

We Are All Friends Here

Who I can tell about my misery? I search the crowd for a familiar face, an auspicious sign. Or just a passenger for my trishaw. In the night sky, above all, the full Poya Moon shines. Yes, it is a pure light upon the streets of this Dutch Fort in Galle. To the tall trunks of coconut palms, their jagged leaves, the simple kadees and tea shops here along Hospital Street, it is like a chalky paint. In all this light, I can only feel heavy. Alone in my dark, small cab parked near the Old Gate.

Even inside this trishaw, some moonlight shines on my postcard picture of Lord Buddha. Even the glass beads and joss stick holder take a gleam from this moon. I only want to say to someone about the deep sadness in my heart. I am tired now, but I can't sleep. I haven't slept since I lost him. I have taken no any arrack. Drink will not bring him back. My chest ache like an elephant stepping upon me. A good father should keep his son safe.

Before, I love to see the people. Now, no pleasure. Radio off. I lean over the steering wheel. Is there any hope? A soldier, his M16 carelessly bouncing against his waist, walks by. My son would never have carried his rifle so thoughtlessly.

Some young troublemakers are shouting at each other. They zigzag this way than that through the crowd. One of them, cupping his mouth in his hands, yells into my cab as he run past.

“Wake up.”

I no care about that. I keep looking at the soldier. If he had come into my cab I could tell him about my son. Perhaps he thinks of his own father now. The kids run on. In my driver's side mirror, I follow the soldier's movements until he is lost in the crowd. Beyond all the people, the Fort Light House reflects in my mirror. I lean back from the steering wheel. I look at the street in front of my cab.

Workers, from the construction yards nearby, come to the street vendors. Even though their skillets smoke with egg rotis, chilies, and dhal, and I have not eaten for a week, I have no fire in my belly for food. A tall man, a village exorcist by his clothes, looks my way several times. I sit up thinking the man wants a ride. Had I given him a ride in the past? Or seen the man perform a Devil Dance? At any rate, he is villager and will listen to my story. I am ready to turn the key as he leans his face in. I can smell alcohol, flowers, and coconut oil.

"Shall I help you my friend," he says. He pretend to brush something off his silk red shirt. Then he reach into his leather satchel that bounce against his black sarong.

"I do not take drink," I tell him. "I am Buddhist." Truth is I can find no relief there. Truth is, I have no time for these drunk buggers. I only hoped he had just wanted a ride.

The man grins. "Of course, of course. Perhaps then, some magic," he says, and spread his arm out towards the street. "Just to make your business come along."

My chest tightens. I have little patience for nonsense. I turn the key and start my trishaw. "I must go." My trishaw rattles aloud.

"No problem."

I rev the motor.

“Some other time then,” he says. Then he walks down the sidewalk.

I glance at my side view mirror. For a second, I think I see the exorcist look back at me and smile, but it is too dark. The beam from the Fort Light House passes over the crowd. When I am sure the man has disappeared into the crowd, I switch off the motor. What to do? Anywhere I go is the same as here. Like this, son not supposed to die before father.

Then I notice two magpies land on the back of a trishaw parked across the street. A passenger shoos them away, and shouts at the driver to hurry. This is encouraging sign. Even now, I can smile. A monk in a saffron robe, holding an umbrella and a parcel, walks by. I sit up. Even if I give him free ride, it would be auspicious and he may listen. I shout to him. “Please. Where going? Let me to take you.”

“I am just going to the Buddhist Center near Laksala.”

“Then, come.” I nod to him, and turn the key. My trishaw clatters to life amid oil fumes. The monk covers his face with a handkerchief. Many do, for me I am used to it. Now I feel it is good to have the gleam of moonlight upon even my eyes. I have found someone who will listen. And even bless me.

He gets into the back of my small cab. I adjust the mirror, wipe the windshield. Then out of habit, I spit into the road, releasing the brake. We jerk forward. I maneuver the small cab in and around the traffic as I head out of the archway at the Old Gate. We go out onto Custom Road.

