**LIVING IN MANCHESTER**

We had arrived in England, but our journey was not over because we had to take the train from Southampton to Waterloo where Ben Fernando, a Sri Lankan friend, agreed to meet us. We were so happy to see a familiar face amid a sea of unfamiliar white faces as the train arrived at Waterloo. He took us to the *Ceylon Student Centre* which was a hostel for Sri Lankan students and visitors. The accommodation was basic but cheap, besides, we were only going to be there for a few days. Alagan’s brother-in-law and wife visited us and took us out to a meal. Bubbian’s sister Vino was in London which was great. We made a trip to St Albans where my dear childhood friend Poppy and her husband lived. Poppy left Sri Lanka to travel to England to get married. When I was still in hospital after giving birth to Niro, Poppy came to see me and told me about the reason for her impending departure. I was not sure she was doing the right thing but had to let her go without comment. When she was told that we were on our way to visit her she got so excited that she threw down the hairbrush with which she was brushing her hair, unable to contain her excitement. Such was our friendship which began in primary school and had grown stronger over the years, even though after our senior year we went our separate ways. We kept in touch and met from time to time. At school we were both painfully thin and competed with each other about who was fatter. Once after the holidays when we met at school I asked Poppy whether I looked fatter. She looked me up and down with a withering look and said, “You are less thin!” After the senior year we parted because her parents decided to send her to Colombo for her HSC. But we stayed in touch. After more than two years we were going to meet each other again. The train ride from London to St Albans in Hertfordshire was long and costly but it was worth the tedium and expense to see my friend again. We had lunch with Poppy and Mahen and really enjoyed catching up. It was so good to see familiar faces because ever since we arrived in London we were feeling isolated. We were going into the unknown with small children and completely oblivious of how things would work out. Before we left for Manchester Vino kindly took us shopping to *Marks and Spence* and advised us what to buy. We needed to be equipped for winter weather because it was already September. We had no clue as to what we needed. Ariam and the girls needed warm coats. Someone had given me a coat which was old fashioned long and ugly but in the interest of saving money that coat was what I wore during the winter months which seemed to last forever in Manchester. I consoled myself by thinking that no one knew me there. Of course, I could remove the coat once I got indoors. We bought anoraks for the children and Ariam bought himself a duffel coat with a hood which students seemed to favour and it was cheap. Soon the time came to leave sunny London and travel to a cold and drippy Manchester where we expected to live for three years. We had never been abroad and never before had to fend for ourselves alone in a foreign country. Even the weather was extreme. I had to enrol at the University of Manchester and Ariam at the Institute of Technology. To ensure he would get his visa Ariam had applied for two night courses. We consulted bus schedules and found our way to the university and the institute for our registrations.

We had arranged accommodation in a flat in a suburb called Didsbury through Sri Lankans who lived next door. They were a PhD student with his wife and son. Hiran had almost completed his doctorate and they were planning to leave for Sri Lanka in a few weeks after we arrived. The plan was that we would move into their flat when they left because it was much better than ours. Both flats belonged to the same Pakistani landlord. Hiran and his wife were tremendously helpful to us when we were settling in. We were feeling so overwhelmed and so alone, so having helpful neighbours was a God send. The flat we moved into was very depressing. It was dank and not proofed against the chilly air creeping through the small gaps under doors and windows. Also, each room was separate from the other rooms. There was a bedroom with bathroom, a dining room and kitchen, and a lounge which we never used in either flat because it would be expensive to heat. Besides the visitors we had congregated in the dining room anyway. I do not know what the neighbours in opposite houses thought because the drapes were permanently closed. At Christmas when we bought a chicken for a celebratory meal we put the frozen chicken in the lounge to keep it frozen. When we brought it into the kitchen to cook on Christmas morning it was still firmly frozen. Ariam took the meat cleaver to the chicken so hard he split the wooden chopping board also in half!

