

THE BICYCLE

In Mangalore the coconut palms grow tall but the men in the 1930s were short averaging about 5'6". Randolph Cutinha, apart from his outlandish name was 6'6" tall. Strangers stopped to stare at him. Some asked.

"Excuse me sir, why are you so tall?"

Randolph, even after repeated similar questions could not think of an adequate answer. He merely shrugged his shoulders shook his head and said. "I don't know. I just grew tall."

People started to call him 'the coconut palm man' and the name stuck. His mother did not like this but there were other things that she liked even less. Disgruntled one day she went to her cousin Sophie.

"Sophie-bhai, I am worried. Who will marry my son, who will employ him? I don't know why God has given me this cross, to bear,. Have I done anything wrong, I ask you? You know me since I was a child, tell me have I done anything in my life to deserve this?"

Sophie moved the lemon drop from the left to the right cheek, sucked on it for a few seconds, shifted her fat thighs to a more comfortable position on the chair and nodded her head ponderously then shaking her right index finger said "It does not need to be your fault. No. It is the fault of your ancestors, during Tippu Sultan's times five six generations ago that is visiting you now, that is all" Don't worry. Useless!" She turned her gaze heavenwards, "Pray to St. Philomena. Make a little penance here and there. I promise you everything will be all right. Turn to St. Philomena. Very dependable."

Adolph's mother wasn't satisfied. "Will it take away his height? Will he grow fat? You understand what I mean? If he grew fat that would be enough: it would not make him look so tall,. But does he eat! So fussy, Sophie-bhai, won't touch fish - can't stand the smell he says. Good. I give him pork, make spicy Indad. Will he eat that! No, too much fat. And what do you want, you want poultry, you want a fat hen nicely cooked in ghee and spices and coconut milk - is that what you want, I ask him. He doesn't want that either. He wants vegetables as though he was born to a Brahmin instead of to a respectable Catholic family. I ask you, Sophie-bhai is it possible to grow fat on vegetables? No consideration - he has no consideration at all. That is what it is. He never thinks what people will say - that I starve him! He wants to see me die daughter-in-lawless, that is what he wants. I get very fed up I tell you. I get fed-up up to my chin."

Sophie continued shaking her head. She said in her gravelly grave voice:

"That will all come in good time. You just pray to St. Philomena, that is all. She will give him a good appetite. That, you see, is important, very important,. Good appetite: polished plate. Indad, fat hen, all polished off. He will grow nice and fat like an Englishman and you will get a

fat daughter-in-law. Your worries will be all over."

"All right, all right, said Randolph's mother, a little exasperated. "I will pray to St. Philomena and light a candle. I shall do it this evening - satisfied?" she added accusingly.

When Randolph got home that evening, his mother was waiting for him. "If you go out all day everyday, like that in the sun, how can you expect to grow fat eh? Go and look at yourself in the mirror - go, go, go, see for yourself. You are turning black. How do you expect anyone to marry you?" Her tone suddenly changed. "Why do you do this to me son, why? Can't you at least take an umbrella?"

Randolph was surprised. "Why, what is the matter, what's happened?"

"What's happened he says - look at him! You are not married, that's what's happened. And will I be here always, to look after you? Will I be here when you grow old to feed you your vegetables - tell me that! No, no, no, don't hesitate. I am growing old, what will happen when I am dead - have you thought?"

Randolph rubbed the floor with the toe of his right shoe and said looking down "I wish you wouldn't talk of such things."

"I have a good mind not to talk of such things! I won't be here very long to talk of such things and when I am gone you'll regret it. Remember that, remember what I said. A daughter-in-law is all I want - is it too much? Don't look surprised, and don't waste time. Go have your bath. I'll have the dinner ready."

When after his bath, Randolph came into the dining room, he found his mother had already piled his plate up. He opened his mouth in astonishment. His mother said: "No need to look like a fish. Don't fuss: just eat it all."

Randolph clicked his tongue perplexed. "I can't eat it. It is too much."

"Don't click you tongue at me. If you say 'I can't', you can't. If you say 'I can' you will be able to polish it all off, easy - no problem! What a fuss you make of a little thing like that. Enough now. Start eating."

Randolph said. "Why aren't you eating?"

"Never you mind..." She stopped and a little gleam came into her eyes. "Did you see the candles burning in the alter room? I have made a vow to St. Philomena, a sacred vow, that I won't touch a morsel until you finish your plate of everything, down to the last grain of rice.

Randolph muttered something under his breath, sighed heavily and said aloud "I wish you wouldn't do such things, without asking me first." All the same he did eat all the food.

And somehow he continued to eat all the food that his mother served him during the following

The Bycycle

Written by "Julian"

weeks. It gave him constant discomfort and put a pot-belly on his thin frame but otherwise did not flesh him up. Instead he grew irritable and found it difficult to sleep as his pot-belly came in the way. One day he felt so exasperated that he went out early and bought a bicycle for Rs.160. He asked Cyril, the shop keepER to raise the seat to its maximum height.