“I am Lenny,” I say to the monk. I know this is a strange name for a Sri Lankan so I say, “My father was a Troskyite, with the Sri Lankan Freedom Party.”

“I see.”

“He also was reading Russian. Chekhov. Tolstoy, like that.”

“Your father was smart.”

“He passed what...so many years ago. I was a boy.” I think of my son. How to start. Will he think me a poor father?

But just then, a stupid chauffer from a cab blasts his horn at me. One yells to me, “Ayo. Where going, old man?”

I am afraid. Afraid to wreck, and afraid to lose sight of my talk. I glance in my mirror and cough.

“Yes, go on.”

I shake my head to get rid of the tiredness, but it only feel as if it sink further into my joints. My throat is dry. I don't know how the monk will respond. I speak louder above the noisy trishaw. “My son, a soldier, died in the north. An ambush in a rice paddy. What to do?” It is hard to believe that I said it aloud. Always, I'd kept the pain of my heart to myself.

“Well you should be proud. He died a hero, isn't it?”

“Yes,” I reply, but I let my voice crackle to hide my disappointment. My chest still feel tight. Every Sinhalese says that, even the commandant at the funeral. “Here I am, an old man, and he died, a young man.”

“He defended the nation. Lord Buddha will bless to him.”

The monk's remarks brings me no any comfort. Why he couldn't say to me, “Tell me Lenny, how you feel about this? Or even say it is a shame that so young a man should die.” I could tell him how I hadn't wanted my son to join and how this UNP government keeps the war going on forever. Perhaps he wants only to hear about whether I am good

Buddhist. That I no fool with the lowly gods like Huniyam. And I don't like. So I say, "Once, I took my son to Sri Pada."

"When?"

"We took a pilgrimage to Sri Pada when he was eight. We'd started in the dark; walking the trail. Up the many stairs, and my son had asked, 'Why they make so many stairs?' even as I had thought so too. The stairs forced to us to take more steps than needed, isn't it?" I turn to back to look at the monk. "My little son, he had to take several steps to one of mine. He stopped in the path. I was feeling--"

A loud horn blares ahead.

"Please, uncle. You must concentrate," say the monk.

I agree. I want to continue. I see in the mirror that he is in prayer. Still I keep telling him. "Other pilgrims had been behind us; an old couple, some monks, a group of school children and their master had to wait. My son asked to me, 'Carry me taththa.' I was tired. I looked at the mist in the jungle below. It was not so dark anymore. I could hear the monkeys in the tree tops. But then, I'd wished I'd listened to my wife. I thought she would be making the breakfast fire. She'd warned to me..."

I glance at him through my mirror and can see that he hasn't been listening. Not at all. He is nervous. As if afraid that I will wreck if he opens his eyes to acknowledge me.

So I just drive. I let my trishaw find its way and I finish my story, but only in a whisper, whether the monk hears or not. "I looked down to my son. He cried. Though the others waited patiently, I wanted to shout to him. The others began walking around us while we stood in the center of the stairs. I picked him up, swung him on my back, and carried him to the top. By the time we got there and rang to the large pilgrim bell, the

daylight sparkled to everything; the treetops, the crows, the dagoba, and even to our faces like the gleam of the sun shining from brass vases. But my son is gone. Only I can remember about that.”

My belly ache, but not a hunger burn. A broken heart pain. I let the monk off at the Buddhist center. I pull next to a kadee and again hunch down. I let the trishaw sputter to a halt. I am feeling that the elephant is putting more pressure on my chest. The moon washes my cab in its pale light. I see a young woman walk by carrying an empty pot. I sigh at such a bad omen. Then some passengers come-funny how sometimes superstitions don't work.

Three young foreigners, a female and two males, walk up, and a blond-haired man pounds on the metal roof of the cab as if I had to be roused from deep sleep. He shouts, “Hello mate. We're going to the Sea View Lodge and Restaurant. Inside the fort. Thirty rupees for the three of us. Right?” I think he may be Australia.