We felt the cold so very much because our heating was woefully inadequate. The rental agreement was that the landlord who was to supply us everything gave us only a small electric heater to warm our rooms and it did not provide much heat. We also had to move it from the bedroom to the kitchen-dining room and back. The four of us huddled together in one large bed. The blankets too were thin and did not provide the warmth we needed. The kids wore their anoraks to bed and fell asleep but Ariam and I shivered through the night for many nights and hardly slept. We felt so dejected. Everything was grey and dismal. The only redeeming thing was the location of our flat. It was quite close to a convenience store and a news agency. It took time though to settle in. At first we did not go further afield for groceries and lived mostly on canned foods. Ariam had to go to the Institute one day so I was alone with the children. The children played quietly. When it was time for lunch I decided to open a can of *Fray Bentos* steak and kidney pie. We had a butterfly can opener but I could not get it to work. I struggled for some time and decided my can opener was faulty and borrowed one from our neighbours. I could not get that to work either. The children were hungry but because of the unusual circumstance and the fact that I was on the verge of tears they kept silent. Finally, after a desperate struggle fuelled by the urgent need to feed my hungry children I got the can opened and put it in the oven and so we were able to have lunch. Getting used to a different cuisine was not easy and neither of us was practiced at cooking. We managed as best as we could. It was a steep learning curve.

We learnt that a bus went past our home to a TESCO supermarket. People from the third world who move to western countries often suffer something called ‘*option fatigue.’* When we go into a grocery store to buy something, we are overwhelmed by the choice before us. In Sri Lanka we do not have different varieties of tomatoes or potatoes, whereas in England there was quite a variety and this was a challenge. There was much we needed to learn about things that impacted our daily lives. We were so hopelessly out of our depth. For a long time, our weekly budget for groceries had to be just £3.00. We could not afford to spend more. Ariam became quite adept at managing to keep it within the limit every week. Only once he exceeded it slightly. He asked the shop assistant at the checkout to

take-off one item but she had great difficulty making the subtraction without a machine to do it.

I need to explain our exceptionally challenging financial situation. My salary as assistant lecturer at the university converted to pounds was a mere £60 a month. Our house rent alone was £26 a month which left us with just £34 for everything else such as groceries, heating, and sundry expenses. It was truly a struggle. Our children though so young understood our poverty and never asked for anything. But once in a while returning from school Githo would ask as they walked past a confectionary store, very timidly of course, “Daddy, do you have any money?” Most days Ariam bought her the cupcakes she wanted. Githo then rushed home excitedly and insisted on clearing the dining table, which served many purposes, least of which was sitting down to have a meal at. She had to be satisfied with having only a part of the table cleared. She would then lay a table cloth and get out the plates and forks as well as tea cups and insist we sat at the table to have tea and cake. The fact that she had to ask Ariam so timidly for cakes was distressing because she was just a four year old child and cakes were not expensive. She seemed to sense our need to be careful. We had to practise wise budgeting. Since we needed to have sufficient protein in our diet we decided to include canned fish once a week. Ariam absolutely hated canned fish before we went to England but he agreed to eat it just to economise. The greatest hardship was the lack of sufficient heating. At the first flat we just had one electric bar heater. Electric bar heaters apart from being ineffective are also dangerous. Once Ariam held his stockinged feet near the heater to warm them. Ariam’s feet were always like ice blocks but suddenly he smelt smoke and found a tiny hole in a sock. A tragedy almost happened one day when Ariam had to go to a nearby store to get lunch. He tucked the girls in bed and told them to stay there till he returned. We always knew they would. But when Ariam returned he found the room filled with smoke and the children cowering in a corner looking terrified. There was a smouldering pillow on the floor. It is heartbreaking to think back to those years because our children experienced much privation at an early age. What transpired was that Niro who sucked her fingers while falling asleep holding on to the corner of her pillow, found her pillow very cold so she asked Githo to warm it for her. Githo obligingly held it in front of the bar heater and it caught fire but thankfully it did not burn. Ariam quickly opened the window and let the smoke escape. He threw out the pillow and comforted the children. The newer flat had a gas heater fitted in the bedroom and a friend brought us a paraffin heater. The paraffin heater was safer and economical but the pungent smell of paraffin lingered and also there was the possibility of carbon monoxide poisoning if we used it too long. The flat had an ancient water heater which took hours to heat up. So, we bathed the children only once a week before they went to bed. We all had to have our baths on different days. Although Manchester was using smokeless coal, when we had a bath the water got discoloured.

