enjoying the blessings of maternal love and the lightness of a carefree childhood. The memory of true friendship from *Pradeep*, who now bears the nickname *Colombaya* remained still intact.

We were studying in grade 10. We enjoyed every escapade a mischievous teen would have experienced. Fun filled summersaulting into the stream, cricket tournaments which ended up in the late evenings and soft chiding at home for being so late, marked my childhood. That was the time I lost my father. As the doctors said, he died due to excessive use of alcohol. My

mother, despite all misfortune that befell us, stood like a rock.

"Leave me the burdens, you do your studies." Her words echoed in my ears.

I dropped a message to my wife, *Thakshi*, and left home. She wasn't home yet, and I had no time to waste. At about 10 O clock, I reached *Galigamuwa, Ihalaketiya*. All the villagers had gathered at my house to pay their last respect to my mother. My mother lay motionless in the middle of our small living room. The soft murmuring that was triggered by my presence was like daggers in my ears.

"There, he has come at last"
"Such an ungrateful fellow....."

"Reached a high branch and forgot how he got up there"

"*Leela akka* never spoke ill of him, though."

"Yes, in spite of all that, she loved him dearly until her death."

A howling dog disturbed me. At the same time an old woman reached me and looked at me. I identified her. She

was one of my mother's close friends in the village.

"*Leela* was always expecting that you would come to see her any time. When she saw my grandchildren, she remembered yours. Every New Year she would make sweets and wait for you to come and see her with your family."

Her words filled me with an immense sense of guilt. The sharp looks that came from around me pierced deep, deep into my heart and made it bleed causing a severe pain.

On the day of the funeral, *Thakshi* came with her father. She suddenly started to play the main role in the funeral house. "What an act!" I told myself. If you had used such nice words when my mother was living, I would never have deserted my beloved mother. On the day my mother visited us at our house, I remember her words filled with disgust and hatred.

"*Aiyo, Roshan*, your mother is a betel spittoon. She doesn't know anything about good manners. Our lassie behaves better than her."

How could she compare my mother

to our pet dog? I was more helpless because I was living in the house given to *Thakshi* by her father. That was her first and last visit. She sensed the air of resentment inside the house and she never came again.

I cannot blame anyone. It was my mother. I should have cared for her and looked after her. I was her only treasure, her only son, who never repaid at least one hundredth of what she gave me all her life. But now it is too late.

"Thakshi,
you never understood my mother's love. She has written this house and ½ acre paddy field to her grandson."

I remember how she mortgaged the paddy field to meet my wedding expenses.

"We are not beggars. You should have a grand wedding." She placed on my

palm a set of five thousand notes worth five hundred thousand rupees.

"But how did you find it, *amma*?"

"Don't worry. I mortgaged our paddy field. I'll redeem it one day for your children." Her voice was resolute.

She had kept her word. And today she lies so calm and satisfied, ready to

leave everything with no regrets to carry. Our small house and the compound were filled with people.

Despite the endless chatter of people who have gathered in the house, I felt in me an irreplaceable void and solitude.