But the woman says, what I want to say, which is “that's not enough.” She shoves the other man with darker hair and glasses. She may be America.

The man with glasses puts a hand on the shoulder of the blond-haired man and says, “Nice try, mate.” He nods towards the woman. “Peace Corps remember?” He faces her and say, “How about fifty rupees madam? Would that pay the ferryman his proper due?”

Afraid to lose three fares, despite their drunkenness, and with the hope that at least one will listen to me, I interrupt. “Yes, get in.”

Then they argue about the best route as they take turns climbing into the back.

I turn the key, and my trishaw jostles to a start. "I can find fast for you. No problem. I will go up to Church Street way."

"Great, now step on it!" the blond man say.

He has the anger that one, and the drink. Still, I push my trishaw to its limits along Custom Road heading towards the Old Gate, but it can't go any faster. I even worry it might overheat.

"How'd ya like that?" the blond man say to his friends. "No wonder this is the third world. Everything's slow. And what a country. Civil war, exorcisms. Coconuts and tea coming out my arse. And every full moon a holiday. What the hell for?"

The woman, wedged in the middle, answers in a dutiful tone. "It's called Poya, you dope. The full moon is an auspicious occasion. It means Buddha was born on a full moon night, attained enlightenment on a full moon, and then passed away on a full moon."

I wonder if she is Buddhist. I say, "Madam is right." I like her. She will listen to my story, even if her companions are drunk. "Yes, at Poya Moon we celebrate. But for me--"

"And why not turn on that radio. Anything sounds better than this noise."

I switch on the radio to hear Christopher Paul singing "My Fair Uncle." I worry how to talk with this now.

The dark haired one asks, "What's that they are singing? About toddy?"

I teach to them the words, "My fair uncle, my fair uncle, bring me some toddy and make me happy now."

"But you don't seem happy," he shouts.

I am ready to say about my son's death but then, the blonde one taps my shoulder.

He sings, "My sad uncle, my sad uncle, you drive so slow that we will die before we arrive."

They laugh and even keep singing it over when the song is finished. Madam says something but we can no hear.

I turn the radio off. "Yes madam?"

"These two are about as goofy as they come," she say to them. Then she looks at me as I see her in the mirror. "Remind me to stay in my village next time I get invited to an embassy party."

I want to only agree with her. She is smart and wise I can tell. But I don't know what they speak about. Only that I have something to say, and I cannot find the way to begin.

I drive under the moonlit arches of the Old Gate. I can barely hear the ocean outside the walls above the whirring of my engine. The woman and the man with glasses kiss. I am afraid to talk while there was so much silence.

The blond-haired man puts his arm out the door beside my left shoulder and flaps it like a wing. "We're really flying now, eh sad uncle?"

The others laugh at him. I too, smile. This man does the stupid things drunk men do. But he is funny. They must know about the war. My son's sweet face, I can see. I want to say about his death but instead I say, "My son ran fast in track when he was a boy. He won races."

"He must take after his mother" say the blond haired man.

They all laugh, and I laugh with them. The elephant is not stepping so hard now. “I remember that day, the sun was so hot. It was all flat around the track. No any shade but some for those in the stands. But for me, I was standing behind the fence. I waved my son to me. I was having a break. I asked to him if he was running soon. I’d wanted to say more. I’d wanted to tell him how proud his mother would be. How proud ...”

The blond man drums on the back of my seat. “Yeah we get it. You love your son, he’s the greatest. I bet he could make this tin can go faster too.”

“You guys. He’s probably going as fast as he can,” say the woman.

“So the coach called for him to go back. I watched the race. It was close. At first, my son, he fell behind two others. I watched closely as they jogged around to the other side of the track. Then my view was blocked until the last stretch. I saw my son just come across the white line ahead of the others.”

“I’m sure you are proud of him. Is he still in school?” she asks.

Now, I think, she will listen. Only, my heart sinks. We have come to the fort wall of Rampart Street. The valets at this spot never allow trishaws to stop for long.