Now that we were in better accommodation we felt more settled. In time we made friends. At the universities in Manchester and Salford there were young and single Sri Lankan men who somehow found their way to our home. Word got around that there was a Sri Lankan family living in Withington and soon we had visitors dropping in during the weekends for a home-cooked meal. At first not knowing much about Sri Lankan cooking we struggled but we learned fast. Our first few attempts were hardly palatable but soon Ariam and I became skilled at cooking tasty curries. We had brought all the necessary ingredients for cooking a curry. I had a cousin, Barathan who lived in Oldham (close to Manchester) and he dropped in frequently. Having all these friends helped to brighten our lives because we were no longer alone. We found a Methodist Church within walking distance and the church proved to be a source of continual support. They assigned a lady to care for us and at Christmas she brought the children gifts and the church sent us a Christmas hamper. My former teacher from Jaffna who now lived in Essex in retirement sent us a parcel of treats. So, during our first Christmas we were happier than we expected to be. Although we were alone and lacking funds to buy even simple luxuries we were blessed by people reaching out to us. For the rest of our stay there we were never alone for long because apart from our Sri Lankan friends, members of the church as well as their minister supported us. If we did not attend church on Sunday the minister dropped in to see if we were doing OK. The church was large but the congregation was small. The people however were friendly and the children attended Sunday School.

When I started classes I left for the university each morning taking the bus to Oxford Street south of the city of Manchester. When I went to the administration to enrol for my MEd I was told that I had to do an advanced diploma first and depending on my performance in it they would determine my eligibility for the Master’s. This was a grave setback because I was given only three years of leave to obtain a PhD. It would now be impossible to do it because I would only have two years which was insufficient to complete a doctorate. I was extremely disappointed. I enrolled in an advanced diploma course. Our class consisted of ten students. Seven of them were Englishmen and of the rest, one was Singaporean and the other Ugandan. I was the only woman in the class from Sri Lanka. I do not remember the names of most of the lecturers now but I will always remember Gareth Lewis because he taught us statistics and made it easy and later he was my statistical adviser for the Master’s Degree. He helped me very much. The teaching overall was uneven although some of it was stimulating. Always the need to do well to be admitted to the MEd course haunted me. I passed well despite the domestic commotion we went through just before the exam and I qualified to proceed with the Master’s.

Ariam commenced classes at John Dalton in the evenings. When I returned home Ariam met me at the door and handed me a mug of coffee and left for his classes. I took over the task of looking after the kids and getting them their dinner. Afterwards, I sat down to my studies. The all-purpose dining table was my study table too. The children played in the bedroom. Often, I had the TV on while studying because I liked background noise. We had a small black and white TV we bought cheaply. Whenever the kids heard an advertisement on TV they ran into the dining room to watch it and ran back to the bedroom to continue playing. One such Ad I remember showed a large green crocodile brushing his teeth to a jingle, “Up and down, up and down till they’re clean and sparkling.” Because they went to bed late they woke up late in the morning during the first months. It was only after they went to bed that we retired for the night but first we had to put away the toys and tidy up. We had fewer hours of sleep than we were used to but because the climate was invigorating we could do with less sleep. We had a large bed and the four of us cuddled in for warmth. It was extremely cold at night so having warm bodies close was comforting.

During the day Ariam looked after the girls. There was a program called *‘Watch with Mother’* at 10 am and if the children were up (which was most of the time later on) Ariam watched it with them. Ariam once grumbled that he was the only father who watched ‘Watch with Mother’ with the children. When Githo started schooling he walked her to school in the mornings and fetched her in the afternoons when school was out. During the weekend friends dropped in. They craved home-cooked meals and the company of fellow Sri Lankans. Chicken was a favourite because back home chicken was a rarity, so we cooked chicken for lunch. On Sundays we went to church. We did house cleaning and laundry too at the weekend. We had to go to a laundromat for big items but handwashed the smaller items. The washbasin was in the bedroom and often Niro would make a beeline to it because she loved playing with water! Things fell into a routine and time moved on.

