

Rowdy Doctor

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By : Juggernaut

This is not everyday short story.



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By

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Coconut Grove was neither a recreational area on the beach front nor a decent residential district but a low-lying shanty area under water during monsoons and home for people at the bottom of the society such as rickshaw pullers, coolies, maids, sweepers, professional panhandlers and petty thieves. The raw sewer from the entire town flows through Coconut Grove via an open drain that also serves as an open toilet to the inhabitants of the Coconut Grove.

Coconut trees flourished in abundance on nutrient rich sewage in open drains in the low-lying area. Thus the area earned the name â Coconut Grove.â However, over the years, some trees were dead from disease, and fires killed several more. Thatched-roof mud houses were gradually built on the spaces left by the dead trees. The area was still known by the name â Coconut Groveâ though very few trees were left in between the crowded huts.

There were no paved roads in Coconut Grove, only narrow dirt alleys for the pedestrian and rickshaw traffic. In monsoon season, the narrow lanes turned into small streams. People used cow dung slurry to plaster their mud houses, the dung turned into a stiff coating on drying like a paint albeit-totally of organic in origin. Freshly dried toddy palm leaves were used to repair leaky roofs. Parked bullock-drawn carts over loaded with dry palm leaves waiting for a brisk sale were common sight on the street near the Coconut Grove.

The odors from the drying cow dung plaster and deteriorating toddy palm leaves on the roof permeates the narrow lanes of Coconut Grove. Children from Coconut Grove would go around the town with a metal bowl on their head to collect fresh cow dung from the street. Some children walk behind the roaming cows and fight among themselves to collect fresh dung as the animals defecate on the streets. Most women at Coconut Grove would leave their homes early for work as day laborers, maids or professional panhandlers. Their children left alone at home entertain themselves on streets playing marbles or running behind push carts or skillfully maneuvering metal bicycle rims with a stick at high speeds on the narrow dirt paths. Some kids roam the nearby streets scouting for funeral processions where few coins could be collected when coins thrown on the dead body as a part of ceremonial tradition drops to the ground.

Women cook their meals on wood-burning mud stoves either indoors or outdoors, and the smoke from burning firewood covers the area particularly in late evening hours. The meal, a hot peppery slurry containing few salted fish or a few shrimps for flavoring and vegetables mixed with mounds of boiled rice was intended to satisfy hunger more than palate. The aroma of dried fish and shrimp blended with odors from cow dung and toddy palm leaves improvise Coconut Grove with a peculiar odor, a lasting experience to any one visiting Coconut Grove for the first time.

Among the crowded huts was a small tiled roof concrete dwelling with a large rectangular shape sign board that read â Dr. Seshagiri, RMP (Registered Medical Practitioner).â Dr. Seshagiri practiced medicine from a small section of the front veranda of his house. He rented the remaining section to a tailor, a fair skinned immigrant from the North. His house was one of the few with tiled-roof and concrete walls in Coconut Grove. Given the economic and social status, Coconut Grove was an unlikely place for a doctor to set up a practice let alone live there. But, Dr. Seshagiri chose to live there with his wife and practice medicine from his front veranda.

The mysterious reason for Dr. Seshagiri to live in the shanty area of the town was only known to a small section of the society. In a society where abortion was a serious taboo and not very many doctors from the main stream want to indulge in such a practice, Dr. Seshagiriâs practice was exclusively dedicated to performing abortions. A large section of his clientele were prostitutes who ended up pregnant, an occupational hazard. Dr. Seshagiri was rumored to have illicit relations with some of his clients. The frequent visits by pimps that brought the prostitutes for abortion to Dr. Seshagiriâs clinic earned him the infamous name â Rowdy Doctor.â Very few know Dr. Seshagiri by his real name since everyone called him â Rowdy

Rowdy Doctor

Doctor. And he accepted the title.

People from upper caste to the poor needed the services of Rowdy Doctor. Some women visited Rowdy Doctor without the knowledge of their families while others were brought by their relatives. He never asked how or under what circumstances the women got pregnant or why they wanted an abortion. His clients visited late at nights in rickshaws. Every rickshaw puller in town knew the location of Rowdy Doctor's clinic. He rendered his services for a small fee in cash and demanded no prior appointment for a visit.

Juggernaut's family was distantly related to Rowdy Doctor. Rowdy Doctor's wife, a diminutive woman visited Juggernaut's home unannounced once in a while. Always wearing a white sari, she appeared fragile and sickly. Juggernaut first encountered Rowdy Doctor's wife when he was young. He was playing with his older sister on a small open trailer belong to his neighbor. A woman hurriedly entered the premises as if someone was chasing her with incoherent smile on her face. Her looks were distinctly paranoid almost like a mad woman. Juggernaut jumped from the trailer screaming for help and ran passed the woman towards his house. The woman followed him into his house timidly only to be welcomed by Juggernaut's mother.

After exchanging social formalities and chatting, Juggernaut's mother offered her buttermilk in a glass. The woman gulped the contents as if she was really thirsty and placed the glass on the ground. Standing behind their mother, Juggernaut and his sister observed all this. After her departure, Juggernaut came to know who the woman was and realized that she was neither mad nor crazy but a very depressed woman. From that time onwards, any time she visited, Juggernaut used to scream that Rowdy Doctor wife was coming.

On a few occasions, Rowdy Doctor's wife brought along her daughter. The girl, the same age as Juggernaut, was thin and unusually very fair skinned compared to brown skin south Indians. With high cheekbones, sharp nose, brown eyes and hair, she was beautiful and foreign looking.

Juggernaut was very much wished to play with the girl, but was afraid to ask her, as she always hides behind her mother.

On one rare occasion when Rowdy Doctor's wife was chatting with Juggernaut's mother, he asked her daughter "do you want to play?"

She was too shy even to answer but her mother said "go and play with him."

The girl's name was Shoba. After playing for some time she left with her mother without even saying good bye. Shoba was really shy and unaccustomed to playing with strangers.

On subsequent visits, Shoba was more relaxed and playful with Juggernaut. "Where do you live?" asked Juggernaut.

"Somewhere out there," she replied.

"What does your father do?"

Shoba thought for a moment and said "Doctor."

"What kind?"

"I don't know," she replied.

Juggernaut played hide and seek, then jumped up and down on the neighbor's trailer with Shoba. Shoba was so delicate she sought help and attention all the time. As time passed, Rowdy Doctor's wife visits became sparse and eventually she stopped coming altogether much to Juggernaut's disappointment.

Many years went by since Rowdy Doctor's wife stopped coming to Juggernaut's house. One day, his mother showed a wedding invitation. It was the wedding of Shoba; the shy girl who visited years ago with her strange mother.

Apparently, Rowdy Doctor spent too much time with his clientele and also drinking "aruk" a cheap alcoholic drink brewed from toddy palm sap. His wife, ignored and neglected by her husband went into depression. She found solace in the company of the Muslim tailor who rented their veranda, eventually she ran away with him. Neighbors believed that Shoba's real father was the fair skinned Muslim tailor not the Rowdy Doctor. Shoba was later given away for adoption to her distant relatives.

Juggernaut attended Shoba's wedding and tried to make an eye contact with her but she did not appeared to recognize him. She was beautiful in her wedding dress but appeared mysterious perhaps it was all Juggernaut's imagination knowing her hidden past.

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