As they get out, I see the valet coming to greet them. “No, madam. He is no longer in school. In fact, he-”

The blond man hands me a 50 Rupee note.

The woman smiles, waiting for me to continue.

I palm the bill. “He was in the security forces.” So much more to say. What to do?

She nods, but then, the valet points them towards the restaurant.

He dismisses me.

The two men begin singing “My Sad Uncle” again as they walked up the stairs to the Sea View Lodge and Restaurant.

I pull away.

Again I am alone. I let my trishaw wheeze to a stop on Hospital Street just past the Fort Light House. Though a minivan with a man shouting from its doorway, and a motorcycle rush by, I feel as if I’m parked on an empty street.

The pale moonlight glimmers across the windshield. I would do anything to have my son back. My sadness returns so that I breathe thinly, as if the elephant now is stepping with all its might. A dull empty ache pains my belly. I gaze at the passersby. If someone would only let me speak, I would tell them everything. But even if I had all night to tell my story it would not be enough. My sorrow is like a large wave that might leave Galle harbor and go on across the whole of the Indian Ocean, never crashing. I slump over the small steering wheel feeling miserable. The gods are cruel. Or maybe they want to punish me for a previous life.

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I leave the trishaw, dizzy with pain and sadness. The quiet street. The full moon so bright. It makes a shadow of my thin old figure against the plaster wall. If only I could laugh at it. I return to my trishaw and try to push away more thoughts of my son. I am afraid to think about him when there is nobody to talk with. It could bring so much pain that I could not bear it. I enter a small kadee where drivers often stop for rice and curry. But I am not feeling hungry, and only come on the hope that someone would recognize me, or ask me to come and sit for a talk. Inside it is dark and a few men are seated at different tables, eating rice and drinking tea. Their postures are stolid. They are all strangers. Still I press on and sit at a table near the door. A waiter brings me some tea.

I stare out through the doorway. The exorcist stops at the entrance and flicks his cigarette into the gutter. He peers around the dim shop, his eyes like a magpie's searching for some morsel.

I frown as he walks towards me. That drunk foreigner's voice still rings in my mind. I don't want to talk with this exorcist. Like this. Most people I take have lives: appointments to keep, sons in the war, daughters who need dowries. But this man seems to loiter around me. I can't help think there is something perhaps a punishment the gods have in store for me. I can do this duty. I couldn't save my son.

"My uncle, may I join you for tea?"

"Yes," I sigh.

He sits across from me and asks me my name.

I tell him.

"Well, Lenny, so how do you like driving trishaws?"

"It is not easy. Always waiting on fares. And it is sad. My son died in the north."

“I am sorry to hear that. What was his name?”

“Ranil.” Perhaps I misjudge him. A listener is a listener. And he may not have empty patriotism for my son’s death. He may be nonsense, but he is not drunk foreigner.

The waiter places a cup in front of the exorcist, and refills my cup. After he moves on to the next table, the exorcist says, “I can’t imagine. It must be the hardest thing—to lose a son.”

“Yes. I cannot bare it. I would do anything to have him live.” I am surprise he will listen. Does he need rupees? Maybe he will want me to give him a free ride to some place. I feel as if the elephant is lifting his foot from my chest. I take a good drink, and begin to let out what is in my heart. “I don’t like this life. A good father will protect his son. You will listen?”

“Of course,” he says.

His English is very good. I am thinking he may be a guru of some sort. His eyes are not so hungry. Perhaps he just needed tea, and like me, someone to talk with. “Well, I fought with my son not to join. But he wouldn’t listen. And what’s more, we argued the day he boarded the train to boot camp. He say to me, ‘I’m not going to become a trishaw driver, taththa!’ My son stood on the platform, holding his bag, ready for the train that would take him to boot camp. ‘And poor Padma. Who will provide a dowry for her?’”

“Ah, you have a daughter, also?”

