

Fortune Teller

By : **Juggernaut**

It is a story about Basheer, a fortune teller and three parrots, Rama, a veteran and Nazeer and Sheeba, two young parrots escape to freedom with help of Rama and a flock of wild parrots.



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By

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Koneeru means a lagoon, pond or a water reservoir, but this pond is special, it is called Peerla koneeru, since it is here the town Muslims gather during the celebrations of Moharram, to dip colorful replicas of Martyrâ€™s tomb made from bamboo and colorful cloth that they carry on their head to immerse. Long processions of Muslim mourners dancing to a particular drum beat carrying the colorful replicas would reach peerla koneeru during evening hours to immerse their contraptions into the pond. Except for Moharram celebration, the peerla koneeru is a just a pond surrounded by Gul Mohar or Poinciana trees with its bloom of bright red flowers particularly in summer.

On one edge of the pond was the City Police Commissionerâ€™s office, an old building built during British era with local stones cut unevenly with sharp edges protruding outwardly as if intended to stop intruders.

A wide cement foot path around the pond is home for scores of people. Mostly beggars, some selling traditional medicine, others provide services such as hair cut, clearing earwax, body massages or telling fortune. The Poinciana trees around the pond are only shelter to the foot-path dwellers.

Basheer, a slender, dark skin man remembers visiting the pond when he was just a boy along with his parents and extended family members during the annual Moharrum festival to immerse the colorful replicas of martyrâ€™s tomb in the pond. For a longtime now, he has been living under the shade of Poinciana tree on the edge of the pond. The sentry outside the Commissionerâ€™s office made him feel secure in the night time. He never attended a school but learned how to write and read Telugu, the regional language. He washed his clothes and took bath in the pond whenever he feels like it.

On a regular day, the only commotion occurs under Poinciana trees are gathering of footpath dwellers to buy left-over lunch from lunch carriers. Scores of working men and women and school children get their home made lunch delivered by lunch carriers to their work place and schools every afternoon. After delivering lunch, on way back, the lunch carriers sell the leftover food in the containers to the people living on the edge of Peerla Koneeru. It is a great bargain, the lunch carriers make little money on the scraps and the poor people get to eat quality scrap food at cut rate prices.

Basheer has an idea how he looks like, though never looked into a full-size mirror on a regular basis. On occasions, when somebody transporting furniture pieces, one with a mirror, he will run and try to stand in front of it to look at himself in full length. Living on the edge of the pond, under the Poinciana tree, eating scrap meals, he made living as a fortune teller.

Basheer is a fortune teller, but he wonâ€™t read palms nor he refers to any astrology books, but with help from Rama, a parrot to pick a card from a deck of cards placed in front of the bird, he reads loud whatâ€™s on the card to the customer for a small fee. There are several roaming fortune tellers around the town, some using parrots, but Basheer is only fortune teller permanently stationed on the edge of the Peerla Koneeru adjacent to the Police Commissionerâ€™s Office.

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Basheer made a parrot cage with steel spokes from an abandoned bicycle wheel and splinter wood. The cage has three compartments separated by steel spokes. Each compartment can be opened by a sliding door. Every time, he slide open the door, Rama would jumps out from the cage and walk slowly towards the deck of cards placed on a cloth. Rama would pick up each card carefully and drop it next to the deck, after discarding few cards; it will hold a card carefully with its beak and gives it to Basheer. He would receive the card with one hand and give some seeds or a piece of fruit to Rama with other. Rama slowly walks back into the cage with food in its beak. Thatâs about it as far as Rama is concerned.

Now, Basheer would read aloud what written on the card with a voice of a preacher â you have been experiencing lots of problems recently, but all these going to end soon,â Basheer has several decks of cards. Each deck has cards with same material written on them. If the approaching customer is student, he will place the deck of cards that each highlights success in education and upcoming job opportunities. If the customer is a middle age man, its all about money problems and unexpected windfall thru lottery win or some kind of godly intervention. The first line defines the problem; marriage, jobs, education or health problem and the second line tackles the problem with impending solution. Basheer reads the first line with emotion and the second line with some kind of soothing voice to make the customer feels good. At the end, the customer leaves with some kind of satisfaction and hopefulness.

