



GABRIEL

Pon Kulendiren- Canada

It was snowing heavily. A few days were left for Christmas. I was enjoying a sip of Scotch on the rocks and watching Discovery channel on T.V. My wife walked into the sitting room after preparing the dinner for the family. She looked at the clock that showed 5.30 in the evening. With a grimace, she turned towards me. It showed that she did not like me having a second drink. Black label bottle was a quarter empty. She quietly took the bottle and disappeared into her room. I ignored her action as I was reluctant to start a fight as she may have a long face while serving dinner. She returned after a few minutes.

“Appah, do you know the time now? She addresses me ‘Appah’, which means father in Tamil. The wife never addresses the husband by name in Tamil families and that is part of our culture although it has changed among the younger families. The younger wives call their husband by name or love or dear. My daughter Malathy is our only child. Until Malathy’s seventh year, she had her primary education back in our homeland, Sri Lanka, and from then on started calling me “Appah”.

” I saw you looking at the clock. Why are you asking me for the time?” I told her smiling.

“Appah this is not the time to joke.” She came and sat opposite me. I took my glass of scotch from the table fearing that she may take that too, away.

“Now what is your problem Mano?” I sipped the drink and got ready to confront her.

“My problem is our daughter’s problem. You have no control over her. She is not listening to me either. She is in her teens. Next year she will enter the University. She is our only child. We have come from a Tamil culture and we should preserve it. Many parents don’t care for the behavior of their children. But we do care for her”. She lectured to me.

“So do you mean to say that Malathy is not adhering to our culture in Canada?”

“Appah, twelve years ago we moved to Canada from Sri Lanka for the safety of our daughter and our family. When she came to Canada she was an innocent girl and knew our traditions and was very religious. But now, I feel that she is moving away from our traditions and culture. We both are from well respected high care families in Jaffna. My grandfather was an Udaiyar. The whole village knows about Uddaiyar Vallavu. I want my daughter to think about our roots.”

“Look Mano. Without beating about the bush and talking about your past and caste, come directly to the subject. What are you trying to say?”

“Appah, Malathy’s friends have warned me several times that she is very friendly with an East African boy named Gabriel. This boy is in her school Musical group. “

“So what is the problem? Canada is a multicultural country. There are many ethnic communities. Our Malathy cannot live a secluded life in school by being friendly only with the children of our community. That will not help her to understand the feelings and culture of children from other communities. I know that Malathy is in the school musical group. You know that she has some talent for playing instruments. That is why I bought her the Accordion and sent her for lessons. You should be proud that your daughter is good at music and is in the School musical group. She did mention one day to me about

Gabriel and how good he is in playing the guitar and at vocal. She also told me that they both plan to perform at the school Christmas party.

“So it means that you know about their friendship?”

I smiled and nodded.

“Now I know who is spoiling Malathy. You always encourage her and never say no to her. You will be regretting it one day.”

“Wait a minute Mano. Don’t come to hasty conclusions. It is only a friendship at school. Why are you blowing it up with your own imaginations?”

“These school friendships blossom into marriages. I know several cases in our community where school friendship has ended up in marriages and brought disgrace to the families. I do not want that to happen to our family. There are many relations of mine in Canada who will laugh at us”, Mano’s tone changed. I saw her becoming tensed up.

The doorbell rang to disrupt our conversation. We looked at each other.

“There it is. It is Malathy. The school was over two hours ago. Look at the time she is coming home?” She started again.

I placed the glass of whiskey on the table. “Mano please be quiet. Don’t start a fight with her as soon as she arrives”. I pleaded with my wife

I went and opened the door. To my surprise Malathy and a tall dark boy with curly hair were standing at the door, smiling. The boy was carrying a Guitar case in his right hand. I immediately guessed that he was her boyfriend, Gabriel. I smiled back at them.

“Appah, this is my friend Gabriel, the great guitar player I spoke about. Gabriel this is my father. I call him Appah? Coincidentally his name is Appadurai”. Malathy introduced me to her boyfriend.

