

Commencing on a tiny tropical island, this is the story of a family torn apart by war, an unlikely and surprising re-union, a heart-wrenching tragedy, and a triumphant return to a land of magical memories.

My Story - Inside and Out

By Robert Gogerly

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MY STORY— INSIDE AND OUT

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GGERLY



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Chapter Nine

Trincomalee, with one of the largest natural harbours in the world, lies in the north-east corner of Sri Lanka. It was a British naval base because of its strategic position in the Indian Ocean.

Set on a rocky outcrop called Swami Rock in a peninsular in the north of Trincomalee, Fort Frederick was built by the Portuguese in the 16th century. It was dismantled and rebuilt by the Dutch in 1665.

Remnants of the past, cannons, and artillery are now dotted around the fort, A small number of spotted deer graze under huge banyan trees in the compound.

Hidden away on a cliff in Swami Rock lies another rocky outcrop which is called Lovers' Leap. Legend has it that it got its name from a well-known story about a woman named Francine who was engaged to a

Dutch officer who broke off their engagement, broke her heart, and left her to go back to his homeland of Holland. As she watched the sailing ship he was on leave Trincomalee she walked up to this vantage point and threw herself into the ocean as the ship sailed past, heartbroken and devastated, unable to face life alone.

Uncle Ric was posted to Trincomalee for a stint as District Medical Officer and Chief Doctor of the town hospital. We waited impatiently to spend a school holiday there. Finally, the day arrived for the start of the vacation at the end of the semester, and he picked us up in his convertible Chevrolet and drove the 180 kilometres between Kandy in the hills and his house in Trincomalee on the coast.

The beach was not far from his house and it was not long before we were frolicking in the waves and picking oysters off the rocks close to the shore. At night we sometimes went down to the fishermen's boats resting in a row on the sand and climbed inside to sleep under the stars. No one seemed to mind. It was

uncomfortable on the floor of the boat, but it was a small price to pay for falling asleep under a canopy of bright twinkling stars bathed by the dreamy light of a full moon, lulled to sleep by the sound of waves breaking on the shore.

Stop for a moment, close your eyes, and listen. Can you hear it? We would occasionally see a shooting star streaking across the sky as we drifted off to sleep.

I remember one occasion when we did this. The four of us brothers and our sister were between twelve and sixteen years old. We were accompanied by Uncle Ric.

The arrival of the fishermen about 3 a.m. woke us from our dreams and we had to give up our beds for the night. The smell of the salty sea air assailed our nostrils as we stretched awake. The fishermen went out in two rows on either side of a vast net, rowing out into the sea spreading their net as they went. It was time for us to head back home to our beds to finish our night's sleep.

Then we woke at dawn and hurried down to the beach again. We could see the top of the nets, wooden floats attached to it, bobbing up and down in the waves, the net was spread below the surface to trap their catch of fish for the day. The fishermen lined up on two sides of the beach and started hauling in the huge net. They chanted as they pulled in a halting rhythm, as each float reached their hands and they laid it with the net on the beach.

They swayed forward and back with each chant. One row chanted loud and clear, “O de elei!” The other row would respond, “Elei yah!”

“O de elei”

“Elei yah!”

“O de elei”

“Elei yah!”

Then the chanting got louder and changed to

“ELEI - ELEI”

“ELEI - ELEI”

“ELEI – ELEI”

“ELEI – YAH.”

The net was gradually dragged in as the sun rose seemingly lazily in the brisk morning air. Seagulls began circling above, calling out their cry of ‘Karr, Karr, Karr’ anticipating a morning meal of freshly caught fish. Little fisher folk children straggled onto the beach in scantily clad colourful clothes rubbing their sleepy eyes with the back of their knuckles, to watch their fathers, as entranced as we were at the ritualistic haul.

As the net piled up on the two sides of the beach, the end of the net was pulled in from the sea and began to appear, and silvery flashes of frantically leaping fish appeared.

Closer and closer the end was hauled up onto the beach. The murmur amongst the fishermen grew louder and

louder as they were able to identify the fish in their haul and point out the tuna, trevally, mackerel, and mullet.