In free time, he fabricates and writes human problems on the cards with hypothetical impending resolution for each problem he creates; after all, a problem with no possible solution is no good business in fortune telling.

The bright red flowers of Poinciana trees became part of an unusual entertainment to the foot-path dwellers. Basheer practically invented a game using the stamen from Poinciana flowers. The competitors pluck a single stamen at a time from the center of a Poinciana flower carefully and used as a sword to fight with one another until the tip of long slender stamen, a bright yellow ball of pollen resembling a stylish hat knocked off from its base. Whoever knock off the hat first, won the game. With abundant supply of flowers, there is no scarcity of stamens for the game to continue for hours. Basheer with his quick fingers handled the stamen like real sword and kept knocking out opponentsâ stamen tip to win the game again and again, until everybody got tired and settled for a short nap under the shade of Poinciana. Between stamen fights and his creative writings on the cards, Basheer attended customers whenever one comes along eager to know their future written on cards randomly picked by Rama the parrot.

Rama, the old parrot is a pro in the business. Basheer bought the parrot from a roaming fortune teller in the business for a long time. Since Rama was trained in the business, it fetched more money than parrots sold in the market as pets. Now, Basheer wants to expand his business. He went to the local bazaar and purchased two young parrot chicks from a tribesman. It is only tribesmen that sell exotic birds like parrots and sometimes young reptiles, small turtles etc. in the local bazaars.

Basheer named the two parrots he purchased in the bazaar as Nazeer and Sheeba. He could not tell which one is male and which one is female, or both male or female and yet he named one parrot Nazeer, a male name and Sheeba, a female name. Basheer carefully placed Nazeer and Sheeba in the empty compartments of his parrot cage.

Parrots communicate in Chilka, an universal language of parrots consists of a series of whistles, some short, some long and few high pitched shrieks in between. While there are regional differences in communication pattern, at large, all parrots understand Chilka language. Parrots are good in mimicry as well. Rama, the veteran looked at the newcomers with grace and spoke in Chilka language â well come to your new home.â

Nazeer and Sheeba turned their head and recognized Rama as an aged bird from conspicuous red ring of fine feathers around its neck. While slow in movements, Rama slowly walked towards Nazeer only separated by

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the vertical steel spokes. "Don't be afraid, at least you have my company."

"Thank you sir, you are kind," replied Nazeer.

"How you both ended up here?"

"While my parents were out flying to fetch some food, a tribesman climbed the tree and pulled me from the nest hidden in a large Mango tree canopy. The next thing I knew, I ended up here in the cage, I am glad to see you sir," said Nazeer in a soft voice while Sheeba stood close to Nazeer separated by the thin steel spokes.

"Well, I was careless in moving and fell off the nest, when a boy picked me up and sold to a tribesman." Sheeba explained.

The bird cage is narrow, hardly any space to move around except to walk few steps either way. The fuzzy feathers more like stumps some light green and some yellow spread unevenly on pink exposed skin of Nazeer and Sheeba. For the first few days, the new comers were nervous and hardly spoke, eating intermittently on guava fruit pieces Basheer left in the cage.

Nazeer and Sheeba watched Rama doing card tricks in front of spectators each day and couldn't comprehend the act.

"Sir, we watched your performance with the deck of cards, but we didn't understand the whole exercise, except you were fed after each performance," said Nazeer addressing Rama with respect.

"It is complicated, contrary to what we birds think about humans as scary and monstrous, they are timid, foolish and live precarious lives. They have no faith in themselves and rude to each other just to feel good about themselves, they constantly fear about their own future." "So, they turn to fortune tellers like Basheer to know their future in advance to feel good that they know what to expect," explained Rama.

"I wish we know our future in advance so we could have escaped from being stolen from our nest," Sheeba lamented loudly.