“Yes. And you must know that when he said it felt as if his words cut into me like a knife into my chest. Just pure air, not even the blood, seeped out.” I touch my chest where my heart now beat lighter, and then heavier, as I continue. “I wanted to stop him. I would work an extra job to help pay his education. To help my daughter with her dowry.

I said to him, ‘What about the boys from our village who have died?’ I could not look at my son’s face because I would cry. I stared past him into the crowd of travelers. Other sons also boarding and saying farewells to their families. There was no any hope. For a poor village boy, whose father had no money for the private tuition, no family connections to the minister, the army looked better. My son, so full of the youth. I wanted to tell him I loved to him. To write to his sister. But all I could do was watch as my son hoisted his bag onto the train. He turned and waved. I smiled and waved back. I never saw him after that time.”

The exorcist nods, finishes his cup, and hails the waiter. He looks down at his empty cup and then at me. “Lenny, how about we try something stronger. Arrack?”

I shake my head. “Now, in those days, when my children were young, I was having so much arrack. Never did I believe I would become a teetotaler.”

We both grin and the waiter returns and refills both cups with the fragrant milk tea. “But what to do? I am a man whose wife died young, whose son died in battle, and who can no afford a dowry for his daughter. I am thinking maybe because I took too much arrack, then the Gods have punished me.”

The exorcist is staring at me and he snaps his fingers. “Lenny, I know it is painful for you.”

My eyes begin to get wet and I can’t breathe so easy. Maybe too much tea. The heart it seems to chase after itself to find some place to fall and burst. I drink my tea and look around the dim café. Some have finished and left, and new ones have sat down. It is no any busier. Just same. I am thinking this exorcist may want to get me drunk. Or worse,

put some magic on me. I feel his stare but I don't look. Only drink my tea. Then I hear his throat clearing.

“Listen, Lenny, I have a confession. You see, I must get over to Karapitiya. I am staying at the teaching hospital to lecture on our local medicine. But I don't have the fare. I wonder if you might give me a ride, then later I can repay you?”

Apoy! So, the truth. I sit upright against my chair and give the look of stern anger I would if my son broke a glass or spilled my arrack bottle.

The exorcist leans back in his chair, his arms extended and his palms downward as if he is patting the air. “But I understand if you can't, Lenny. Please, go on. I will listen.”

I had hope he might say to me, he also had lost loved one. Maybe not a son, like me, maybe a daughter. Or his wife. But no. I see, at last, I am to be his chauffeur. And yet there is so much to say. I think of the monk, our religious leader and how I'd given him a free ride. Not as far a trip. But then, he had only mumbled something about patriotism. At least, this exorcist is listen to me. “But you must know that is far to go in just my trishaw.”

“I understand. And listen, Lenny. I will pay you when I receive my check. Tomorrow. You just come, and you can give me a ride to the Galle Train Station. I will pay you then for both rides, isn't it?”

As I drive up to Doctor's Car Park near the hospital, I begin to feel lighter. I don't know if this exorcist is tell the truth. Perhaps when I go back tomorrow, he may be gone. Still, I almost happier. I laugh a little, instead of cry. I tell him over my shoulder, “Every

day, I feel in my very joints and muscles that I failed my son. I hadn't given him a better life, and I saw that he was right to follow his own path. What to do?"

He exits the cab and shouts above the humming of my trishaw's engine. "I understand. But Lenny, you shouldn't feel this way. You did what you could. You can't turn back the clock or trade places, isn't it?"

"No." My heart feels stuck in my throat. I breathe thinly. "Death would not be so kind as that." An elephant stomps upon my chest, I know, but I feel nothing. Is it because he has at least listened, and now it will be over?

"Right. Listen, my chum. I come to Galle once every fortnight. I would be happy to meet and talk with you. We are all friends, here, isn't it?"

I nod and frown a little too.

"I will see you tomorrow, friend. Half past three?"

We shake hands, and then I just drive away. The Buddha's face on the dashboard shines with a halo from the moon light. The street lights sparkle as if dripping crystal suns. I feel my heart lift ever so slightly. I see the moonlight as it is and think why I have never seen its brightness like this?