Suddenly and unexpectedly our lives turned upside down. We were not equipped in any way for a crisis. Ariam’s young cousin had come to England expecting to marry a young man in London. But the arrangement fell through. To get a visa to travel to England she had applied to study nursing so she had no choice but to enrol for the training if she desired to continue to live there. At that time nurses’ training began with tasks such as scrubbing floors and giving bedpans. They were given the most menial of tasks and our young cousin absolutely hated it. In Sri Lanka she had hoped to study Medicine and having servants at home she probably did not do domestic chores. Hospital Matrons are usually strict but it seemed there was a hint of racism in the way she was treated. Unable to adjust to doing lowly tasks she did not thrive. She was young and living alone in an entirely unfamiliar environment and feeling miserable. In the course of time, she had a complete mental breakdown. The hospital where she was working immediately dispatched her to a mental asylum. Ariam’s brother Bubby had arrived in London to further his medical career about that time. He heard about the fate of their cousin. He called us to ask if we could have her live with us until he could find a way to send her back home to Jaffna. The alternative was dire because she had formed a relationship with a mental patient at the asylum who was married and they were planning to leave and live in his car. Even though we were living in a one-bedroomed apartment and on a tight budget we had no choice but to say yes. Here was a young girl, a relative who had fallen into difficult times so we knew we had to help her. Ariam slept in the dining room so that she could sleep in our bedroom on a single bed we had. It was cramped but we managed. Bubby arrived with the cousin. She seemed deeply traumatised and was diagnosed as schizophrenic. Our ordered life was challenged. The cousin spent most of the time in bed and was reluctant to communicate with us. After some weeks she began to feel better and started talking to us and told us about some of her experiences in London. As an intelligent woman she could have gone to university but here she was going nowhere. She wanted to go back home but she had no money for the airfare and we did not have the means to help her. She decided she needed to work and save money for her fare home. Since she felt better she went to work in a stationery store close to the university. The work was not hard but she came home exhausted each evening. A few weeks of working proved too much for her and one morning she had a relapse. She started behaving oddly and accused Ariam of trying to hurt her. So, she felt that she needed to run away and find security in a police station. Ariam followed her at a distance each time, once or twice accompanied by a friend. Each time Ariam had to convince the police he had no evil intent in following her and with their help got her home. However, she kept on running away and each time she found different police stations to run to. One night a policeman brought her home and stayed all night and in the morning he contacted the GP and Social Services. The GP medicated her which seemed to quieten her. They tried to find a facility that could take her in for treatment but the waiting list at these institutions was long. With medication and counselling she seemed to settle down. Since she spent much time in bed she did not experience stress so she was doing ok till one day she decided it was time to resume work again. Since we had no control over her we could not stop her when she took the bus to work. However, she did not last long. Within a few days she had a serious meltdown around midday at the shop and the employer was able to get her into a mental institution immediately. The place she was taken to was far from our home but we knew she was safe. She was there for some weeks and improved. When the doctors wanted to meet with us to discuss discharging her I went there. Her family had managed to organise travel for her and so she was sent home. I saw the psychiatrist who had treated her just before her release and he told me that with medications she could function reasonably well. We were sad that a beautiful young woman’s life had been so ravaged because she came to a foreign country and had to work in a job she hated. It was a monumental tragedy. It left us shaken and the kids were noticeably quiet and troubled. Our lives were so severely disrupted. During the time of the breakdown my studies were completely suspended. I was too consumed by what was happening with our cousin, not knowing how to deal with it. All this happened just days before my exam. How I managed to pass and pass well despite the harrowing days was just by God’s grace. I qualified to enrol for the Master’s. We were grateful to our friends, the GP, Social Services, and the Police for their help. Above all we were grateful to God who sustained us through it all.

Life went back to normal and the winter cold began to dissipate. We were so tired of chilly days and nights. Because Manchester is wet we did not have much snow but when it snowed and then melted the water froze and became like sheets of glass which was extremely slippery to walk on and we both had to hang on to Niro who walked carefree and was in danger of a nasty fall. Wearing several layers of clothing weighed us down. I wore the saree to the university each day and it was not as warm as wearing pants. But my long coat kept the worst of the chill at bay. Each of us had only one pair of footwear which had to last us through our time there. I bought a handsome pair of hushpuppy leather shoes but before I left for home they had worn so thin that there was a tiny hole in one shoe. I had to avoid puddles because it was hell when freezing water snuck inside the shoe. Ariam and the children had sturdier footwear and fared better. Although Ariam and the children slept well at night, I did not. I woke up each morning with a pain in my neck. I mentioned this one day to a classmate. She was from Jerusalem and was in Manchester to study for her Master’s. She suggested that our blankets were not warm enough. The agreement with our landlord was that he would supply us with **all** our household needs but he fell far short and the blankets were thin and probably from army surplus. So, we decided to invest in a decent blanket and a quilt. From that time, I felt warmer and had better sleep.

