

Peace-keeping (Valentine's Day Massacre Theme)

by Ajay Nair

He was a small boy but a strong boy, was Velu. When he was eight, his arms were cords of steel and his fingers had the grips of ancient hooks. He climbed trees as if they were vertical roads and he split open coconuts with his hands (and sometimes cracked them with his teeth). He was a strong boy, was Velu.

His mind was a million tiny fireflies and they buzzed and flitted about with easy electricity. And yet, because they were in his head, and you couldn't see into his head, even when it was dark, they didn't know his head was full of fire-flies. So they told him he better get ready to join the army because that's where it was at, for him. After all, not everybody could split coconuts with their hands.

He was shipped off to Sri Lanka as part of the peace-keeping force, to keep a fragile thread from snapping that joined the local army and the rebels together and kept them apart at the same time. But the thread sagged and when it did, people got hurt, people got maimed, people got raped. Velu watched and crawled and sometimes shot off his fire-arm but the thread kept on sagging and all his strength was wasted because his muscular arms couldn't keep a thread taut. Sometimes, the thread snapped and he wondered at the irony of it all. Peace-keeping was the shell that allowed murky goings-on to breed deep inside in the heart of the war; it was the fragrance which subdued the stench. He smiled tiredly at his peace-keeping when the nights were relatively quieter; the nights when stars fell off the sky because they weren't afraid of being caught in nets held up by tyrants.

When he finished his tour, he was installed as the game-keeper in the local zoo. He was given a rusty rifle and a few bullets to chew on. They tasted like iron and there was no tenderness inside them like those coconuts he used to bite open. His zoo had a lion, two tigresses, a bunch of monkeys and fifteen elephants.

One day, the oldest elephant-cow woke up and realized that what had been stirring inside her womb was no longer stirring. It was still, like it was the end of the world. Her sanity broke in a clatter of chains and she showed what strength was, what strength really was as she broke out of the zoo. She was a one-elephant stampede.

When her feet trampled upon seven year old Josekutty and nine year old Sweety, she only felt a soft squish beneath her feet - temporary relief from the harsh, hard, hot asphalt of the road. She craved more softness for her burning feet and her burning head.

They woke Velu up and he strode out to meet the mad elephant, the rifle in his hand. He wore no shirt and his skin was cool cotton. His dark brow had four horizontal grooves that were shallow pools of sweat. He raised his rifle to his shoulder and fired. Re-loaded and fired. Seven bullets was what it took.

All Velu wanted was everlasting peace. All he wanted was to wake the fireflies out of their blind, staggering torpor.

