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"The Till in the Box at the Barbershop"

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By then the party was closer to Raja's mansion, which stood in the middle of a street. And the Grandpa again addressed the boy. "We will rest here at this place. And you can have a haircut also. Because your school vacation ends tomorrow."

Nevertheless, by then the boy's attention was somewhere else. The boy was looking at an earthenware pot that hung on the front wall of Raja's mansion. Raja's mansion which had a swinging half-door. The swinging door is not modern. The door belongs to the old world. Those days, to craft such a door by hand it took more than three days. It is why the door is still around. Push the swinging door and enter the shop like a cowboy, like you imagined during your school days, as if you are in the old Wild West. Not to fire at the other cowboys, but to meet old Raja. The expert hairdresser at Kider Chetty Street.

The pot which was once used by a housewife for her cooking purposes was black as charcoal, because when it was a cooking pot, the flickering fire flames of her stove used to create a charcoal hue around it. In addition, there was an entrance carefully carved on the middle of its bottom. It is the gate for sparrows to enter. Boy, first you have to find this type of a discarded pot and a nail. The pot now begins to mumble towards the boy. The boy understands it. It is not some words, but the very shape of the pot that now communicates with the boy. Hammer the nail to the wall. If the wall is hard, blame the masons who plastered it. But the nail should be placed at quite a high place where a naughty boy or a snake who is fond of bird eggs could not cast anchor. And then carefully place the pot's wide open mouth within the nail until the nail is not visible. Boy, then you are equipped with your own nest for the sparrows.

The most striking fact about such a nest is, a pot that once belonged to your mom becomes a home for another mom.

Moreover, who is this mom? This mom is a she-sparrow, with a white belly and a black and white and brown plumage, and with a beak as small as a boiled brown rice seed. Oh boy, again the pot

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continues to communicate with the boy. Even sparrow moms become pregnant, as your mom was pregnant a few months back before your baby brother was born. Then the pot goes into a slumber. However, the sparrows by that pot now begin to twitter. Chirp. Chirp. Chirp.

To see sparrows at your dooryard makes you prosperous. Yes, old barber Raja is a prosperous octogenarian, the Grandpa thinks. Raja still works like the twittering sparrows from dawn to the evening. Performing his skills with a pair of scissors and a comb on every unruly nest of hair of each person who is seated before his mirrors, the mirrors of Raja's mansion, the mirrors that had been imported from England fifty years back when the British Empire was largely important in this street.

The babe is delicately muscled. A couple of waves and some curves on those muscles continuously sooth your eyes. His eyes are blue and his smile is pink because his lips are pink. He is toothless yet his cheeks are well puffed. He is baldheaded. But it is a baldness perfumed with milk. You would never shun it like an old man's baldness. Instead you would continue to embrace that baldness. The baby is tight fisted. What does he hold? On the other hand, had he brought anything to the world eleven months before when he was born? The thing he brought is invisible within his tight fists. Moreover, his wrists are decorated with baby beads. First a black bead then a white bead, then another white bead - a train of such beads on a string to adorn his wrists.

With that baldness, with those beads, with those milky smiles the baby is trying to fly joyfully by kicking his legs and spreading his hands here and there. If he would stop his flying, it would be to give his ears to the twittering of those sparrows. The sparrows who now dance on the earthenware pot. But the baby now gurgles at the sparrows and his language to the sparrows is gibberish.

The sparrows are happy and the barber is happy. The camel is happy. Nilupul means a blue lotus. The blue lotus is now seated or blooming on a chair for a haircut. And he is happy with his Grandpa and with the baby, while the camel is very vigilant of all matters.

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Then that swinging door is pushed, and there enters a cowboy, as during the old western movie days. The door swings, swings, and it stops.

The barber greets the man who enters. But the man never greets the barber. Instead he greets the baby. As if the baby had known the visitor from many a previous birth.

“Hai,” the visitor exclaims. “May you live long, Aubowan Rajayya!” He then greets the barber in Sinhala.

And the visitor is now seated on a chair and he has taken the newspaper of the day to read; let us call him the man with the newspaper, because he is a voracious reader.

And the barber makes a musical note, a chirping sound, with his pair of scissors – chirp – then comes out a little portion of Nilupul’s hair while the baby keeps on his gurgling at the sparrows.