 When the longed-for summer warmth was delayed I asked a lady at church when summer would come. Her answer was not at all reassuring because she said, “One day is a bit warmer than the rest and we call that summer”! Summer, although late was gloriously warm and dry, a welcome respite for us. During summer Ariam’s colleague at college helped him secure a summer job at Kellogg’s. This meant so much for us because we were able to creep out of poverty and have more to spend and not have to budget so strictly. It was just a cleaning job but it paid well. During summer it seemed every working man in England felt it was obligatory to take a summer vacation with his family. It was a tradition that was deeply entrenched. When they returned from their holiday they brought photos to share and talked about the great time they had. People who did not go felt embarrassed they had no holiday tales to share. Hence summer jobs were easy to find and Ariam jumped at the chance of earning money to augment our stretched-thin finances.

During our second summer too, Ariam hoped to get work at Kellogg’s. But his hopes were dashed when he went for the mandatory medical examination before commencing work. He was told that his blood pressure was too high and he was medically unfit for work. This was an enormous blow. We had relied so much on the money Ariam might earn. Ariam was determined to do something about it and went immediately to our GP. The GP was an older German and a kindly man. He felt that Ariam’s weight could be the source of his elevated blood pressure. He suggested that Ariam should go on a strict diet for two weeks. It was a punishing diet that allowed Ariam only one thousand calories per day. This was a huge challenge because it was so hard for Ariam to keep to the limit. A cup of rice was two hundred calories, a slice of bread sixty-six and a cup of milk one hundred and three. He was virtually starving. He told me that he woke up hungry and went to bed hungry each day. He bought a book that detailed the calorie count for every item of food to help him adhere strictly to the diet. It was painful to watch him go through with it. After the first week his blood pressure came down significantly and by the second week it was normal. His suffering paid off because when he went back to Kellogg’s after two weeks they took him on. That summer was so much better because we had more money and were able to venture further afield. We were able to go out and enjoy walks in parks or have picnics outdoors. Accompanied by a friendly Sri Lankan woman my children and I took the bus to the cinema to see *My Fair Lady* and the children were so excited about the outing. The minister of our church invited us to afternoon tea and another member of our church invited us to high tea and a drive into Derbyshire to see the beautiful countryside and visit a retired minister of the church in a retirement home. Accompanied by Mahinda we took the children to an amusement park. While Ariam and I stood watching, Mahinda took the children on some rides. During the second year my brother arrived with his family in London to undertake further studies. Thamby enrolled at the London School of Tropical Medicine and did a Master’s Degree first and then aPhD. Thamby was academically brilliant and was awarded the prize for the best student at the Master’s Degree and received a medal and a cash prize. His doctoral thesis was in parasitology. Because Thamby and his family were in London we made a few trips there by coach. But before they arrived we visited our friends Ben and Ira and their two little daughters in London. Our girls were overjoyed to find children to play with. While there we did some sightseeing. We attended the Easter parade at Battersea Park and took in other popular sites such as the Tower of London and Buckingham Palace. The following summer they were guests at our home. How we managed to fit us all into our tiny flat I do not know. We made trips around Manchester and visited the famous Cheshire Zoo which was disappointing. It was wet, gloomy, and bitterly cold and the ponds were frozen so the ducks were standing on the frozen water. A colleague from university in Peradeniya, Aria and wife were in Birmingham and we exchanged visits. When they came to us, we went to Blackpool to see the famous illuminations. Because of British influence on our education, we knew British history and geography, so we had the feeling of familiarity while sightseeing. Summers brought us good cheer and we were able to move from survival mode to actually living.