"Oh no, it is all hocus pocus, nobody can foretell one's future, even Basheer has no clue what could happen to him in couple of days or within next hour. He is making a miserable living from foolishness of others," said Rama.

"In couple of days, Basheer would start your training in picking cards and you both will join me in the fortune telling business," predicted Rama with confidence.

"You mean we will be enslaved lifelong here in the cage and help Basheer expand his livelihood," sobbed Sheeba.

"So, we know our future then," concluded Nazeer.

"Not at all, your future is in your hands, you don't have to spend rest of your lives trapped in this cage like me." "I am too old to make changes now, but you two, can get out with a plan," comforted Rama.

"How can we escape, we don't even know how to fly," lamented Nazeer and Sheeba.

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“More likely, Basheer would clip your wing tips to prevent you flying while he will train you in card picking, that’s what happened to me, I could not fly, even if I want to, you see, Basheer routinely clips my wing tips to prevent my wings to develop fully to enable flying, but I will teach you both how you can develop confidence in Basheer that you won’t fly away even with your wings fully developed, that would discourage him to clip your wing tips to begin with,” explained thoughtful Rama.

“You will do this to us, sir,” said the parrot chicks.

“Sure, your future is in your hands, and you will prove yourselves with a good game plan,” now Rama is excited. “Basheer bought both of you to increase his business since I am old and slow, and you both are young, active and quick in playing the card game to attract more customers, now if you play your cards right and become active participants in Basheer’s game, he feels confident that you won’t fly away and may not clip your wings,” Rama is now thinking loud for the benefit of the youngsters.

“When Basheer lets you out of the cage to train you, feel confident and show respect to Basheer, play with him, slowly climb onto his hand and jump onto his shoulder, kiss his neck tenderly with your beak, as if you are affectionate to him, these acts would encourage Basheer give you more freedom outside the cage than he gives me, he constantly fears that I may fly away, that’s why, he clips my wings on a regular basis. But with your antics, you can make him feel comfortable and you can be more creative in picking cards rather than straight business like method I was trained to do, afterwards, I would come out with a full-proof escape plan for you both,” comforted wise Rama.

The parrot chicks gained confidence from Rama’s assurances and prepared to play Rama’s game plan to set free themselves from Basheer.

As expected, on one fine day, Basheer let the parrot chicks out of the cage into the open and fed them with seeds and guava fruit to make them comfortable outside the cage. Keeping Rama’s plan in mind, both Nazeer and Sheeba moved around on the cloth spread in front of the cage. As a next step in training, Basheer carefully placed a deck of cards in front of Nazeer and nudged Nazeer closer to the cards. Nazeer with its tender beak touched the deck as if trying to sniff and carefully lifted the top card and walked away from the deck to place it on the cloth as Sheeba looked anxiously. When it came to Sheeba’s turn, she moved slowly towards the deck of cards and instead of picking up the top card, she walked around the deck of cards three times as Hindus perform pradhakshna or walk around their deities in a temple. Basheer was mesmerized in looking at this act.

As the training progressed, both Nazeer and Sheeba competed against each other in impressing Basheer with their creative acts. For example, Nazeer before picking up the cards, performed pranaam or salutation Hindu style by lowering slowly its neck few times in front of his master Basheer. Sheeba stepped up its act by performing a fancy foot work while walking around the deck of cards. While the young parrots performed their creative movements, Rama watched with great satisfaction from inside the cage.

“Humans think that we the birds have little brains and cannot think, even they use derogatory expression ‘bird brain’ to put down among themselves, but see how much destruction humans create with their complicated thought process.” “They kill each other with sophisticated weapons, produce weapons of mass destruction to wipe out cultures and destroy the fragile environment in the name of human progress,” lectured Rama while the young parrot pair listened with respect.

The Poinciana trees around the pond also gave temporary sanctuary for wild parrots and other birds on their daily route to feeding grounds. On occasions, wild parrots communicate with Rama and share their experiences in living free, at the same time expressed their sympathy for Rama’s house arrest. Once in a while, the wild parrots encourage Rama to free himself from Basheer’s cage to fly with them to freedom.

