

LIYANAGE AMARAKEERTHI

# A Thin Net over an Abyss

*Translated from Sinhalese by Chamini Kulathunga*

THE STORY I'M ABOUT TO TELL you might surprise you. It would surprise you only if you paid enough attention. For now, let's not worry about the names of the characters. Let's call them Man, Woman, and Child. Was it Baudelaire or Mallarmé who said "to define is to destroy"? Naming is also like that. To name is to kill.

The surprise element of the story began when Child was nine. Man, fifty. And Woman, forty-two. Child was born six years after Man and Woman got married. Although Man and Woman found success in every aspect of their lives as planned, their success in reproduction came a little late. It was the only occasion a bit of grit fell into their pure, well-planned, successful life. You wouldn't want to go as far as to say a piece of cow chip fell into a milk pot, as the Sinhalese saying goes. Someone once said, for a child to be born, a mother, father, and God must come together. But it looked like God had been nowhere near their bed of roses for about six years. However, the couple didn't show their worries to the outside world; they only worried about showing that they had everything the outside world could see. Woman studied for exams. So did Man. When Woman flew to Malaysia for a training session, Man flew to Singapore for work. "They don't have the time for anything else. They have to fly everywhere," their mothers said to other mothers.

Man's parents were teachers; so were Woman's. They both grew up hearing the mantra, "If you don't get a good education, the world will laugh at us. Remember, your parents are teachers." One of the surprising elements of the story is that this mantra was chanted verbatim in both households. How did this happen? Were they neighbors? No, the two houses were hundreds of kilometers away. In two separate districts. Two separate provinces. Until Man and Woman got married, the two houses knew nothing of each other's existence.

"Tell me the truth. Did they really use those exact words?" Woman asked Man once, when she was still young.

“I’m telling the truth. Perhaps a word or two may have switched places, but they used the same words,” Man replied.

The two met in college. When they learned these facts about each other, they were surprised, too. Fate had brought them together, they thought.

“We’re very similar. So are our families. How surprising is that, right? Maybe that’s why your eyes were fixed on me during the college rag season, *aiya*,” Woman once said to Man. Back then, Woman called Man “*aiya*,” big brother. She only started calling him by name years after they got married.

“We’re the living proof that fate can indeed work wonders. Maybe things like Cupid’s arrow and ‘the one’ are real after all,” Man replied. He was in his senior year.

Or perhaps there were no arrows from Cupid to begin with. When two people come from similar financial backgrounds, were raised chanting the same mantra, educated in similar-ranking schools, and get into the same university to take the same courses, what’s left for Cupid to do? What indeed had happened was that two trains had left Colombo to Badulla. Not only had the trains left for the same destination, but they had also run parallel to each other at the same speed. The rail lines had been laid out because there were trains. And the trains were running because there were rail lines. So, in such a journey, there was no time for Cupid to shoot arrows. Had one of the trains taken a detour and left for Kuliyaipitiya from Peradeniya, instead of running to Badulla, one could have said that Cupid had succeeded in his arrow-shooting business to some extent.

Because their parents were teachers, they had the right connections. The parents made a few visits to the local education offices and then to provincial and national educational directors’ offices, obtained letters from the leaders of the teachers’ unions, requested that the leaders make some calls, and made sure their children got into prestigious schools. That was why they’d joined the unions anyway.

Even if the two schools were in two different cities, they adopted similar teaching strategies. Therefore, the schools were essentially the same. It was a time when the schools didn’t strictly prioritize the admission of the children of veterans, doctors, and university professors. So, the teachers could unreservedly enjoy the benefits of universal free education for their own children.

All right. The girl and boy were now enrolled in the schools. Once

the parents found good private tutors from the area, threatened the kids to adhere to an additional precept apart from the five Buddhist precepts, and made sure the kids grew up, everything was set for the kids to find themselves in college. Oh, by the way, the sixth precept was to study hard and parrot back the textbooks.