The children had grown and needed new clothes. I bought a *Necchi* sewing machine in London during summer because it was at a sale price. Since my mother loved sewing and was good at it I never made serious attempts at making clothes before. But in England we could not afford to buy new dresses so during the second summer I bought dress patterns and material and embarked on dress making. I made two sets of dresses for each of the girls which was an achievement. To my surprise and delight they looked good and the children were happy to have new clothes, even though they were slightly larger. When summer started disappearing we felt unhappy because soon we would be plunged into the cold as well as have to get back to our studies and our dull life. Githo was not quite five but we got permission for her to attend school. She started at St Paul’s Withington, a fair-sized primary school within walking distance. The teachers were kind and asked a classmate Alison Bruce to look after Githo. Alison took the task seriously and really looked out for her. Soon her grandmother who came to fetch Alison after school also took a keen interest in Githo. Mrs Ferguson brought Alison a small bag of cookies or sweets. Being Scottish she called these “wee baggies.” Soon she started bringing these ‘wee baggies’ for Githo too. Githo was delighted with school and loved the way she was taught. Britain was trialling the ‘play way’ methods of teaching at that time. One day when she came back from school I asked Githo what she had learnt at school that day. She gave me a withering look and corrected me. She told me “We don’t study in school, we play.” The first word she learnt to write was her name and arithmetic was learnt through playing shop. She brought home many drawings she had done at schooland we faithfully put them up on the walls to be admired. Niro was so envious that Githo was able to go to school and enjoy it that she started clamouring to be sent to school. Since she was still too young, we decided to send her to preschool. She was not quite four so I went with her on her first day at pre-school and waited outside in case she needed her Mum but she never looked for me even once. She headed straight to the sandpit. She loved to play with sand and water and so school was great

Githo and Niro at the New agency

One day Githo came home deeply troubled because her classmates, all five-year-olds, wanted to know who she really was. She was the only one in her class who looked different. Then a child in her class declared that Githo was a Jew! When Githo came home that afternoon she was very upset and told me about it. I assured her that there was nothing wrong with being a Jew because Jesus was a Jew. I also had a classmate at university who was a Jew who we met socially so I assured her that they were great people. Githo seemed satisfied. After some days however, another classmate had another idea and told Githo she was Black! Githo is fair skinned although not white. Githo was again upset so I told her she was the colour she was because of where she was born. I explained to this five-year old as simply as I could that hot climates cause darker pigmentation while cooler climates produce fairer skin tones. I wanted my daughter to be proud of who she is and accept her skin colour. A note from science on the race debate could help our thinking. ‘In the biological and social sciences, the consensus is clear: race is a social construct, not a biological attribute. Today, scientists prefer to use the term “ancestry” to describe human diversity. “Ancestry” reflects the fact that human variations do have a connection to the geographical origins of our ancestors. Even if most scientists reject the concept of “race” as a biological concept, race exists undeniably as a social and political concept. The long history of racism is a sombre reminder that throughout human history, a mere 0.1 percent of variation has been sufficient justification for committing all manner of discriminations and atrocities.’ (Note: from ‘How Science and Genetics are Reshaping the Race Debate of the 21st Century’ by Vivian Chou of Harvard University). Unfortunately, in many countries racism persists in many forms.

Alison’s grandma became a friend so we invited her with her husband over to a meal. Not knowing much about finer English cooking, we decided to cook a Sri Lankan meal but make it tolerable to the western palate. At first, they seemed nervous when they saw unfamiliar dishes. Since we did not use chilli, nothing was hot but it was very different to them. They were however willing to try our food and started with the basic salad which was familiar to them. At the end of the meal however they were happy with what they had eaten. They were Scottish and in their seventies so we admired their willingness to try unfamiliar food. We also invited the Aroni family who were from Jerusalem to dinner. They were much younger and more familiar with spicy food so they enjoyed our meal and said it was the best meal they had eaten in Manchester! Despite all the friends we made, our neighbours down our road were unfriendly. During the time we had the bother with our cousin they just peeped at the goings-on through their curtains but only one neighbour befriended us and when she did, the others thought she was being nosey! Our landlord was supposed to take care of our garden but he did not. The garden looked unsightly with the grass and hedges overgrown. Neighbours glared at us when they saw us outside and once a woman came to our door to complain about how unpleasant our garden was. Ariam told her that the landlord was responsible for the upkeep of the garden and offered to give her his contact number. Eventually, the landlord tended the garden. It was certainly nice having a tidy front yard. The appearance of our flat inside too was not good because the wallpaper was very faded. We asked the landlord if he would do something about it but he was unwilling. So, we came up with a compromise. We offered to paper the walls ourselves if he supplied the wallpaper. He agreed. We had no idea how to do it. We had never seen wallpapered houses before so doing it was truly a challenge. With help from friends, we did it even though it was time consuming and we had a few mishaps. Our flat looked so much nicer.