Cyril adjusted and tightened the screw. "That's as far as it will go" he said. "How long since you rode a bike, Mr. Palm-tree sir - I hope you don't mind me calling you that?"

"Oh no, I don't mind" Randolph said, "but it is quite some time - not since I was 16, I think. Do you think I may have forgotten how to ride?"

"No problem, no problem then at all. Once you learn you never forget - guaranteed! All the same, don't ride here - too much traffic! Push your bike to some quiet street or to a maidan and practice there a little,. A couple of rounds and you will be riding like a maharaja. But you you don't have to worry, you wont have any problems, Mr. Palm Tree sir. With your long legs you can't fall, even if you wanted to."

Randolph took the bike to a flat piece of ground behind his house and threw his right leg over the seat. The seat was about four inches higher than the handlebars and he found his knees came in the way of the handlebars so he sat well back and pedaled with his ankles at awkward angles. It worked as long as he was going in a straight line but as soon as he made a turn to the right he found his right leg, knee to foot, firmly wedged between the handlebar and the pedal. He lost his balance and toppled down heavily.

When he came to he was in bed. His mother was putting a wet piece of cloth smelling of vinegar on his brow. When she saw him open his eyes, she shouted shrilly. "He is coming round, quick get him something to eat" then turning to him she said in a surprisingly soft voice: "Are you feeling hungry son?"

"What happened? Why am I in bed?" Randolph asked.

Just then fat Sophie came waddling in with a tray laden with jelebies dripping with syrup and laddoes oozing ghee. "These were fried in the best ghee" she said "You can taste it - pure ghee! So don't say no."

Randolph's stomach turned at the sight of the food. "No, I can't eat" he said with unusual conviction. Please give me a glass of water and an aspirin."

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The bruise on Randolph's forehead swelled and turned purple. His mother alarmed called the doctor.

The doctor was short, fat and quick of movement. He took out an enormous pocket watch from his trouser pocket and thrust a thermometer into Randolph's mouth. He looked intently at the watch for two minutes and put it back into his pocket. Then he pulled out the thermometer

and looked at it. He nodded. Next he took the pulse without the aid of the watch, his little finger jutting out as though he were holding a cup of tea. he nodded vigorously this time.

"Nothing amiss" he said turning to randoph's mother, "a little temperature caused by the concussion. It will soon go away. Good rest, three-four days in bed, good nourishment - give him plenty of meat, he needs it, he is very thin - and he will be right as a maharaja. That's all, no medicine."

Randolph's mother saw the doctor to the door, then came back, her left eye twitching wildly. "You heard what he said?" she almost screamed "Give him plenty of meat!". He thinks I starve you. Everybody comes and insults me. You ever feel how I feel? You don't know. You don't want to know. You don't care. What kind of a son are you letting people insult me right and left. Thoughtless - you go out in the sun and become black as tar and don't eat - that is the present I get for bearing you in my womb for nine months. Not one or two - nine months!"

Her voice became hoarse and her eyes glistened then brimmed. She took the free end of the sari and wiped her eyes. Randolph watched feeling uneasy and guilty. He said weakly: "I eat as much as I can,. It is not my fault if I have no appetite."

His mother took no notice. Husky with emotion she went on: "I do by best. I get up early everyday and go before anyone else to get fresh-fresh fish from market And I only choose best meat, tender vegetables, nicest herbs and spices; good coconuts with plenty of water. I wash everything myself twice and cut and chop and grind with my own hands. Not even one servant I have. The day-woman what good is she? No good. Good only for sweeping and cleaning, that is all. Everything I have to do myself. You think people will notice and be grateful. You think people will say 'look at that poor husbandless woman, look how she takes good-good care of her son. See how wonderful she keeps her house - not one unclean spot!'. That's what you think. But what you get? Plenty of advice, that's what you get. Everyone think they know best how to look after my son - give plenty of meat, pray to St., Philomena, do this, do that. Not one single praise-word! This is my reward. God gives me son like a black bean-pole. I have to order special bed for him. 7-foot long. Two hundred rupees it cost. Which mother would do that - tell me, go on, don't feel shy, tell me! And all you do is buy a bicycle and nearly kill yourself."

Randolph suddenly remembered the bicycle "Is the bicycle all right?? Is it damaged?" he asked.

"You don't listen to one word I say. I worry so much and you worry only about your bicycle., All my problems... You cause only problems. Who bring you into house and put you into bed? Who put vinegar on your head? Who prepare special food? Who call doctor? Who sell the bicycle....?"

"What! You sold the bicycle?" Randolph interrupted,.

"You think, I stupid? You think I let you ride the bicycle and kill yourself? I did everything myself. I go personally and ask Cyril to come and pick the bicycle. I get best price." She

lunged out but actually only to pull open a drawer and take out a bundle of bank notes. She threw it down on the bed. "There!, there is your money. All there, count for yourself. Don't say I steal your money."

Randolph picked up the money and counted. "There are only Rs.60 here"? he said.

