

Echoes of the Protector

By Sohara Bandaranayake

The café hums with the quiet lull of conversations and the gentle clinking of porcelain cups. The scent of cardamom-tinged tea and freshly baked seeni sambol buns lingers in the air, wrapping around me like Amma's old cotton shawl. I sit by the window, hands wrapped around a steaming mug of Americano, staring at the raindrops racing down the glass, their patterns reminiscent of the rivers that ran wild behind our old house in Galle. Across from me, perched on the edge of her chair, is my younger self. She doesn't drink coffee—never liked the bitterness. Instead, she cradles a small pink carton of strawberry milk, the same one Amma used to buy from the Petti kade by the school gate as my daily reward.

She swings her legs, her bare feet brushing against the chair. I had forgotten how small I once was. How the world had felt enormous, filled with winding roads lined with kithul trees and hidden corners that smelled of cinnamon and sea salt. She stares at me with wide, untainted eyes, and for a moment, I wonder if she recognizes me at all.

"You look tired," she says, voice light like a whispering monsoon breeze.

I smile, but it falters. "Adulthood does that."

Her nose scrunches. "Do you have to be an adult?" She sips her milk through the tiny straw, slurping at the end. "It seems hard."

I pause, watching a drop of milk cling to her chin before she wipes it away with the back of her hand, just like how Appachchi used to do for me after temple visits when he treated me to a bottle of sweet faluda. The innocence in her question stirs something deep inside me.

"It is hard," I admit. "But I have to keep going. There's too much to carry, too much I can't let go of."

Her brows furrow, her small fingers tracing the condensation on her milk carton.

"Do you think too much? Worry too much?"

I exhale sharply. "I don't know how to stop."

She tilts her head, looking at me like she's peering into my soul. "Then let me help."

My throat tightens. "You? You're just a child."

She smiles—a knowing, gentle smile, like Amma on Avurudu mornings when she held me close before the firecrackers burst into the sky. "I was always the one protecting you. When the world was too heavy, I made you dream. When you cried alone at night, I made you believe in stories. And when you forgot how to breathe, I was the one whispering, 'It will be okay.' Didn't you hear me?"

Tears prick my eyes. I had forgotten. I had drowned out her voice beneath the weight of expectations, responsibilities, and fears. She had always been there, keeping me afloat, waiting for me to listen.

"Do you still run barefoot on the road with your Aiya?" she asks, voice softer now.

I shake my head. "Not anymore."

"Do you still eat pol pani pancakes on Poya days? And steal watalappan from the fridge before guests arrive?"

"Sometimes," I whisper.

She leans in, eyes shining. "Then let yourself be free again. You have protected me—now I am the one who should be protecting you."

A sob escapes me, but it feels light, like rain washing over parched earth. I close my eyes and inhale—cinnamon, rain, the warmth of Amma's shawl. When I open them, my younger self is still there, but she looks satisfied now, like she has done what she came to do.

She finishes the last sip of her milk and places the empty carton on the table.

"Remember me. Don't hide me away again."

I nod. "I won't."

She grins, a flash of mischief in her eyes. "Good. Now, stop thinking so much. Be light. Be happy. You once believed in magic—why did you stop?"

I don't have an answer. Somewhere between growing up and surviving, I abandoned the magic I once held so dearly. I stopped believing that small moments mattered, that life could be beautiful even in its uncertainty.

"Do you remember how you and Aiya used to fight over the last Siyambala toffee? How you always lost, but he'd sneak you an extra piece when no one was watching?"

I chuckle through my tears. "Yes. And how Amma would scold us for making a fuss over sweets."

"But now, you miss him, don't you?"

The ache in my chest deepens. "I do." The busy lifestyles have kept us apart for so long.

She watches me, waiting. And for the first time in years, I whisper, "I want to believe again."

A knowing smile spreads across her face. "Then do it."

The café grows quieter, as if the world itself is holding its breath for me. My fingers tremble as I reach for my coffee, the warmth grounding me. "Where do I start?"

She points outside, where the rain has slowed to a misty drizzle. "Step into the rain."

I hesitate. "I'll get wet."

She giggles. "So what? Remember how we used to dance in it? How we used to let the water wash away the sadness?"

I do remember. The memory is hazy at first, but then I see it clearly—the way we spun in the rain, our laughter echoing across the empty streets, Amma scolding but smiling, Appachchi pulling out a towel to dry my dripping hair. I had been free then. Untouched by fear, by doubt.

Slowly, I stand. My younger self beams with approval as I push open the café door and step onto the pavement. The drizzle is cool against my skin, soaking into my blouse, my hair. The scent of wet earth rises, and something in me shifts. A breath I didn't know I had been holding releases from my lungs. I tilt my head up to the sky and close my eyes, letting the rain fall over me like a blessing.

And just like that, memories flood back—lying on Achchi's lap, listening to her stories about the moon prince and the talking jackfruit tree, sneaking out of bed

to listen to Appachchi's radio playing old Sunil Edirisinghe songs, stuffing my face with kiri toffee until my fingers stuck together, doing Aiya's makeup while he is asleep.

When I turn back, my younger self is gone. But she is not lost. She is within me, the protector I never knew I had.

I step out of the café, slip off my sandals, and let the warm, wet earth embrace my feet, just as it once did when I was a child, free and unafraid.