When I successfully completed the Diploma I entered the Master’s program. The Master’s degree could be done by coursework and a minor thesis or by thesis alone. The course was usually designed for two years but the thesis only choice meant it could be completed in one year. I chose to do it by thesis only hoping I could buy some time to commence work on a doctorate before my leave ran out. Dr David Hargreaves was appointed my supervisor. Although David was a young man he was published, competent and easy to work with. Initially, I spent a great deal of time in the library researching a suitable topic for my thesis. I finally decided on ‘*Parent - Peer group cross pressures on adolescent girls.*’ Although David was not sure that choosing to do the Master’s in a year was a good idea I told him I needed to so that I could embark on a PhD during the following year. Unfortunately, the university in Sri Lanka informed me that if I returned with a Master’s they would confirm me in my job but if I returned with an unfinished PhD they would not confirm me till I did. This was a risk I was not willing to take. To finish my thesis in a year was quite a challenge because we did not have free access to computers for data analyses at that time. But I had access to a scientific calculator with which I could do basic calculations like chi square ( χ2) tests manually. When it came to complex analysis I hired someone to do it on a computer. I finished my thesis wee in time and found a typist to put it all on paper. She was a charming person and efficient but when I visited her home I did not want to sit down because her furniture was covered in cat hair. She completed the typing within a short time. Since photocopying was not available at that time we had to make carbon copies of the manuscript on really thin paper. When I told a departmental secretary that I had completed my thesis she said, “Mrs Niles, you must be really brilliant to have learnt English and completed a Master’s in two years.” I replied, “I would indeed have to be super brilliant to accomplish something like that”! Then I explained to her that I had all my education in English and even studied English language and literature for my first degree. It is a common mistake in the west to assume that a person who does not engage socially must be challenged by a language barrier. Because I wore the saree and looked different people assumed that I must be unable to talk in English. Since I was out at university all day, Ariam did the shopping at our neighbourhood store. The owner of the store once asked him whether the reason I did not shop there was because of language difficulty!

Looking back, things did not go as I wanted but in the end everything worked out well. God seemed to have a different plan for my life and what a perfect plan it was. Eight years later when I was entitled to sabbatical leave I decided to go overseas to earn a doctorate. I found a scholarship at La Trobe University in Melbourne. Having an Australian qualification paid dividends in years to come. In the meantime, my time in England was coming to an end. I handed in my thesis and then had to wait a few months for the oral exam and the results. I was now free to work. We wanted to take home some things we could not buy there and we needed the money to buy them. We decided to send the children back to Sri Lanka with some friends so that I would have a few free months to work. I found a job at the *Ceylon Tea Centre* but there was no machine to do calculations and my mental arithmetic was poor so I had a hard time calculating change in the pound, shilling, and pence. While I was floundering there I was offered employment at the university as a research associate to work on a major project for the national government. I enjoyed the work. I shared an office with a Scottish woman, Marion Cameron. We were about the same age. We got on well together and became friends. Marion had a car and invited me to go with her to classical music concerts by Manchester’s famous Halle´ Orchestra. I invited her home for dinner several times and she loved our food as well as our company. She invited me back once to her home.

The oral examination for my Master’s was scheduled and I bought some material to wear as a saree for the interview. I met David my supervisor on the stairs one day and he told me the questions he was likely to ask me at the oral exam, hoping it would help. The external examiner was Prof. Musgrove of Bristol University. The name on the title page of my thesis said *Florence S Niles*. (Florence was my first name on my birth certificate although I preferred Sushila). Professor Musgrove expected to see an American woman walk into the interview. Instead, I walked in dressed in a saree and distinctly un-American. The prof. managed the shock well. He told me that my thesis had the potential to be developed into a PhD and that my work was the first one to research adolescent girls in Britain. Professor Musgrove later quoted my work in a book he wrote and provided me with a great reference unsolicited which was extremely beneficial when I applied for jobs later on. The graduation was in early December and I had to be back in Sri Lanka by January. I bought the necessary ceremonial gown for my graduation and was excited about the ceremony. The professor who presented me tried to pronounce my second name (which was Sucillavathy) phonetically and made a hash of it but of course no one would have known that. I planned to fly via Israel and visit Drora my Jewish friend. She was going to host me and show me around. I was excited at this prospect of a visit to the Holy Land but suddenly there was an airline strike in Sri Lanka and my British Airways flight was cancelled. By the time flights resumed it was too late for the detour in Israel. I flew back directly to Colombo.