It was a shock to me as the introduction came a few minutes so soon after a serious discussion with my wife about their friendship. It took me a few seconds to balance my thoughts.

“Hi uncle, I am Gabriel. I am in the same class as Malathy. Can I come in, please? Gabriel was polite and stretched his hand towards for a handshake. I regained my balance when I heard his voice. It sounded a familiar voice to me.

I shook hands with him. “Welcome to our house, Gabriel. Malathy has spoken to me about you. Come and sit please”.

I turned back to see the reactions of my wife. I expected an explosion. But I was surprised. She had disappeared from the sitting room. Probably she would have guessed from the voices the things to come and avoided an uncomfortable situation of meeting Gabriel with Malathy.

“Gabi, please make yourself comfortable. My father loves music. So you have some common topic to talk about. I will leave my books in my room and be back in a short while after a wash. Malathy left us together to get acquainted and disappeared.

Gabriel was a little shy and replied my questions cautiously.

I knew that he was a little tense. To make him relax, I started the conversation first on studies and then on music.

“Gabriel, how is Malathy in the class?.

“Uncle she is very good at Math and Science. She helps me in Math”.

I was proud to hear that about Malathy from her classmate. I thought to myself like the “father the daughter”.

“Gabriel. Did you learn to play the Guitar after coming to Canada?”

“No uncle. The love for guitar is in our family. My grandfather and father too were good at playing the Guitar. Probably I have inherited the talent from them.”

“Gabriel, from my old school days I too love all types of instrumental music. Only thing is that I know to enjoy it but don’t know how to play the instruments. Luckily Malathy has the talent for music. That is why I encourage her in learning the Accordion. How is she playing?”

“She is very good at playing Accordion uncle. She quickly picks up the notes. We both are planning to perform a combined program for the school Christmas party.”

“I am happy to hear that.” I refrained from asking personal questions such as details about the parents, how he came to Canada and his country of origin etc. I thought that those types of questions during the first meeting would upset him.

Malathy reappeared with a cup of coffee and a plate of Maliban biscuits.

“Gabi, have the coffee before it gets cold. These are popular biscuits from Sri Lanka ”.

She served Gabriel and then turned towards me.

“Appah where is ammah?” She inquired about my wife. Probably she wanted to introduce her boyfriend to her mother.

I had to lie to her. “She is having a severe headache and is resting in the bedroom” I replied without hesitating.

“Gabi today, we both are going to show appah the music piece we are planning to play at the Christmas party. Are you ready for it? Malathy asked.

“Why not?” replied Gabriel

She took the Guitar from the case and handed it over to Gabriel. He started tuning the guitar. I watched them seriously. Malathy brought her accordion from her bedroom. Within a few minutes, the sound of music filled the sitting room. It was a beautiful Christmas song "Mary's Boy Child/Oh My Lord" from my favorite, old Boney M group. It took me back to Sri Lanka. I sat there like a statue mesmerized by their combined effort. How is it appah? Malathy brought me back to my senses.

“That is really nice”. I did not want to show her my feelings.

“Gabi, now please sing my favorite song that you frequently sing and play for me. My father may like to hear that too. The tone of her request to Gabriel showed the closeness of their friendship.

Gabriel started singing Malathy’s favorite song. His Guitar synchronized with his voice beautifully. I was shocked to hear the tune of the song. It sent shivers down my nerves. It was my favorite “Single nona” (Sinhalese lady) Portuguese baila song. I could easily remember the meanings of the Portuguese texts of the song which goes as:

”Single nona (Sinhalese lady),

Eu kere Kasa (I wish to marry),

Porta ninkere (I don't want a house),

Orta ninkere (I don't want land),

Figa namas da (Only your daughter give), “

I could not believe that Gabriel knew that song. I was listening to it with an open mouth, fully frozen.