On this morning the catch of the day happened to be two red Snapper called ‘thabalayaa’ in Sinhalese. Ecstatic screams of, “THABALAYAA” rent the air, as they gathered around the net, now completely ashore. It was a good catch, and the excitement and anticipation of good sales at the fish market became evident in the chatter and laughter amongst the fishermen. The smell of the fish mingled with the salty smell of the sea.

Then it was time to divide the haul amongst themselves and haggle over who would get the thabalayaa, and negotiate the trade-offs.

They carried their catch in two large baskets attached to a long pole at each end, slung over their shoulder, and headed off to the market to start a new day.

Life was good.

My cousin Paddy, her husband Anton McHeyzer and their four children were also in Trincomalee at this time. Anton was the Government Agent at Trincomalee and had a beautiful house on the top of a hill overlooking a cove aptly named Sandy Cove. A private beach.

A row of stone steps led down to the beach from their house, where we were frequent visitors during our vacation.

We spent hours exploring the beach, collecting seashells, frolicking amongst the rocks at the water's edge, and delving into the jungle bordering the steps.

Paddy was a buxom brunette with bright blue eyes, short wavy hair, and a full rounded figure. Anton was tall, well built, with grey eyes - which were a feature of his face - and wore glasses. He had a receding hairline and his full head of hair was flecked with grey at the temples. He was a well-known Rugby Union player with the Havelock's, a prominent club in Colombo in the Rugby Football Tournament.

One day he was working under his car - a black Holden sedan - installing a new muffler. His hand slipped when tightening a nut and the muffler crashed down on his face smashing his glasses, sending a splinter into his eye. He was rushed to the hospital where he underwent surgery but was never able to play Rugby football again.

They were not able to remove the tiny splinter in his eye and he had to live with it for the rest of his life.

The recently crowned Queen Elizabeth 11 of England was visiting Sri Lanka (still Ceylon at the time) on her first visit to the new independent Dominion of Ceylon. She was due to visit the naval base at Trincomalee, and Anton (as Government Agent), and family were to host her for afternoon tea at his property.

There was great excitement at the McHeyzer household at the prospect of meeting the Queen. Anton spent a tidy sum re-laying the front lawn and hired a gardener to spruce up and tidy the property for the visit. The kids

had new clothes bought for them and they were all looking forward to the day with keen anticipation.

Then, at the last minute, the visit to Trincomalee was cancelled, and a reception in the capital of Colombo was scheduled in its place.

Everyone felt disappointed and ‘flat’.

I was an avid cricket fan. A Test series of matches between England and Australia was taking place in England. At night when everyone had gone to bed, I quietly made my way into the living room to the house radio, in a large cabinet much like the one at my grandparent’s house. I switched it on, turned the volume down low so as not to disturb anyone, and tuned in to listen to the commentary on the game. I was soon engrossed in the progress of the match.

Then I heard a sound that froze me with fear.

I heard footsteps on the veranda outside. The house was in darkness and there was a watery moon shedding pale

light on the garden, the shadowy trees swaying in the breeze. I have a vivid imagination and I imagined Portuguese and Dutch soldiers in armour in days of old as they patrolled the streets of the town. I stayed very still. There it was again. A kind of swish, swish, the sound of heavy squashy footsteps on the veranda outside.

Was it a ghost? Can ghosts make noise? My hackles rose as I listened intently.

Silence.

A wicket fell in the cricket match and I was drawn back to the commentary. I felt something soft brush against my bare leg (I was in boxer shorts) and my heart nearly stopped beating. Then I heard a purr and realised it was the cat.

Back came the footsteps, smooth, deliberate, slow. Swish, swish, swish, swish.

My heart was thumping in me and I was sweating.

After a short pause, it was back, furtive, and stealthy. Swish, swish. I couldn't move. I was now scared out of my wits. I imagined the ghost of a soldier, Portuguese or Dutch, walking outside.

I gathered up my courage and crept towards my room.