“Do you know, madam, to cook a soup for this little baby what and what ingredients are needed?” The barber is now trying to focus his attention on the camel. Moreover, he had suddenly forgotten his job, to give a haircut to Nilupul. “Madam to prepare a soup what you need is two grains of Masoor dhal and a curry leaf and one teaspoonful of water.”

The others know what is Masoor dhal, which is yellow like a Buddhist monk’s robe, and the curry leaves, which are green as a flag in a mosque. The others know what sort of water would fill the teaspoon; the colour of the water is clear as a crystal, the water specially selected for the soup of such a milk lover who would ever aspire to be under the warmth of a camel.

“That much is enough,” the barber says, “to prepare a soup for a baby. The three ingredients are enough. And the baby would be satisfied. But don’t try to cook a soup for the Grandpa.” And the barber makes another chirp. There then goes another portion of Nilupul’s hair with that single twittering that comes from the pair of scissors.

A sparrow too imitates the barber’s twittering. “There,” the man with the newspaper exclaims.

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“If you try to cook a soup for granddad,” the barber continues his instructions, “he would quarrel with you. In request of a larger bowl of soup. On the other hand, he would say the salt and pepper is not enough for the soup. And he would say the soup is not tasty like the soup that is offered at Jamaliya Hotel. And that would provoke Grandma and Grandma would say, ‘Oh, you even appreciate the other man’s snot but not my soup.’” The barber then cocks his head towards the Grandpa and he says, “I am sorry, sir.”

“It’s all right barber,” Grandpa smiles. “But don’t neglect my other grandson’s haircut.”

“And, by the way, my wife is not living.”

“Sorry, sir.”

It is a she sparrow that now hops on a windowpane and the babe is about to exchange a wave with the sparrow, with his tight fists.

“Cut shorter. Cut shorter,” Grandpa now instructs the barber. It leads the baby to sprinkle more and more smiles. The barber now sprinkles his water bottle over the hair of Nilupul. That sprinkling sound, that hissing sound of dewdrops that comes out of the bottle makes the baby merrier. And the baby makes the others more and more merry. Raja’s mansion is about to explode with that collective happiness.

A king could bestow happiness upon his public. Each babe is a king for his mom. His highness the king is invested with a loincloth. And with a calico vest. The vest contains an embroidered bunny holding a carrot. The loincloth is as simple as a seed of Masoor dhal, a square piece of white cloth folded into a triangle. And of its three corners, His Highness the King’s mother, the Czarina, had pulled out the middle corner through his legs and she had tied a knot with the other two corners taken around his waist.

“Reflect on his dress,” the barber now says. “You know this is the most stylish dress. Even a peacock is not beautiful next to this dress despite his technicolour. According to my judgment, this is the

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most beautiful dress in the world. Yet Grandpa cannot wear this type of dress.” And the barber now turns his head towards the Grandpa and says, “Sorry, Sir.”

“It’s all right, barber,” the Grandpa says, “but again you neglect Nilupul’s haircut.”

The babe is observing a silence. Why? Is it that he had attained a noiseless state? The barber, too, focuses his attention on the haircut. The others too are indulging in a noiseless state. Even the sparrows have now given an end to their twittering.

Then suddenly through an open window, a bumblebee enters into the barbershop. And the bumble bee fly around the baby and it hums a buzz like an alien.

“It may strike!” The camel is scared.

“Do not fear. The bumble bee is a friend of the baby.”

Then suddenly the bumblebee exits from the window through which he entered. Was it a classical piece that the bumblebee sang to the king? The bumblebee, was he a Ustad Nusarat Fathe Ali Khan, the great kawali singer, or a Ravi Shanker, or a Jim Reeves to the baby? It seems the baby is inebriated by that sweet music like a drunkard, but not like a drunkard at the tavern in Joseph Lane, but like a baby on his mom’s lap. The quite soft and tender and warm lap of his mom. The kings are like that: they would imbibe their portion of wine and would stretch on those great cushions.

Yes, moms’ laps are the greatest cushions; no other cushion could compete with their softness.

“It is we who feared. But the baby never feared,” the barber says.