There was also a Plan B. And no, B didn't stand for Bamba, the creator god. In case the parents failed to get the kids into a prestigious school from the get-go, Plan B was to enroll them in the schools where the parents worked, find the best private tutors who would help the kids get a higher score on the grade five Scholarship Exam, subject them to constant monitoring, and then transfer to a school in Plan A. The trick was to make sure to chant the mantra several times a day: "If you don't get a good education, the world will laugh at us. Remember, your parents are teachers."

"It was the sixth precept in our house," Man once confessed to Woman at college.

"Really? Ours too," Woman answered.

It was during that time when they told each other about their families. They also got to know a little during the rag season, as was the custom. Once we are done saying the *I love yous*, all we talk about from that point on is our families rather than love, don't we? It was the same for this young couple. They first covered the main topics related to their families. Then the subtopics that emerged from the main.

So, the kids passed the Scholarship Exam in fifth grade, the Ordinary Level Exam in eleventh grade, and the Advanced Level Exam in thirteenth grade. The four teachers were happy. You remember the two teacher-couples, right? They were now safe from the laughter of the world. It must have been a strange world, because no one seemed to be laughing at the kids whom these teachers taught who constantly failed their exams. If the world laughed at all those kids who weren't able to pass exams, there would be laughter everywhere. As if it were a carnival. But why would the world laugh at kids? If you carefully unpack the sixth precept, you can see what was bound to happen to the kids whose parents weren't teachers. *If you don't get a good education, the world will laugh at us. Remember, your parents are teachers.* Man and Woman did indeed see through it. The fate of the kids without teacher-parents was predestined: they were supposed to be failures in the world of Man's and Woman's parents. So, during their railway journey, if they came across people who were good at their studies and whose parents

weren't teachers, they were genuinely surprised. They saw such people as geniuses, or lucky, or exemplary. They admired kids like that. "There were many times when I felt sorry for the kids who failed their exams in the schools where my parents worked," Man once confessed. "Me too," Woman agreed.

The more time passed, the more they discovered how much they had in common. They found people who led similar lives to spend their time with. We hardly ever get bored when we spend time with people like ourselves, don't we? When we have to spend time with people who've led different lives, we have to listen to things we don't understand. We have to make an extra effort to understand them. And then we get frustrated. So the couple picked people like them, who wouldn't make them understand new ways of looking at life, and so they led a happy life.

They obtained degrees. Took the college batch photo. Enlarged and framed photos of themselves wearing their regalia. Found good jobs. Got married. Built a house. Bought a brand-new car. Got promoted. Had Child, albeit after a little delay. Enrolled him in an English medium preschool. Made friends with people who had kids in English medium preschools. Became happy if the new friends lived similar lives. And if they didn't, Man and Woman found happiness in each other's company.

They planned every aspect of their life to the extent that on the first day of every month they already knew what their breakfast menu would be on the 18th. It was at this point in their life that the following incident happened. Before I tell you that, there's something I need to confess. Man in the story is me. Woman, my wife. Child, my son. The reason I used these names in the first part of the story was because that's how I'd like to look at my life up to that point: generic. And I feel sorry about both of our parents. Annoyed, sometimes. Their entire life was about herding me, my wife, and our siblings in the direction I've explained so far.

Here comes our surprise story.

ONE DAY, when I was thirteen, I was punished for breaking the sixth precept. A "nasty kid" in my class taught me how to screen a movie on a wall using a flashlight. This is how it's done: you need a box six to seven inches long with a height and breadth of two inches. A big rectangular Cream Crackers box is ideal. Or a long Swiss roll cake box.

First, you need to make a hole in one end of the box, a hole big enough to slip a flashlight bulb through. On the other end, you need to cut a square-shaped hole of about one inch. Or slightly bigger. Remove the head of the flashlight and the protective glass, slip the bulb through the first hole you made on the box, and let it sit there. When you switch it on, the light comes out from the square hole on the other end. There: you've got a projector. Keep the end with the square-cut shape facing a wall and hold a used roll of film in between the box and the wall. If the roll is long, unfurl it fast, so the pictures will also move faster. The nasty kid had several old rolls he'd gotten from his uncle who worked at the Imperial Cinema. He had also made his own film by drawing pictures with red, blue, and black pens on a roll of polythene. He'd used stories from the weekly magazine *Sittara*.

