

*Wedding Gifts*



OTHER PRESENTS

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# *The Litmus Test*

FOR JON & NITA  
ON THEIR WEDDING DAY

The first rays of Monday morning's sun gracefully illuminated Rajasingha's broad bald head, causing him to stir from sleep. He blinked, glanced at the porcelain clock hanging above the mirror, and smiled. Five thirty. How wonderful a cup of plain tea would be now.

As if on cue, Bandula shuffled through the bedroom door with a cup of plain tea.

"Good morning, sir!" the old servant shouted into his master's ear as he slammed the cup onto the bedside table. Rajasingha shut his eyes and mouth leaving his abused ears to monitor the cripple's exit. Short heavy panting was punctuated by the wooden leg scraping the floor - a footstep, then scraping, another footstep, more scraping, until finally the door shot sharply into its lock.

Rajasingha exhaled. Thank God that buffoon's gone, he thought. On mornings like this, he seriously considered giving his servant another mahogany leg to match the existing one. He looked again at the clock. Five thirty-two. He'd let the sun warm his head for three more minutes then get up. He was not an idle man and no devil would make a workshop out of him. There was work to be done. The fair started in less than thirteen hours.

At exactly six o'clock he was at the breakfast table. His spotless shirt matched his spotless trousers and both were colour coordinated with his socks and shoes. A gold-edged watch circled his wrist. Sterling silver links secured his cuffs. A matt-black pen hung in his shirt pocket, perfectly straight.

He was ready for breakfast.

He stared at the bare wall before him, then at his watch, then at the bare wall again. Where was the idiot, he wondered? How long did it take to boil a three minute egg? Three minutes, one would presume. He had never had any trouble with his eggs before, none at all. And it was important for the egg to be eaten at the correct time. Rajasingha had come to appreciate the energy-releasing qualities of the six o'clock egg, the gun start it gave to the blood circulation, the buzz it shocked the fringes of the brain with. It didn't matter in what state one ended the day, one always began it with an egg. So what had happened? Had the fool been hit by a passing lorry while chasing a pregnant chicken across the road?

The pantry door slammed open into the drinks cabinet. Rajasingha's doubts vanished as his servant hobbled towards him carrying a large tray covered by an even larger lid. His eyes widened as the ship descended on the table. Soon its lone passenger would begin a very different journey, he thought, now glaring at the lid, almost willing it to fly off and reveal its stowaway. It was the same tray and lid his servant had carried in through that door, every day, for seventeen years, and in all that time there lay under that lid the same item: a solitary three minute egg.

Bandula lifted the lid.

"Lot of pology, sir. No egg today. Only pineapple."

Sure enough, there on the tray was a sorry slice of pineapple. Rajasingha closed his eyes. It was going to be a bad day.

With the morning papers read, Rajasingha rested in his easy chair placed in the corner of his spacious study. This was his personal domain, a room no one could enter except for his students and himself. Its door was locked even to Bandula and for this reason a thick layer of dust covered the floor and furniture. Rajasingha didn't mind because in this room even the dust seemed dignified.

He glanced at his watch. Eight fifty-six. A quick flick through his diary and he'd know who would be sitting at his desk at nine: Fernando. Ah Fernando, he thought. A good solid boy who never missed the middle stump. Of course his personal pronouns were atrocious, but given time that too would be as accurate as his bowling.

The doorbell shook the tutor from his thoughts and a few seconds later a young man appeared at the study door.

"Good morning, sir!" he bellowed wearing a broad toothy smile and a loud yellow, green and shocking pink tee shirt. Fernando was a tall lad whose ferocious appetite had encouraged the swelling of a small pot-belly. He had a chubby face with ears that flapped whenever there was a strong wind, a trait some old women in the village felt was a lucky one to have. Rajasingha simply thought it a product of nature's more humorous side.

"Hello Fernando. You're early."

"Yes! You couldn't wait to come!" he beamed.

"You mean, *you* couldn't wait to come."

"Yes sir, that is what he said," he replied sitting at the leather-topped desk.

The hour progressed with the speed of a packed, lop-sided transport bus crawling up the Kandy road. Howler followed howler as Fernando struggled with the basics of the English language, sweating copiously and constantly drying his fat fingers on his trousers. His tutor on the other hand was perfectly dry.

“So, finish the composition for next week and learn those past irregulars. You’ll thank me in later life,” Rajasingha concluded and closed the textbook quietly.