Then, in the dim light of the moon coming from outside, I saw the curtains swaying in the breeze coming in through the open windows. The bottom of the curtain was brushing against the linoleum on the floor making this swishing noise as it moved back and forth in the breeze.

Swish, swish, back and forth, fanned by the breeze. Swish, swish, swish, swish.

I had found my ghost!

Ta-Da! . . . Drum Roll . . .

Sequel to this memory. Fast forward . . .

Real-time, 20 June 2020.

I had a dream!

We were in our garden, in Dingley Village on the front lawn under a fruit tree (which isn't there). It had a thick bark lush green foliage and was laden with pink pear-shaped fruit. I was with Jan and a small child. It was late evening and almost dark. Then suddenly we became aware of a Japanese woman on our driveway about twenty metres away. We sensed that she was dangerous and evil. She carried a sword and crouching, scanned the garden looking for us. She couldn't see us in the dim light, behind the tree. We saw her scurry down the right side of the house looking for us.

We had our backs to the road outside and were facing the front of the house. We crouched down behind the bark of the tree and waited apprehensively. I was on my haunches and Jan lay against my back her chin tucked in between my neck and shoulder. The kid was at my feet. We stayed motionless not wanting to give our position away.

Then I heard the sound of something being bumped into on our left, and I sensed that she had come out the front on the left side of the house. It was dark now and we couldn't see her. Jan had fallen asleep on my shoulder.

Then she started to hiss, to scare us no doubt. The hissing became louder. My heart thumped in my chest as I tried to move but couldn't because of the weight of Jan. I tried to nudge Jan off my shoulder but she wouldn't wake up.

The hissing became even louder and closer. I had to do something but was trapped under Jan's weight. Fear gripped me and I whispered to Jan, "Wake up, she's here and we've got to act." Still no response. The hissing was very close now and I was getting desperate.

All I had was a dagger in my right hand with a foot-long blade. (This happens in dreams!)

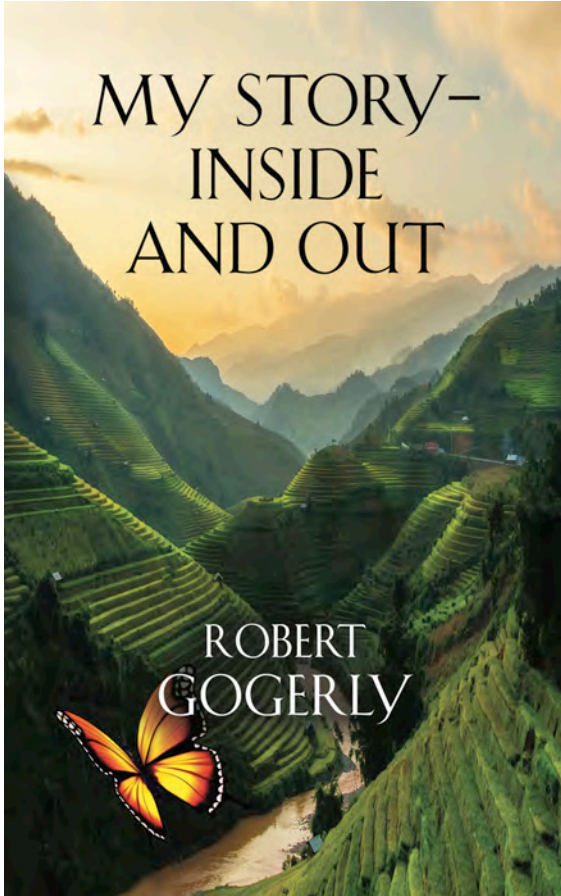
I was scared, trapped, and terrified, and did the only thing I could – I let out a blood-curdling scream!

The thing was I yelled right into Jan's ear and she sat bolt upright in bed, instantly awake. "What's wrong, what's wrong?" And I told her about what happened.

Scared the cat (who was sleeping on the bed) right out of its wits as it streaked through the door out of the room like a bat out of hell.

Okay, you can stop laughing now!

Back to My Story . . .



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