The nasty kid not only taught me how to make the flashlight projector, he also gave me his hand-drawn polythene film roll along with a used one from his uncle. Soon, I was obsessed with the film-screening business. And I started breaking the sixth precept. The precepts are bound to be broken at some point, right? Isn't that why they've been imposed on humankind in the first place? Why isn't there one like "Thou shall not fly"? Because those who make precepts know that people can't fly and wouldn't try it anyway. There are precepts because it's natural for people to perform the restricted verbs that follow the "shall not."

As I went deep into the projecting business, I wanted to make a theater of my own. So I pushed my desk into a corner of my room, covered it with the biggest blanket I could find in the house, and crawled under the table. It was dark. Pitch dark. I held the projector against the black space in front of me. Almost all the pictures from the Imperial Cinema were the same, but not the ones the nasty kid had drawn. They had characters like Toga, Yuniko, Dedunu, and Kalum from comics. There was also a picture of a man and a woman doing that thing. It was so lifelike! As if he'd seen them doing it for real.

It was when I was staring hypnotically at this last picture that my mother looked under the table. The couple was doing it on the wall. My teacher-mother ran away with a high-pitched squeal. In her mind, I'd broken several precepts under that pitch-dark table. Then my teacher-father tried me and passed a verdict. I was made to kneel down and chant the sixth precept for a good while. Mother lodged a complaint with one of her teacher-friends in my school to catch the

nasty kid who spoiled the innocent kids of the teachers. She made sure the nasty kid's teachers found the "nasty film roll" in his backpack. In order to protect the sixth precept, I had to break the fourth: "I shall not lie." I didn't bother finding out what happened to the nasty kid after that.

Did I tell you that I was reminded of this incident when my son was nine? It was when this memory gatecrashed my mind that I realized how our lives had been running on precepts, charts, formulas, and multiplication tables all this time. And now, we're running on constitutions and establishment codes.

The nasty kid's father was a carpenter. I doubt whether they took the first five precepts seriously in their household at all, let alone the sixth. Perhaps that was why he was able to win the national literary award for the best novel of the year recently. I heard that he had had to transfer to a small school after the projector incident. I even found his phone number. But didn't have the courage to phone him. I was ashamed of myself, of what I'd done.

Instead, I decided to build a projector with my son. Now that I'd already proved to the world that I was reaping the benefits of the sixth precept, I was free to do whatever I wanted. So was my wife. There was a rumor that in order to get the Assistant Educational Director position, she hadn't had to uphold the sixth precept as much, but rather to break the third: "I shall not engage in conjugal relationships out of wedlock." However, I didn't let the fire inside the house reach the outside world. And I honored her devotion to the sixth precept.

Everything was all right. We'd accomplished everything in life.

The time had come for our parents to boast of their parenting.

Apart from the unsettling sense of guilt that had been stirred up in my mind following the news of the now grown-up nasty kid's award, something else also happened in the house. It was a crisis my wife and I had not seen coming, so we had to face it quite unplanned. It made us look back at our lives. The crisis was that the honorable sixth precept didn't seem to work with our child, nor with our parenting. For him, it wasn't a precept at all. For one, we weren't teachers. And we've secured higher-up positions in the government service and have friends in similar positions. So we'd already managed to get him to one of the best schools in the country from the get-go and didn't have to worry about a Plan B.

So, I thought of teaching my son how to build the projector that

I once built under my pitch-dark desk although I could've easily bought him a far more sophisticated projector from the store. With a multimedia projector, he'd be able to play real movies on it. Instead, as a tribute to the nasty kid, whom I'd begun to realize was a genius I'd betrayed, I taught my son to build a toy projector.

Unlike in my childhood days, we could easily find a cardboard box suitable for the purpose. Many products come in boxes nowadays. After my mother caught me under the table, she crushed and flattened the cake box I'd found after going to considerable trouble, but she kept the roll of film with her. What she couldn't flatten out was the knowledge I'd gained from building the projector. The more I thought of the incident, the more I was determined to tell this story to my son one day.