"You should be grateful you got that much. Cyril wanted to pay only fifty rupees. He said the bell was completely damaged."

You only asked sixty rupees for it? I paid one hundred and sixty rupees. Why do you do these things without asking me first? You threw away one hundred rupees."

"You paid hundred and sixty for it?"

"Yes, and used it for less than five minutes"

Randolph's mother struck her forehead with the palm of her hand "How was I to know how much these things cost! He said fifty rupees and I got sixty out of him. You can't believe anyone these days. crooks. No shame, taking advantage of a poor widow. You better go and get it back as soon as you are better."

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Three days later Randolph went to Cyril's shop. "He out now. Come back in two hours" said one of his men.

Randolph wandered about in the sun and then remembering the danger of darkening his skin, sat under the shade of a banyan tree and closed his eyes. At once he heard the buzz of bees. He listened and heard other sounds - the twitter of sparrows, a crow cawing metrionomically. He was surprised there were so many sounds that he normally never heard at all. After a while he felt drowsy and fell asleep

When he went back to the shop he found Cyril sitting on a chair, both legs tucked under. He had a tender coconut with its head sliced off in one hand. He lifted it to his mouth and tilted it. His Adams apple moved as he drank and a little trickle of coconut water dripped from one side of his mouth. Randolph waited until Cyril lowered the coconut then coughed.

Cyril looked up and his face creased into a smile, his eyes lit up. "Ah, Mr. Palm-tree sir, what a pleasant surprise." He uncoiled his leg and got up and at the same time his face drooped into a concerned look. "Tell me, tell me how do you feel, after your terrible accident? So sorry, I was so sorry to hear about it as though it was my own fault - so much I feel for you. But it is no fault of my bicycle - I examined it thoroughly, there was nothing wrong with it...But, but, but, that is not important. What is important is how you feel now. You feeling all right? You feeling one hundred percent? That I must know. Please sit down - sit down, sit down", then turning round he added: "Govind, go quick-quick, get a chair for our friend and a first-class, a special

first-class tender coconut. Quick-quick, we mustn't make him wait."

Randolph was glad to sit down. It was hot and he was feeling rather weak after four days of not being allowed to stir out of bed and being practically force-fed meat three times a day.

He took a sip from the coconut and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Thank you, Cyril, I feel not so bad. A little bruise that is all." He gingerly touched the bruise on the side of his head.

"That is good. That is very very good. It is healing well, I can see. In two-three days you will be as well as a maharaja." He tilted his head to one side then to the other, sighed and then smiled. "And then you must buy a special Hercules bicycle from England with a 26 inch seat."

"Ah. That is what I came to see you about" Randolph said and coughed. "You see, my mother made a mistake. She should not have sold back the bicycle." He put his hand in his pocket and brought out sixty rupees. "Here is the money you paid her, let me have the bicycle back please."

Cyril joined his hands flat, palm to palm and brought them against his lips, his index fingers almost inside his nostrils, then he took his hands down and a whole gamut of emotions ran across his face - concern, pity, sadness. Then he slowly shook his head. "What a pity, what a pity. I wish I could - really wish I could - but how can it be done now my tall friend? Don't you know, it brings bad luck to buy back an article once sold? I took a big chance and bought it back for your mother's sake. Only for her, I did it - and for you, I mustn't forget. But to sell it back for second time - oh my friend, that is impossible. Very risky. Not good for you and dangerous for me. No, no, I must not do it for your and your mother's sake. And I have to think of my family too. Seven children, I have - seven children! - five of them girls for whom I have to find dowry. I cannot take a chance for their sake. Don't think, I don't understand your problem. I do one hundred percent but you are young, a bachelor, no worries, happy as a maharaja. It is a small matter for you. But think about me, I beg of you, think of my children... No my friend, you will agree, I should not take such a risk.

Randolph hadn't quite seen the problem like that and he realised that he couldn't possibly buy back the bicycle. He scratched his head vigorously, not knowing what to do.

Cyril, got up and came close to Randolph and said in a soft confidential voice: "There is one thing we can do, though, my tall friend which will help you. I make the sacrifice - never mind, never mind - you buy another bicycle, I make a special deal for you, for a special price and you will get a first-class bicycle worth two hundred rupees for only Rs.180 - special for you, no one else. Don't worry: you lose one side, you gain other side. So you happy and I happy because I help you"

"But I still lose one hundred rupees" said Randolph hesitatingly.

Cyril spread his hands helplessly and looked at Govind and said "what more can we do!". Then turning back to Randolph he said. "You win. I have heart" He touched his heart "I feel it

The Bycycle

Written by "Julian"

here. I cannot say no to you. You can have the cycle for Rs.170. Give me your hand. We shake hands, tall sir. You win."

Randolph carefully pushed his bike all the way back to his home. For some reason he could not understand, he felt it was very much like the original bike and like the seat was raised to its highest point. However, it had a dent on the handle bar and the bell seemed and sounded very different.