The rhythmic tune of the song switched my thoughts to a few decades in the backward direction and stopped in the year 1949.

It was the year after Ceylon attained independence from the British. My father was transferred from Jaffna Kachcheri, as Office Assistant to the Puttalam Kachcheri, a coastal town eighty miles North of Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka. I was then eleven years old and was moving into a new school environment. I was anxiously waiting to see new teachers, books, and friends from different communities. I was admitted to St. Andrews School, a Catholic institution located in the heart of Puttalam town. It was there I met Elias, the only student from the Kaffir community. Within a few weeks, we became friends. He was weak in arithmetic and I helped him on that subject. That strengthened our friendship.

He told me that during the Colonial period his forefathers were brought to Sri Lanka from East Africa as laborers and soldiers. A section of the Kaffir soldiers was stationed in Puttalam to guard the fort. A small group of one such community, the Kaffirs, settled in a village called Sirambiadi few miles from Puttalam along the Puttalam Anuradhapura road. Their features are more akin to the natives of Mozambique and Angola. Although the color of their skin has lightened over the years, they looked similar to Africans, having flat thick lips, bulging eyes, and curly hair. The only remaining tradition they treasure is their song and dance.

I was invited by Elias to a Christmas party. At the party, they all drank, played music similar to baila called Manja and danced holding each other's hands. That was the first time I knew that Elias could play the guitar and sing well. Their songs were mistaken for

baila, whereas they are known as 'manja'. The community is mainly Catholic. As a community, the Kaffirs were not wealthy. Except for a few houses made of brick, the rest are made of wood. Whenever I visited he made me happy by playing the "Sinhala Nona" baila song. He taught me to dance to the baila music.

Our friendship continued until I moved to Jaffna in 1955 for further studies. Whenever I came home for the holidays I made it a point to meet Elias and discuss our experiences at our schools. When my sister's family moved to Jaffna from Puttalam, I lost contact with Elias.

Again in 1974 I never expected that I would meet him when I visited Puttalam Post office on official business as Superintendent of Post Offices. I saw him working as a Postman in the mailroom. I was delighted to see him after many years. I told the Postmaster that I studied with his Postman Elias and that I would like to meet him. When I was introduced to him by the Postmaster, Elias could not recognize me. I reminded him of the Christmas party, the Sinhala Nona song, and arithmetic. He grinned and immediately grabbed my hands becoming emotional, kissed me and said: "God bless you, Sir". Tears of joy started rolling from his eyes. Few fell on my hand.

I said "Elias stop calling me Sir. I am your old friend. Call me by my name. Just because I lost contact with you that does not mean that I have forgotten you. How are your parents?" I inquired. He told me that his parents and wife passed away a few years ago and that now he lives with his son Sebastian who works in the Middle East. On my request, he took me to his home and played the musical instrument that was lying in a

corner covered with dust. He sang my favorite old school days' song. That was the last time I saw him.

The music stopped. There was an abrupt silence in the room. They were surprised to see tears rolling my eyes. Malathy was upset.

“Appah are you crying? What is the problem?”

“Nothing serious. Just old memories” and I wiped my tears.

As Gabriel was getting ready to go by packing the guitar, my curiosity overpowered me.

“Gabriel. Where did you learn this Song? Did you learn it after coming to Canada? I quietly fired the question at him.

“Yes, uncle. It is my Grandfather's favorite song. My father learned it from him. I learned to play the song from father after coming to Canada.”

Gabriel pulled out an old black and white photograph from his wallet and showed it to me.

“Uncle, this is my grandfather Elias. I have not seen him. But my father Sebastian told me that he was a nice man and good at music.”

When I looked at the photo, my heart missed a beat. I could not believe it.

“So Gabriel is my friend Elias's grandson. Oh god, the link has continued to the next generation”. Words would not come out of my mouth. I got up suddenly and hugged Gabriel and kissed him. Malathy and Gabriel were stunned to see me behaving in that unusual manner.