I wasn't sure if my son would even like the projector. I asked a friend who worked at the National Film Corporation to get me some old film rolls. While waiting for them, we tried the projector with various other things. Even our own drawings on tissue paper. I wanted to try the projector the next time my mother visited us. It felt like I was coming out in my middle age.

Although we had things like big-screen TVs, sophisticated home studio sets, and broadband internet in the house, the monochromatic pictures this magic toy projector created on the walls brought a fresh sense of happiness to our family.

We turned off all the lights in our spacious living room. The farther we walked from the wall, holding the projector against it, the larger the projected pictures appeared. We experimented with new things. We tied a dead gecko to a thread and held it against the projector: it looked like an enormous alligator, and then a dinosaur. Even a fly could be enlarged to the size of a dinosaur. That was when we realized how big our house had been. Even a dinosaur could live there.

Seeing a dinosaur inside our own house was strange for a couple like us; we thought that, since we'd seized everything in life, we'd seen and heard everything in life. When we held a dragonfly against the projector, it was enlarged to the size of a Pteranodon. The three of us walked into a world that existed sixty-five million years back. It was as if all those big animals were freely roaming around our living room. Although we could only see the animals we projected, when we imagined we were in a jungle, we could see various shapes in dark corners we'd never noticed before.

One day, when we got home from work, our son had moved from his world of pictures to a world of words. My friend at the National Film Corporation must have forgotten about the film roll. So I brought some transparent cellophane papers from my office that were used to create slides for overhead projectors. Those were no longer in use. I could easily slip them off my inventory list. The precepts weren't a part of my son's world of projected images. I also got him some markers to write on them. I wonder whether his shift from pictures to words had something to do with a lie I'd once told him, that I used to project difficult English words onto the wall to study them as a child. I told you, right? It was a lie. What do lies matter in a projected world with no precepts?

Although I had studied difficult English words as a child, it was Sinhalese words that my son found difficult. And he didn't just write difficult words on the slides. He wrote whatever came to his mind. Sometimes my wife would write down words for him. And sometimes I would. It was fun.

MIRROR. He held it onto the door. GRANDMA to the living room. GRANDPA to the floor. MOTHER to the closet. FOOD to the window. LOVE to the couch. BED to the table.

It brought us new sensations. Our well-planned world became a mess and we started to feel relaxed. The bed was a table. The table was rice. Rice was sugar. Love was the couch. Mirror was the door. The door was a tree. The family was a vase. The vase was love. Education was the tiled floor. We kept projecting these words onto different things. What a wonderful feeling! It was as if the thin, mystic line between language and reality had cracked open, showing us the bare skeleton of the world.

We projected nouns onto the walls and lived in a world of no other word groups.

It started to feel less complicated when we didn't have to worry about adjectives like BEAUTIFUL, UGLY, TALL, SHORT, and STINKY.

It was wonderful to see how adjectives became helpless in the absence of nouns.

And a life without verbs was lighter.

We began to realize that the machine that we'd invented was not only a projector but also a surgical system that performed surgery on the world in which we'd been living.



The incident I'm going to tell you about took place on the second floor of our house. While projecting nouns onto other nouns, our son held MIRROR onto the ceiling. And he stared at it.

The three of us shortly found ourselves staring at the ceiling.

"What is a mirror?" our son asked suddenly.

We didn't tell him at once.

"What do you think a mirror is?" I asked him back.

He was still projecting MIRROR onto the ceiling.

"A looking glass," he said after a pause.

"Yeah? How so?"

"Look," he pointed his finger at the ceiling.

Gradually, we could see the ceiling turning into a mirror.

"Oh, that's right," my wife said.

The entire ceiling had indeed turned into a mirror. Not only could we see the shadows of the living room in it, we could also see objects from the living room downstairs that were visible through the design of the handrail. We were pleasantly surprised.

"Where are we?" he asked us.

"Keep looking. You'll see us, too. And don't move the flashlight," my wife answered him.

I silently wished that we could see ourselves before the flashlight's batteries died.

Don't you think we'd already seen ourselves, even if we hadn't yet realized it?