“Yes sir! No problems sir! She will be doing those things, sir!” the student paused, fiddling with his pencil. Rajasingha sensed a question being carefully constructed in the boy’s mind. He hoped the tenses would be consistent.

“Sir? Er... is Dilshani coming to the fair tonight?” The words fell awkwardly from his mouth and managed to cover all ranges of pitch.

“Why do you ask?” The tutor’s voice hadn’t altered but he knew he had come to the point of the lesson.

“I... I was thinking, that’s all. I was thinking if you were going.”

“I’m not going.”

“No, er... is *he* going?”

“Who?”

“Dilshani. Is... is Dilshani going?”

Rajasingha savoured the terrifying pause that followed while his pupil writhed and suffered under his expressionless stare like a leech in salt. It was cruel, he knew, but necessary. All prospective suitors had to pass the litmus test in order to continue through to the next stage. The burning question now was which colour would Fernando turn?

“I don’t think Dilshani will be going to the fair tonight. Same time next week or do you want an earlier lesson?” enquired Rajasingha flicking through his diary. From the corner of his eye he noticed Fernando frantically throwing nouns and verbs together like a desperate cook. He had reached the point where correct sentence structure was of no importance and general sense was everything. The boy’s eyes suddenly lit up.

“I can fit you in on Friday at eleven,” lied Rajasingha looking

blankly at the 'Tuesday' page. "Or are you otherwise engaged? Hmm?"

Fernando turned yellow.

"Er... no, sir. Thank you. Next week, em, Monday. Thank you, sir. Good, goodbye, sir." He almost tripped over the rug as he hurried out of the door.

A lesser man would have been ashamed of himself but Rajasingha was more than that. He had seen too many young men sit at his desk and attempt to climb the heady heights of English grammar - only to fall like moths from a burning bulb - to have his conscience mauled by guilt. When the pride of an eager young man was scratched, it seemed to hurt forever but would be forgotten in a week. An old man however, once stung, would endure the pain for the remainder of his days.

Ten twenty-two. Eight minutes to - a flick through the pages - de Silva. Now there was a boy with a head on his shoulders. An 'A' student with an inclination towards anything artistic. He would never fail to bring his latest offering of poetry or a sketch of some distant imaginary land or mythical creature to the class and sit awaiting his tutor's comments, quietly quivering with anticipation. He had been gifted with the looks of an artist: wavy black hair and a chiselled facial bone structure grandmothers would dream about caressing. If he weren't a mere mortal residing in a village outside Tangalle, he'd be a god on the dizzy Olympian heights dining on life-giving ambrosia and heavenly nectar.

"Good morning, sir. I am in the paddy field."

Sadly, he had a problem with his tenses.

"Oh? And what *were* you doing in the paddy fields?" Rajasingha corrected subtly, waving him into Fernando's sweaty seat.

"I am looking at the colours in the paddy field for my painting. I will be doing a sketch." He produced the sketch from

among his textbooks.

Rajasingha laid the paper flat on the desk and examined the drawing. Even with dubious perimeters and no colour apart from the grey of the pencil, the scene glowed with life, pulling the old man's mind into a bucolic place blooming with cows, crows and rice. How wonderful a sketch this is, he thought. How wonderful an artist de Silva is. How wonderful a match he'd be for...

"When it is finished I have presented it to my fiancée."

The paddy field spell snapped.

"Fiancée? What fiancée?" He stared at his pupil's inane smile which he recognised from the countless boys all smitten by his one and only daughter. This fiancée simply had no place in the equation.

"We will be planning it for months sir, and now finally I can sing it to the world!" The boy looked as though he would take flight there and then. His tutor by contrast felt nailed to his chair.

"Congratulations. What's her name?" he managed.

"Oh it was a beautiful name, sir," beamed de Silva. "She was called Dilshani, but I am calling..."

"Dilshani?" cried Rajasingha. A dozen mixed emotions flattered in and out of his mind.

"Yes sir, Dilshani Pereira. Did you know her?"

Rajasingha sighed with relief at the surname then suddenly remembered the tense.

"What? Is she dead?"

"Dead?" de Silva sprang to his feet. "But I will be talking to her this morning!"

The old man sat back in his chair, breathed out heavily and motioned his student to sit.

"We really must do something about your tenses, son." He