“Now barber. You again delay the haircut,” the Grandpa says.

“The little baby is not old enough to run after the bumblebees and butterflies,” the barber then says to Grandpa. “But Sir, it is better if you can run after the bumble bees.”

“You are mad, barber,” the Grandpa says. “Should an old man run after the bumble bees?”

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"Sir, you are a retired officer. For your own health, you should now engage in exercise. As an exercise, please run after the butterflies."

Then the camel says, "Let these months disappear. When my son learns how to walk, when my son learns how to keep his balance, his Grandpa will have to run after him. That would be a good exercise for Grandpa."

"Sir, that would make you extremely healthy."

"My dear barber," the Grandpa then says, "do you think that I am a sick man? I am eighty years old like you. And I am as active as a young man."

"It's a blessing," the man with the newspaper says. "During your days the diets in this country were very healthy. We wouldn't live as long as you have enjoyed your days."

The barber then observes a silence. In addition, he indulges in his work like an athlete who is about to breast the tape before a distinguished board of judges. Moreover, the barber makes his last dash with his pair of scissors. Now who would judge his masterpiece? Because every barber is expected to create a pleasing haircut. Specially a schoolboy's dressed hair would be judged by his school teachers. Inevitably such a haircut should be very short like a police sergeant's well trimmed hair.

"A boy must cut his hair short and he must bathe every day. Not only that, he must eat food that is cooked by his mom. And a boy must consume a ripe banana each and every day," the barber says.

"Fine crop. He looks like a cop." The man with the newspaper is delighted.

Naturally a lotus would be born out of mud. But it would sway majestically above the mud. It is advice from an elder how to be a real lotus, a fine blue lotus. Because each banana contains all the vitamins that a boy needs. So eat a sour yellow banana. Or a rare red banana. Or a green banana with sweet pap.

Imagine a blue lotus blooming on a barber's chair, and allowing its thousands of blue petals to be cropped off by the barber.

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However, not a single bumblebee would sing songs to those thousands of petals as that bumblebee did to the baby.

Resting is a kind of feasting especially after crossing a hard desert. The caravan and the other people in the barbershop were able to feast and enjoy the very pranks of the baby, and the very good looks of the baby, and the charming blue eyes of the baby... as well as the rosy muscles and the curves of the baby. Moreover, the camel, the ship of the desert, is now about to carry that babe across the desert once again.

The journey is very hard.

The babe, what a king he is! Clients of diverse types visit here. Even people who suffer from chronic skin disorders visit here, but then the king just enthralled the others by his natural beauty, which is fostered and strengthened by camel milk, the greatest food in the world. A mama may be a camel or not, but her milk is the finest food in the world.

Desert camels have around their necks a string of bells, but this camel is devoid of such a string. But when the king is taken out of the barbershop, the caravan hears a giggling bell. A travelling ice-cream vendor rings his bell with his icebox, and when he encounters the king with a camel and a grandpa and the short cropped boy even his bell sound becomes different. And the king's face, too, beams with a different smile towards the ice-cream vendor.

"Bravo baby," the Grandpa says. "O, Bunnio bunny!" The boy fondles the baby, while then the barber and the man with the newspaper retire into the barbershop.

"Actually I did not fondle the baby," the barber says. "A baby would be appreciated by everyone. But look at his Grandpa. He is a pensioned fellow. No one appreciates him. He, too, is an old man like myself. Who would offer him a dish of soup? Even his wife is not living. So I made him happy by mentioning about a dish of soup that he so madly yearns for."

"Oh, you are wonderful," the man with the newspaper says.

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“And, by the way, have you seen his dress? His trousers are threadbare. So I made him happy letting him imagine himself in a fine loincloth.”

“Oh, you are mad.”

“And that Grandpa is a little lazy due to the age. However, the baby was not so. That is why I made him think about a little exercise.”

“You are a funny fellow.”

“On the other hand, he smells of tobacco. But think about the baby. The baby is perfumed with milk.”

“But we made a mistake. We couldn’t ask the name of the baby.”
The man with the newspaper says.

“It is a mistake. A real one.” The barber’s face is grave.

