

‘NEGOMBO ROAD.’

A MAD TUTU STORY.

By Gary Brooks.

The sun rises every morning, and then stays there for as long as its interest is kept. Which, given how much the sun can see from way up there, is usually quite a long time. It was distracted by events taking place on Negombo road, the long stretch of boiling tarmac which connects Colombo to its ailing airport.

Wooden shacks and tin-shackle shops presented smooth surfaces to be seared and singed as the traffic crept along like a series of automotive elephants, bumpers nudging bumpers instead of trunks grasping tails. Distorted music metalled out of ancient radios and reedy voices chanted piety from junk shop megaphones.

Sampath stood in a rare patch of shade, small and brown and ten years old, watching the cars and tuk-tuks, and watching closer still the looks of harried resignation on the faces of those behind the greasy wheels. It wasn't the most exciting thing to look at, but was a thousand times better than staring at his creepy Aunt Harshi.

She stopped being normal after the tsunami had washed away her house down south. She came to live with Sampath and his mother, her only possession being one brick she had managed to salvage from the wreckage. Now she spent all of her time wearing a blue tutu, poised with a watering-can over the brick. Sampath asked her what she was doing, and she had stated simply that if she watered the brick enough, her house might grow back. Sampath thought that that brick had probably seen enough water.

So he stood and stared at the traffic trundling to the airport. He liked to imagine where the people might be going. Sampath's problem was that he had a less than elementary grasp of geography, so in his mind everyone was just flying to other parts of the island. The mean looking drivers, he decided, managed to get as far as the shore before eventually crashing into the ocean. This ghastly fate was reserved especially for those people who beeped too loudly and too incessantly in the perpetual traffic jam.

At that moment a cacophony of horns erupted. Sampath looked down the road and saw an elephant had rudely stomped onto the road and kicked several tuk-tuks out of the way. The little vehicles lay upended in the ditch, their drivers standing and staring with hands on hips, each waiting for the other to do something first. The elephant, meanwhile, was showing far greater initiative and had inserted itself into the new traffic vacancy. It stood patiently behind a Lada.

Sampath had, of course, seen elephants on the Negombo road before, but they were usually standing by the side of the road, and not stuck in the traffic jam. Also, this one had two very odd people sitting on its back. He ran down the road to get a better look, flip-flops flapping and kicking up dust behind him.

Drawing level with the side of the elephant, he stared up and saw a red-headed girl leaning back, balancing with her hands on the elephants haunches. Auburn sunglasses rested on her face. She had on short shorts and a short t-shirt too. Sampath winced. She was white like a seagull's belly, and here she was in direct sun on an elephant. There was a man in front of her, also wearing the worst stuff possible for the heat – clad in a black leather jacket, he smoked a beedie through a huge unruly

beard. His hands alternated between putting the cigarette, and what looked like an ice-lolly, in his mouth. It was dripping on the elephant.

‘Sir! Madam!’

Sampath’s eyes widened. He had shouted out without even meaning to. He couldn’t help it – things had suddenly got so interesting.

The man and the woman both peered down. The woman smiled and had kind eyes behind the auburn. The man’s eyes were hidden behind silvered shades.

‘Hello mate, what’s up?’

‘You are sir. Up on an elephant. How did that happen that you have an elephant to ride here? How is she not burning, and you not suffocating?’

The girl laughed, and fetched a purse from her side. Slender fingers made to open it up. Sampath stepped back and looked down, cheeks burning hotter than the street. He did not intend for these people to think he was after money.

‘Little boy?’

Grudgingly he looked up. The girl had somehow taken a very large ice-lolly from the very small purse. He frowned, then smiled – he could accept a lolly. He held out his hand.

‘Now listen mate,’ the man continued, ‘this lolly is special, yeah? It’s got beer in it. And. . . other things as well.’

‘Nothing nasty,’ the girl said.

She leaned down to him.

‘It makes magic happen when you blow into this.’

She pulled out another unfeasibly large object. It looked like a whistle. Quickly, she threw them down to him, and he was pleased to find his arms and hands do their thing and catch them before they hit the dusty floor.

‘Bored now,’ said the man. He patted the side of the elephant, whose legs then grew by ten metres and became excessively skinny. The elephant ran off down the road, leaping over the cars. The girl cried ‘Wooooo. . . ’ as they went.

Sampath didn’t even have to think about it. He sucked on his lolly and put the whistle thing into his mouth and blew. He puffed hard, so hard he stood on tiptoes and felt his stomach touch his spine. He waited. Nothing. He sucked the lolly and again he blew, so hard he felt faint and dots danced in the sand.

The whistle beeped. He looked down and a little message appeared on the screen:

THAT’LL DO IT.

He looked up, just in time to see the roof and driveway of Aunt Harshi’s house explode out of his garden and into the sky.

‘I told you!’ she cried, pirouetting on her still-moist roof, tutu taunting the sun.