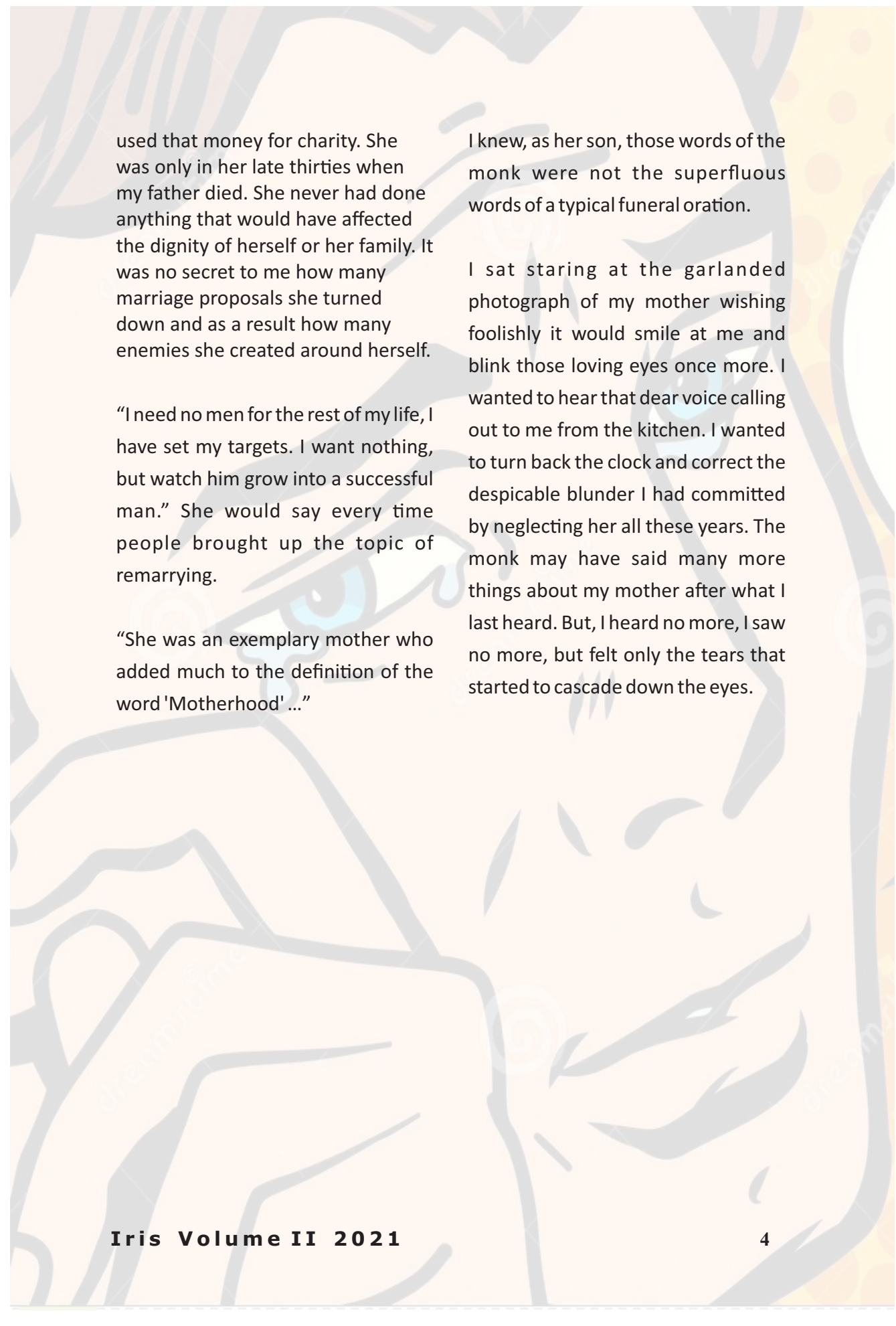
I sat behind the place where she lay, in order to perform the final

rituals. The monk began his sermon.

"People live and die. That is a fact. But some, only some can leave behind an impact that would not be forgotten by many " The monk continued.

I remembered how she would collect ten rupees every week from what she earned by selling string hoppers and

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used that money for charity. She was only in her late thirties when my father died. She never had done anything that would have affected the dignity of herself or her family. It was no secret to me how many marriage proposals she turned down and as a result how many enemies she created around herself.

“I need no men for the rest of my life, I have set my targets. I want nothing, but watch him grow into a successful man.” She would say every time people brought up the topic of remarrying.

“She was an exemplary mother who added much to the definition of the word 'Motherhood' ...”

I knew, as her son, those words of the monk were not the superfluous words of a typical funeral oration.

I sat staring at the garlanded photograph of my mother wishing foolishly it would smile at me and blink those loving eyes once more. I wanted to hear that dear voice calling out to me from the kitchen. I wanted to turn back the clock and correct the despicable blunder I had committed by neglecting her all these years. The monk may have said many more things about my mother after what I last heard. But, I heard no more, I saw no more, but felt only the tears that started to cascade down the eyes.