The man with the newspaper is an acquaintance of the barber; he visits the barbershop daily, not to have a shave or a haircut but to read the newspaper and to gossip with the others who crowd therein for a shave or for a haircut. Moreover, where are the sparrows who twittered and flew back and forth, where have they gone? Have they left the wall of Raja’s mansion like a retinue of musicians on His Majesty’s Service as soon as His Majesty left the barbershop.

“There he comes again,” the man with the newspaper shouts.

“Who comes?”

“The Grandpa.”

Then the barber looks out of a window. But he feels a sadness: the Grandpa who now runs to the barbershop is feeble. Because Grandpa is tired and he cannot move in a hurry.

“A woollen boot of the baby’s and my handkerchief is missing,” the Grandpa shouts.

It was not a mere search carried out by the barber: it was an exploration done on behalf of a king. The barber becomes a crawling baby and he crawls even to a hidden corner beneath a desk, which is a territory of the rats. And to his amazement he finds

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an old coin with the insignia of King George the Fifth. And he declares, "No it is not here".

The Grandpa runs again. He is tired. And when he is about to reach his destination he hears some clapping. The twosome had found the lost woollen boot of the baby. Could they be showered with boons or with gold and jewellery from the king's house for pleasing a tight-fisted king?

It is natural we begin to love even a baby's discarded article, say even a rubber teat or a hat. It leads us to imagine sweet memories and it seems the man with the newspaper is about to kiss the woollen boot of the baby which they found.

"Now give it. Give it. To the Grandpa!" the barber shouts.

"Here, I have found even Grandpa's handkerchief."

"Throw it away," the barber shouts. "Who would appreciate an old man's snot?"

The very nature of Raja's mansion or the barbershop with a swinging door is so. The sole establishment of the street that would inspire you to imagine a cowboy, like you have seen in the old western movies. Then you will push this swinging door and enter the barbershop with the imagination of a Roy Rogers or a mounted Ronald Reagan. But without holding a gun, even a toy gun.

Moreover, then you would face the reality. That is, your image would be reflected in the mirrors of the barbershop. The image is ugly. It is one of the reasons that the girls shun you. Nevertheless, in front of the mirror you would go on admiring your moustache. As if it is your favourite matinee idol Gemini Ganeshan's moustache. And the old barber Ratnaraja is ready with his equipment to trim your hair, to trim your beard or to powder your face.

Not a single person is ugly in their baby days. He had been puffed by his mom with clouds of talcum powder, as if she was comforting and perfuming a most sacred infant of a royal lineage.

But after two days the real bolt hits the barbershop.

In the morning the man with the newspaper runs to the barber and says, "Rajaiyah, we were unable to ask the name of that baby

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on that day. But here, his name has appeared in the newspaper with his photo.”

“What is his name? As I cannot read Sinhala, would you read it to me?”

“The baby’s name is a long one. Wasantha Madusudan Lakshitha Ratanajothi Prem Fernando.”

“Oh, it’s a long name, like a Mikado,” the barber laughs. “And tell me what sort of a message the birthday greetings convey?”

“The message is sorrowful,” the man with the newspaper says. “The baby suffers from a heart ailment and to perform a surgical operation the parents need about a million. And the parents request the public to send donations to their bank account.”

There had been dethroned kings in history. And there had been Javanese kings who had been expelled from their thrones and deported to old Ceylon by the Dutch. And those kings had to be paupers. It was the last Sinhala king, a Dravidian who ruled the country, who ordered a camel to put her baby into a mortar and pound the baby. Thus he dethroned a baby from his mom’s lap, before he himself was dethroned by the raging public. Here a king had been made into a pauper by his nemesis, or by his fate, and his parents had to go begging funds for a surgical operation.

The days of roses had vanished.

“We too can install a till box,” the barber says.

“But who will donate to it?” the man with the newspaper says. “It will be the beggars like us who would insert coins to it.”

“Don’t say that. Each water drop would contribute to a greater river. But I am sad about that Grandpa. I knew him personally. He is a man who has undergone many calamities. Now in his old age he will under go another difficulty in collecting money.”

Slam that swinging door and enter the barbershop like a cowboy. The reality is not your imagination of a Roy Rogers or a mounted Ronald Reagan in the old Hollywood films but a till box that is sitting on a desk with its open mouth.