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Rama while thanking his fellow parrotsâ interest, declined their offer of help to free him from captivity , not that he is happy in captivity but felt too old to live independently in last leg of his life.

But now with two young ones placed in captivity by Basheer, Rama decided to take up the help the wild parrots always offered to free enslaved parrots. During one of the stops on Poinciana tree, the wild parrots were introduced to Nazeer and Sheeba by wise Rama. The wild parrots were saddened to hear the story how Nazeer and Sheeba were stolen by the tribesmen. They all voiced their anger on the illegal trade of exotic birds in the market. They assured Nazeer and Sheeba that they would do everything to help them free themselves from Basheer. The wild parrots showed confidence in Ramaâ s game plan to set free the young parrot couple.

As time progressed, both Nazeer and Sheeba grew fast into young adult birds with bright green feathers and bright red strong beak. With new antics, Nazeer and Sheeba attracted more customers. According to Ramaâ s game plan, one day Nazeer rather than dancing with fancy foot work before picking up the cards, suddenly flew several feet above the ground in a circular motion and landed on the Basheerâ s shoulder. Few customers waiting for their fortune reading were thrilled at the act. As Basheer looked at Nazeer with amazement, Nazeer slowly descended from his shoulder towards the deck of cards. Sheeba followed Nazeer but stepped up the act by flying in circles few times before landing on the shoulder of a customer before walking down slowly towards the deck of cards. Nazeer and Sheeba became actors in a side show Nazeer was thrilled to perform each time when several spectators gathered to see the performance. At the end of each performance, the spectators dropped few coins whether they opted for fortune reading or not. This became a side business for Basheer in addition to fortune telling. Basheer made more money from the side show than fortune telling. He fed Nazeer and Sheeba with all kinds of fruits rather than bland guava fruit all the time. Rama was happy the way events turning out in favor of the escape plan as Nazeer and Sheeba earned the full confidence of Basheer and he never contemplated to clip their wing tips.

Basheer, now with increased income from the parrot side shows started buying food at a roadside restaurant rather buying scrap meals. Now, he has no time for playing sword games with Poinciana stamens or writing new scenarios on the fortune cards. Most people gathered to see Nazeer and Sheeba fly in various formations to eventually land on shoulder of one or two fortunate spectators. The clever parrots started imitating peopleâ s voice, some time laughing , crying or singing popular tunes Basheer taught t them meticulously.

Rama in consultations with wild parrots decided that time has come to stage the final phase of the escape plan. On one bright afternoon, Rama alerted Nazeer and Sheeba that it is time for them to gain freedom and explained in clear terms not to back off from the plan in the last minute since a flock of wild parrots would participate simultaneously in the escape plan. Several spectators, many returning home from the work and students way home from school gathered under the Poinciana tree on the edge of the Peerla Koneeru to see the parrot side show, Basheer proudly released Nazeer and Sheeba from the cage to start their act. The young parrots flew in circles high and above the spectators, but continued to fly at higher altitude than usual to the surprise of Basheer. Suddenly a flock of wild parrots descended from the Poinciana tree to join Nazeer and Sheeba, and all of them flew swiftly as a group in the direction of Police Commissionerâ s Office building. The spectators cheered and clapped thinking it is part of the show and the birds would return back to land. Basheer suddenly jumped up to stand on his toes to watch his birds get away with wild parrots into the horizon and appeared as small dots on the sky at they flew further and further into the distance. There was confusion among the spectators, some thought it was part of the show and some looked in the direction of the birdsâ flight in disbelief. Basheer confused and dumbfounded, with his mouth open continued to look in the direction of path the parrots escaped.

Rama looked at the entire event with great pleasure and for the first time sang with his sweet voice â Donâ t despair Basheer, let the parrots enjoy their freedom. Your next act is to build a small wooden portable place of worship to place a Hindu deity and a replica of Muslim martyr, an unusual combination.

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Believers would flock and you as Basheer Baba would prosper with wealth and that is my prediction as a fortune teller.â

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